



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 053

Monday, March 20, 2023

Chair: Mr. John Williamson



Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Monday, March 20, 2023

• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick South-west, CPC)): I call this meeting to order. Welcome to meeting number 53 of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(g), the committee is meeting today to resume its study on “Report 8: Emergency Management in First Nations Communities—Indigenous Services Canada”, and of the 2022 reports of the Auditor General of Canada.

I would like to welcome our witnesses. For the first hour, there will be a change up, or a departure in about one hour.

First, let me welcome the Honourable Patty Hajdu, Minister of Indigenous Services. Thank you for being here today.

Also from the Department of Indigenous Services, we have Gina Wilson, deputy minister, Joanne Wilkinson, senior assistant deputy minister of the regional operations sector, Valerie Gideon, associate deputy minister, Kenza El Bied, director general of the sector operations branch in the regional operations sector, and Rory O'Connor, director general of the regional infrastructure delivery branch in the regional operations sector.

Minister Hajdu, you have the floor for five minutes for your opening statement, and then we'll turn to our members.

Thank you.

Hon. Patty Hajdu (Minister of Indigenous Services): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

To all members, thanks for the invitation. It's a pleasure to join you here today on the traditional and unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe People.

I think this is a very important conversation, which you have, I'm sure, been studying over the last number of weeks. Joining me today, as you pointed out, are Deputy Minister Gina Wilson, Associate Deputy Minister Valerie Gideon and the senior team.

Indeed, in December, I appeared at the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs on the same matter, and I will reiterate what I said there: We fully agree with the Auditor General's report. I've had the opportunity to speak with her about the recommendations and our findings.

I've been the Minister of Indigenous Services for about a year and a half now. During that time, I've worked with and visited communities that have been deeply affected by climate-related disasters, whether it's atmospheric flooding in B.C., flooding in Manito-

ba, high wind and rain destruction from hurricane Fiona in the Atlantic, or countless communities threatened by forest fires in close proximity. It's clear that first nations people are on the front lines of climate change, which compounds the layers of challenging circumstances many communities already navigate.

Recently, the department has been supporting communities close to the environmental disaster of the Kearl Lake spill. These kinds of emergencies place enormous stress on communities through fear, disruption and, often, dislocation and expense, not to mention the deep sense of loss many people share. Whether the impact is on salmon, water, animals or land, or there's personal loss of property, health or even life, there is a deep grief every single time.

The frequency of these emergencies has increased exponentially over time. In 2010, there were 92 reported emergencies to manage collectively. In 2022, there were 173. There's no doubt we need to change how we support communities in pursuing adaptation and resiliency measures much more quickly, while we continue to be there, in an increasing way, as emergencies continue.

We know first nations people need to be in the lead, with a department that works as a true partner in both mitigation and emergency response. Indeed, first nations are taking on services and programs. The department is implementing new ways and flexible funding agreements. We're increasingly seeing collaboration with provinces, so we can more collectively respond and create better outcomes for everyone.

As an example, Ontario first nations have put forward a joint command governance model that includes indigenous partners such as tribal councils, Missanabie Cree, the Province of Ontario and Indigenous Services Canada. This approach provides better integration, so that when an emergency occurs, affected first nations have an immediate say in the emergency management process, including about decisions along the way and evacuation.

When first nations are equipped with the tools they need to deliver their own services, the results are palpable. For example, with support from Indigenous Services Canada, the First Nations' Emergency Services Society of British Columbia is supporting first nations to deliver emergency management services that integrate cultural and traditional practices. They also deliver Indigenous Services Canada's FireSmart program, which provides B.C. first nations with resources to increase resilience and better prepare for wildfires.

These are just some of the concrete examples of our transition to an approach that is inclusive, places first nations as full and equal partners, and supports their right to self-determination.

We know we don't have the luxury of time. Climate change is real. It's increasing the number of emergencies the department, provinces and territories, and communities must respond to. We need to continue aggressive funding and action, and to dismantle the colonial ways that haven't served first nations very well.

I understand many of you received a copy of the Indigenous Services Canada management action plan. I'll briefly talk about a few points.

We're updating emergency management plans to reflect today's realities and support first nations to make informed decisions.

We're actively finding solutions to address unfunded structural mitigation reports. Since our last appearance, we've reduced these reports from 122 to 58.

We're continuing to initiate multilateral conversations with indigenous leadership, first nations and provincial and territorial governments. As I said, the multilateral approach provides for better preplanning and coordination if and when emergencies occur.

- (1105)

Finally, we're working to ensure that emergency management services on reserve are supported to be culturally competent and in line with community needs and priorities.

As well, other government initiatives are outlined in the shared path for a more climate-resilient Canada through the national adaptation strategy. This strategy includes \$1.6 billion in new federal funding commitments to help protect communities across the country, including indigenous communities.

Since 2015, when this government was elected, we have made unprecedented and historic investments in first nations communities, but the gap is very large. There's still much to be done, including continuing to act on this particular Auditor General's report, signing agreements with first nations and provinces and territories, and building structural mitigation efforts.

As I said earlier, I appreciate your work and advocacy for self-determination and equity for all first nations in Canada, including in this space of emergency preparedness and management.

I see my role as minister as being to press for service excellence and transformation, but also to seek the additional investments that we'll need to support better emergency management services and preparedness for first nations. I will continue that work.

Meegwetch. Thank you. *Marsi.*

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

I'll just remind members that we have Minister Hajdu here until noon, so I will be strict with your time. I will allow witnesses to answer briefly if the time is over, but I mean briefly. I want to make sure we get through two complete rounds while respecting the minister's time.

Without further ado, I'm turning to Mr. McCauley.

You have the floor for six minutes, please.

Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Minister, thanks for joining us today. I think it's very important that you be here, so it is appreciated.

I have to say this is probably—and I don't think you could find disagreement—one of the very worst AG reports that I have encountered in my seven and a half years here in the House. The performance and lack of answers from your deputies at the first meeting, to be very frank, was disappointing. We have seen that high-risk first nations communities were not IDed or prioritized. Structural mitigation needs were not met. First nations homes were damaged while communities waited for funding to address flood risks. There were non-existent or out-of-date emergency plans and a lack of knowledge of emergency management commitments and whether they were being met.

I have to ask: Who is responsible for this debacle? Who's responsible for all these, frankly, just unacceptable, horrible items listed in this report?

- (1110)

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, I would say that the response from the government indicates that the government fully accepts responsibility to change a colonial system and to invest more aggressively both in the space of preparedness and in renewing emergency management approaches.

What has not worked well has been top-down—quite frankly—bilateral approaches whereby the federal government has—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I'm going to interrupt you. I appreciate that, but some of these items are from nine years ago and haven't been done. It's fine to say, "Well, we're going to do this," but for nine years it hasn't been done. Who's going to be held accountable? Who's going to be held accountable on the go-forward basis to achieve the recommendations noted by the Auditor General? No one's been held accountable, and no one's getting the work done.

Please, I'd like a commitment from you. Who is going to be held accountable so that in one year, nine years, we're not faced with the same report?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Well, certainly, I think we should all be held accountable, as members of Parliament, to, hopefully, support the upcoming budget. We have a very aggressive—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Minister, that's not the question.

Who's going to be held accountable for this debacle? Who's going to be held accountable to ensure that the recommendations in the Auditor General's report are going to be followed out and completed, so that we're not sitting here in nine years again, looking back and having an Auditor General again saying, "Well, nothing's been done"?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, Mr. Chair, I think it is all of us who are accountable. All of us are accountable to indigenous peoples to get reconciliation right.

I will point out that the Auditor General talked about reports during a time of Conservative government leadership when nothing was done. This government is taking action and making historic investments in first nations communities that will result in—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Minister, you're very—

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): I have a point of order.

A voice: It's not a point of order.

The Chair: Is it a point of order, Ms. Shanahan?

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Yes.

Could the witness be allowed to finish her answer? That's three interruptions that we've had so far. I know you're being judicious with the time.

The Chair: Yes, but as you know, we're on the clock here. I'm going to let members be a little aggressive with their time in seeking answers. Having said that, I would urge members to be respectful of all witnesses.

It's back to you, Mr. McCauley.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Okay. I think it's very clear that the people sitting at the front of this table are the ones who are going to be accountable for the specific items mentioned in this report.

What is the dollar total needed to fully fund the 112 eligible projects that are noted in this report, please?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I will turn to my officials in a moment, but I think we're at 58 projects now—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: No. What are the total dollars required?

Ms. Valerie Gideon (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Indigenous Services): I believe we have \$82 million for the out-

standing projects that are still on the list that we're working to complete.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: That's \$82 million. How much is in the main estimates that have just been tabled to address these issues?

Mr. Rory O'Connor (Director General, Regional Infrastructure Delivery Branch, Regional Operations Sector, Department of Indigenous Services): There are a number of sources of funds for the structural mitigation projects. There's \$12 million dedicated to the structural mitigation—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: How much is dedicated in the main estimates for these projects?

Mr. Rory O'Connor: Overall, there's funding of over \$1 billion for other community infrastructure projects—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I've asked a very simple question. There are identified projects for infrastructure. The main estimates just came out.

How much in the main estimates is set aside to address these 58 projects that are now outstanding?

Mr. Rory O'Connor: If I could just add to that, we're working with communities on prioritization. Part of that is to see what projects are ready to be moved on, which are still priorities for the community, and what those will actually cost, because, as you know, there have been escalations—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Perhaps I'll ask it in a different way. Is all the money needed to finalize these 112 projects in the main estimates that were just tabled?

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Regional Operations Sector, Department of Indigenous Services): To clarify, there's \$12 million annually dedicated to structural mitigation projects. We work within the department to prioritize these projects when funding becomes available through other sources, such as the community infrastructure—

• (1115)

Mr. Kelly McCauley: This is a question for the minister. Why isn't there the money in the main estimates to finish all these projects?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I assume that through these questions, you will be supporting budget 2023 as we seek to continue to close the gap in infrastructure that was a result of decades, actually, of neglect by previous governments, including Conservative governments—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Here we go. It's Harper's fault, yes.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: —recently. The gap is quite large—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: That's a disgraceful answer, Minister.

The Chair: Mr. McCauley, you can ask a question or you can listen for the answer, but....

Okay, go ahead. You're down to about 15 seconds.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Okay.

I noticed in your departmental plans that there's not one mention of any items from the Auditor General's report in the results expected. There's not one item.

I also note in the main estimates that there's \$980 million to fund wealthy people buying electric cars, but we do not have the money to address this outstanding issue in the main estimates.

The Chair: That is your time. We'll have to come back to that.

Colleagues, I have no problem with members pushing witnesses for answers, but I won't allow commentary that's not a question. Again, a back-and-forth is healthy, but run-over commentary is less so.

Ms. Yip, you have the floor for six minutes, please.

Ms. Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Welcome, Minister, to public accounts. Thank you for coming.

Did you want to finish answering any of the questions that Mr. McCauley asked?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: No...well, maybe I will. Maybe I'll just say that emergency mitigation projects, along with many other infrastructure needs for first nations.... Undoubtedly there's a huge gap. The gap is something that our government has been very deliberate in trying to close, in fact, with unprecedented investments in first nations infrastructure.

This work must continue, so I hope that members of this committee will vote favourably for budget 2023, as we present the next steps in closing that significant infrastructure gap.

Ms. Jean Yip: As indigenous services minister, you have undoubtedly participated in many round tables with the indigenous communities. What is the number one ask that indigenous communities have when you provide feedback on the emergency management assistance program?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Talking about emergency management is one of the very emotional spaces for me as a minister, because what we're talking about—and many of you may have experienced some climate-related emergency in your own life, a flood at home or relocation—is significantly disruptive to communities.

In the past, while communities were in the chaos of trying to manage crisis, there was a fairly restrictive approach to getting money to them. What communities would say frequently was that they needed flexibility in those times. What they needed was the ability to have some form of advance payment so that they could, on the fly, decide how to protect people, protect property, deal with the ongoing emotional crises that inevitably swell up in the time of an emergency, and the many other things that we can and can't imagine.

In fact, the department has been able to do that. We've pivoted from a “show us your receipts” approach to a “here's an advance” approach to supporting communities through crisis management, which then enables that community to act much more rapidly. They don't have to worry about whether or not they will be reimbursed for a particular expense.

Some of the stories I heard were incredible, like the Tsilhqot'in protecting their community in the middle of a forest fire raging

around them and being able to, very quickly and rapidly, mobilize to keep the fire away from their perimeter using historical knowledge of fire management.

Those kinds of things are enabled when people don't worry about the money they're going to need to rent specialized equipment, to support volunteers or to do the kinds of activities that sometimes we can't imagine unless we've done that ourselves. This approach has been a real success story over the last year and a half.

We learned a lot by supporting communities through COVID. If you remember, in the early days of COVID the federal government needed to make money and resources available to communities so they could enable measures that would protect them from COVID. It proved to be very successful. In fact, we had reports from first nations communities that talked about the ability to protect life using that flexibility and honouring the knowledge that communities have.

• (1120)

Ms. Jean Yip: The flexibility of these payments really helps the communities. Have you heard feedback with respect to, as you just mentioned, the COVID period of time?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Yes. Maybe I can turn to the officials to talk a little about the conversations they've been having around that flexibility and what they're seeing. I certainly hear it at one level, but they're seeing it at a micro level.

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: Certainly. Maybe I'll use Peguis as an example.

Peguis is a community in Manitoba that has had repeated flooding year after year. With them, we have done advance payments, not only for response and recovery but also for preparedness.

For this spring, as an example, we provided them with \$2.5 million so that they can prepare. One of the advantages for them is that it then reduces the burden on their cash flow, so that they can be out contracting those services immediately, without having to dip into their own resources to float those types of projects. That's probably the most important piece for a nation like Peguis, ensuring that they have the cash on hand to procure those services immediately.

Thank you.

Ms. Jean Yip: The AG's report noted that Indigenous Services Canada spent 3.5 times more on responding to emergencies than on supporting first nations communities to prepare for them.

We were just talking about the cost of structural mitigation in infrastructure. What makes the cost of responding to emergencies so high?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I can give a general comment and turn to officials.

The frequency of events, as I mentioned in my remarks, is just astronomical. In 2010, as I mentioned, there were 92 reported emergencies. In 2022, there were 173. The frequency and the rapidity at which the department is having to respond....

Of course, everything you're doing in crisis management is expensive. We are talking about evacuating people and the cost of accommodations. In some cases, it's for a lengthy period of time if homes are destroyed. Sometimes it's the cost of additional resources around mental health and support for people's mental health. Sometimes people are left without anything, so you're not only accommodating people but building up their lives again with some of the basics that they need.

Maybe I can turn to Joanne to talk about—

The Chair: I'm afraid I'm going to have to cut you off, Minister. I appreciate that. We'll come back to that. I'm sure the officials will be able to provide information at a future time.

[*Translation*]

Go ahead, Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné. You have six minutes.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné (Terrebonne, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to the witnesses.

Minister, this is a rather important meeting, so I would like to point something out. From the Auditor General's first report on emergency management on reserves in 2013 to the Auditor General's 2022 report on emergency management in first nations communities, a number of the findings haven't changed. That's why we've requested so many meetings with you.

We met with the deputy minister, Gina Wilson, in November, but it was also important for us to speak with you, because we all represent members of the population who are very concerned to see so many major gaps. First nations are really struggling, and although the government seems to have good intentions, it isn't acting on them in a meaningful way, unfortunately.

Three of the Auditor General's findings are especially noteworthy. First, Indigenous Services Canada did not provide the support first nations communities needed to manage emergencies such as floods and wildfires. These emergencies are happening more often and with greater intensity, mainly because of climate change, and first nations tend to be more vulnerable to them. Second, the department spent three and a half times more money on response and recovery than on preparedness and mitigation. That approach is less cost-effective, as everyone knows. Third, the Auditor General noted with anger and dismay that many of the 2022 findings were the same as they were a decade ago.

Thank you, by the way, for providing us with a somewhat more detailed action plan last week. Some progress has been made. It addresses issues I raised when we met in November, laying out clear

er and more specific time frames. I can see that you've made some efforts.

I'd like you to respond to the points I mentioned. First, is the risk assessment under way, and above all, will it address the specific needs of the communities?

• (1125)

[*English*]

Ms. Gina Wilson (Deputy Minister, Department of Indigenous Services): Thank you so much.

I just want to talk a little about the risk assessment.

Like I stated the last time I was here, I was thankful to the Auditor General for the recommendation on a risk-based approach. She recommended something along these lines in 2013.

To my understanding, we felt that we in fact had incorporated a risk-based approach through our priority-ranking framework on infrastructure, which is based on risk, and also through our risk-based formula through the EMAP funding.

In talking to the Auditor General when we received the draft report, we came to understand that her understanding of a risk-based approach was not satisfactory. What we plan to do is to improve that risk-based approach. You have that in the recommendation and the timelines.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: I see. You are confirming that the risk assessment will be very specific and that you will provide it to the committee so we can review it.

I hope you'll follow it up with the funding necessary for prevention. We agree that responding to an incident is clearly not the way to do things, especially given what an impact climate change has on the number of events first nations communities experience. For that reason, I want to stress how important it is that you provide funding for prevention.

Earlier, one of the officials mentioned that \$12 million was going to be put towards prevention annually. Now Indigenous Services Canada's overall budget is \$39.6 billion. You'll have to forgive me here, but \$12 million for prevention out of a total of \$39.6 billion sounds like peanuts to me.

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: In general, the gap is huge; you're absolutely right. In terms of emergency management, the challenge the department has increasingly had is that the need to respond is increasing and growing. There is a fiscal challenge in meeting simultaneously the urgency of the response measures that you have to take quickly when there is a crisis, but also having the capacity in terms of the infrastructure mitigation work.

As other officials have mentioned, though, in particular Mr. O'Connor, we don't have one source of money for infrastructure investments in first nations. It doesn't all come through Indigenous Services Canada. There is, obviously, money in Indigenous Services Canada, but there are a number of other departments, including Infrastructure, that Indigenous Services works collaboratively with to close that gap.

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you, Minister, for answering that.

You mentioned a possible fiscal shortfall. The department's actual expenditures in 2020-21 were \$16 billion, but your budget was more than twice that. That means a whole lot of money wasn't spent. Why did you allocate only \$12 million to prevention when you know how much work is required on that front and you didn't spend all the money you got from the government?

[English]

Mr. Rory O'Connor: Could I respond to that?

The major projects in particular are complex. They are often multi-year projects. Sometimes there are delays in projects, for example, related to COVID, which puts back timelines due to labour and materials. As such, sometimes we need to reprofile funds into future years in order to be able to complete those projects as originally planned.

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: I would also note that the \$12 million is specific for structural mitigation projects. Prevention funding under the emergency management assistance program can provide additional funding for things like sandbagging, the project I mentioned earlier with Peguis.

[Translation]

The Chair: Your time is up, Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné.

[English]

Mr. Desjarlais, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais (Edmonton Griesbach, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Madam Minister. Thank you so much for being here.

I think it's deplorable, unfortunately, that we have to be in this circumstance, first and foremost. For over a decade, it's been mentioned, this audit was nearing. That is the most troublesome aspect of this—the time we wait, the time indigenous people are waiting, and the amount of risk that these indigenous communities are suffering because of that time lost and the waiting that is occurring.

We should be ashamed of ourselves. That is, the government should be ashamed. These are people's lives. They are real people, beyond politics, beyond partisanship. I'm upset to see that this has become a partisan issue in many ways. I had hoped to see that Canadians have grown, and that the governments they elect have grown, but the fact remains that this is still an emerging emergency.

Canada is one of the wealthiest countries in the world. In the entire globe, Canada is one of the wealthiest places. You wouldn't know it, looking at first nations reserves in Canada. You would not know it. With promise after promise after promise, Madam Minister, this government continues to fail indigenous people. It's not just your government; I will take that point. Governments right across this country have failed indigenous people and continue to do that. The breach of these promises has a cost to it.

There's a reason I'm upset today. If this was the first time Canada had broken a promise, maybe indigenous people might give you a pass. This is over 150 years of broken promise after broken promise.

Indigenous people right now...just last Monday, Chief Jordna Hill declared a state of emergency in the Shamattawa First Nation in northern Manitoba. He explained at a press conference in response to several suicides in recent weeks, as well as a fire that destroyed the homes of eight families at a time when the community was down on fire equipment, that it was this government's fault.

They didn't have fire equipment, Madam Minister, because this government failed to adequately prepare and ensure that indigenous people had fire equipment.

Fire is not a matter of if; it's a matter of when. That's why there are insurance companies, but even insurers won't help these communities, so if the insurers won't and the government won't, who is going to help them? This needs to be fixed. I'm going to get to the point of what I recommend is a fix, and as a matter of fact it's your own department's recommendation.

Beyond that, Grand Chief Garrison Settee of the MKO, a political advocacy organization I'm certain you're familiar with, which represents 26 first nations in Manitoba, said what's unfolding is a product of “years of neglect”. This is someone you're supposed to be in a relationship with. You're supposed to ensure that these things aren't the case.

There were years of neglect, Madam Minister—not my words, but the words of first nations—by governments that are failing to financially support remote communities such as Shamattawa.

The question I have is, when will the government take this seriously? When will any government take this seriously? It is way too long this has been going on. Indigenous communities can't continue to do this by themselves. It's explicitly clear the federal government.... You talk about partnerships, but the federal government is responsible. Section 91(24) of the Constitution Act of this country says the federal government has responsibility for Indians and land reserves for Indians. Those lands are flooding; those lands are on fire, and those lands require the assistance of indigenous people to actually mitigate that, but they need this government to step up.

I want to return now to the previous meeting, on November 25, 2022, in regard to this audit. The deputy minister of indigenous services, Ms. Wilson, said:

I would like your support to ensure more resources to first nations for emergency management going forward. If parliamentarians were to approve increased resources to the department, we would be happy to administer them.

That's not all she said, though. After her ADM acknowledged that there was at least \$358 million in need, but just \$12 million in dedicated annual funding to the program just mentioned by Ms. Wilkinson, she was asked, Madam Minister, directly whether she was making the request for finances to achieve this, and she responded with "yes". She confirmed that she spoke to you about this request, that she had asked you for the \$358 million, a small amount of money, to go into the direct fund for first nations mitigation, into the first nation infrastructure fund, which currently sits at \$12 million, nothing.

Twelve million dollars is nothing in an emergency. When I worked in emergency management in northern Alberta, \$3 million was the cost of the houses we lost in just one community. For the entire first nation infrastructure fund, \$12 million is an embarrassment. This is why we have these issues.

• (1130)

You can talk about the many pots of funding you allocate and you merge together. The reality is that the fund is way oversubscribed. You know it, Madam Minister, and your deputy ministers know it. It's oversubscribed. The emergencies are real.

My direct question is this: Will you take the advice of your deputy minister and, at the very least, increase the first nation infrastructure fund, which sits at \$12 million, to \$358 million, something she actually could—

• (1135)

The Chair: Mr. Desjarlais, could you allow a response? I'd like to hear the answer, and I think you would too.

Go ahead, Minister.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: How many minutes do I have, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have 40 seconds.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I have 40 seconds. Okay.

First of all, I will never stop advocating for equity for indigenous peoples. I fully appreciate the pain and rage that you're expressing, and I feel it every time I am in a community.

The way I do my work is as an ally to first nations and indigenous peoples, and I work closely with the department to advocate for the resources that—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Is it yes or no?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'm getting to that, Mr. Chair.

I work closely with the department to advocate for the resources we need.

I will also say this. I wouldn't want confusion to arise around the \$12 million that you're talking about, which is specifically for structural mitigation, and the money that we have set aside and are investing in infrastructure as a whole. They are different things.

When we're talking about house fires, those are not included in the structural mitigation money. There is a separate pot of money.

When we're talking about water, for example, or other civil engineering infrastructure projects, such as community centres or health centres, there is separate infrastructure spending for those, so the Government of Canada spends far more than \$12 million on infrastructure in first nations. In fact, we have spent unprecedented amounts, as you know; however, we still have a huge gap.

The Chair: Thank you.

We turn now to our next round, starting with Mr. Genuis.

You have the floor for five minutes. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Minister, a couple of things are striking to me about the conversation so far. One, hearing you talk, it sounds as though the government that has, in fact, been in place for eight years hasn't, in fact, been in place, because you are continually talking about all of us sharing some responsibility and how we're all accountable for this, as members of Parliament.

Your government has been in place for eight years. We had an audit in 2013 that identified many of these same problems. Your government has had eight years to try to address or fix those problems, and you're coming to us saying that you're an ally, that you're angry too and that you're supportive.

These are problems that you as minister are responsible for. You should be taking action on them, and action should have been taken long ago.

The other thing that's striking to me in this discussion is that we have a government now that always wants to measure its success by the amount of money it's spending. The Auditor General has found that if we were spending money proactively on emergency preparedness, we would actually be saving money on emergency response, and in fact, saving money overall. That is, spending money quite literally on preventing fires instead of putting out fires would save us money and reduce the negative impacts on communities. This notion underlines the problem that it's not just about money spent; it's also about management and about being proactive. Those are my comments.

Minister, I want to ask you specifically about page 14 of the audit. The Auditor General highlights the absence of service agreements in a number of cases. Clearly, given the interaction of federal and provincial responsibility when it comes to responding to these kinds of issues on indigenous communities, the federal government has a responsibility, but it will obviously likely need to benefit from co-operation with provinces.

In fact, in a number of provinces there are no service agreements in place to deal with emergency management in general or with wildfires. In one case the agreement was signed over 30 years ago and has not been updated. In four of six wildfire agreements, not all first nations communities in the relevant provinces are included.

Minister, you've said that you accept the findings of the Auditor General's report. Is your department proactively working to update and negotiate agreements, and could you give us an update on when we can expect to have agreements covering every province and territory and agreements that include all first nations communities?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: First of all, the short answer to your last question is yes. In fact we're working on the co-development and multilateral agreements.

In direct contrast to the previous member's statement, although of course the federal government has some very distinct responsibilities in whatever province you live in, whether you're indigenous or not, there are certain responsibilities in jurisdictions that provinces and territories have and in fact are better equipped to provide, and there are funding agreements with provinces and territories to provide those services.

For example, we have a—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I want to ask about the negotiations and timelines.

You can continue answering, but can I direct your answer? I'd like to know, what is the status of those negotiations, and when we can expect to have agreements covering all jurisdictions and communities, please?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I can certainly go through all 13 provinces and territories, and where we're at. Is that what you'd like?

• (1140)

Mr. Garnett Genuis: When can we expect that the entire process will be completed?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: As you know, when you're working on a multilateral agreement, you don't actually control the timeline completely. Of course, we would need the provinces and territories to

work collaboratively with us. Those trilateral conversations with first nations people, provinces, territories and the federal government happen in a collaborative way.

We have a memorandum of understanding on a trilateral approach with British Columbia, and we're thrilled. In fact, it worked very well with the Province of B.C. There was some great work happening with Alberta, as well. Manitoba is in progress. There are other provinces and territories that are not at the same stage.

Maybe I could turn to Joanne. Would you like to speak about—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, just because of time constraints, I see I have about 30 seconds left. Can I ask you to provide a detailed response, updating the committee in writing on the status and expected timelines in the case of all those negotiations? Can you provide that to the committee as a follow-up?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: We certainly can. It may be in your package, though, in the plan.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you.

Minister, give a quick response to this. It's been eight years. You seem to be trying to disperse responsibility for this. Do you take any personal responsibility for the contents of this audit?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I take personal responsibility for my work as a member of Parliament and a cabinet minister in a government that has put reconciliation at the core.

I would ask, do you take any personal responsibility? The \$2.6 million proposed—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: For the failure of—

The Chair: Our time is up.

As you know, I allow witnesses to continue once the time is up. Once you interrupt, I end the time. I don't like the talking over one another.

Mr. Fragiskatos, you have the floor for five minutes, please.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister and officials, for being here today.

Minister, the report talks about the imperative of a culturally appropriate response when it comes to emergency management.

Could you talk about how the government has sought to ensure that principle in its approach?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'll give some high-level thoughts and then turn to the officials.

One of the big differences between this Liberal government and the previous one is that this Liberal government, when we were elected, put reconciliation at the core. In order to do that, we had to understand how to be a good partner, rather than how to be a controlling partner, quite frankly.

Sometimes, when you have all the money and resources, it's easy to slip into being the controlling partner. The best outcomes are coming from the work that we're doing collaboratively with first nations. Leaning into a cultural change within the department and the government as a whole puts indigenous self-determination at its core.

It's not just in emergency management. We have a new child welfare law, for example. We're in consultations now on self-determined health legislation. We're working on principles of co-development with first nation peoples, so that we don't unintentionally impose legislation on people that isn't going to fit.

This is really a cultural shift within the federal government. It's difficult. As our colleague, Mr. Desjarlais, mentioned, it is a colonial country with a history of determining for indigenous people what they will live through and endure, rather than asking indigenous people how best to support their own self-determination and healing.

It is a process, but it is one that I'm profoundly thrilled to be part of.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I take from your remarks and what you talked about previously with respect to advance payments in response to the whole challenge of emergency management, that the approach of advance payments fits very well and reflects the goal of reconciliation. Rather than having you confirm that, and I think you've done it even by nodding, would you say this is now underpinning the entire vision of emergency management going forward, getting payments in advance rather than after the fact?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: It's an actual policy change. That, in itself, is a formalized approach. It isn't something that we're considering on a case-by-case basis.

I will say, though, that if a particular community doesn't want that approach, that is certainly within their prerogative as well. Some communities, for example, have sufficient resources to manage a crisis without needing an advanced payment.

That is a huge cultural shift. It's built on trust, actually. If you don't trust people, you need to see every receipt. If you trust people, you can do audits in a way that is far more respectful of the relationship.

We're not on the ground, as officials. In particular, deep within departments, they are not on the ground to understand that, for example, a team of 20 volunteers that has been working 24 hours a day might need to buy T-shirts. I'm not even saying it would or wouldn't have been covered in the past, but to an auditor or to a person reimbursing on a receipt basis, for example, that might look like a silly expense.

For the many first nations leaders I've talked to, keeping their volunteers engaged and connected is super important for being able to continue to, for example, prepare the site so that the fire doesn't breach the wall. We can't necessarily understand on a granular basis what goes into that.

Having been a professional working in not-for-profit, I can tell you that keeping your volunteers happy is a critical ingredient in keeping your organization running.

That flexibility allows communities to make those decisions on the fly, without worrying about whether they are going to get covered for it.

We are now looking to be a supportive partner in those kinds of decisions and doing so in an accountable way together.

• (1145)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Minister, I have about 30 seconds. It's not related directly to the contents of this report.

Are you engaged with counterparts internationally? I'm thinking of Australia. There have been huge disasters there, particularly with flooding and fires. Obviously, there are large indigenous populations.

Are you engaged in conversations? If you are, could you elaborate a little on that?

I'm thinking about best practices and an exchange on those best practices.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: It's a great question.

Under the previous Conservative government, international travel was severely affected. International relationships were severely affected for department officials. That loss of knowledge exchange and best practice, as you point out, is something that I think all ministers would say is fairly profound. We're trying to regain it through re-establishing connections with counterparts through the United Nations and through other...colonial countries, for lack of a better word.

Connecting indigenous women leaders with Maori leaders last summer to do some of that knowledge exchange benefits not just the work of the government, but the work of advocates on the ground.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll turn now to Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, you have just two and a half minutes.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have to say that I'm a bit disappointed. I came here today with the intention of working constructively, but here we are witnessing partisan comment after partisan comment. We're getting finger pointing because one government was supposedly worse than the other, but the truth is that they were both bad. After eight years in power, the Liberals haven't done much to improve things, and frankly, it's shameful.

Minister, you accused members of voting against the budget. It's not that we don't agree with the amount of funding; it's that we don't agree with how you administer that funding. It's clear from the Auditor General's reports that we're right to take issue with your budgets and the way you administer them.

Let's talk about your budget. You spent only half of your funding, and you say it has to do with how long everything takes. How long does it take to provide water pumps so that communities can fight fires? Forgive me for saying that it shouldn't take 10 years and that there's something wrong if it does.

Can you tell me how long it will be until communities like the Atikamekw community of Manawan, which is just north of my riding, will have all the equipment they need to fight fires? As we all know, those fires are more and more frequent. I'd like a time frame, please.

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: It's important to distinguish between what takes the most time, which is infrastructure, and what we can rapidly put into place, which is equipment. It's fairly easy to support the purchase of pumps and equipment.

I think what Mr. O'Connor was talking about was complex civil engineering, like staging, for example. If you have visited a northern community—I assume everyone here has—you know that even getting equipment and people to a community to task multiple projects....

Neskantaga is a perfect example. They may have three or four construction projects on the go, but they don't have the capacity to house three or four construction crews. They don't have capacity to have—

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Sorry to cut you off, Minister, but I have just 20 seconds left.

I agree with you that long-term infrastructure projects take longer, but I have here proof that the Atikamekw community of Manawan had to buy its own firefighting equipment. Then, the community had to wait months before it was reimbursed for the equipment.

How do you explain that?

• (1150)

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: That is exactly what we've changed. I think when you talk about the emergency management aspect and not the infrastructure and resiliency aspect, that approach whereby we are supporting communities to purchase equipment and we're supporting communities with advance payments.... That is the change. I think it is a profound change, and it has resulted from reflections of this government, the Auditor General's approach, and of course a renewed relationship built on respect, trust and self-determination. Maybe—

[Translation]

The Chair: Your time is up.

[English]

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

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to return to this topic and the funding of the structural mitigation fund.

Madam Minister, perhaps your officials could look for data related to that and the conversation they had directly with you on that. I want to comment on what structural racism really is, because I think that is the big piece that's missing, not only in your attitude present in this committee, but also in dealing with the nature of the severity of this. It's a severe topic.

We're trying to centre indigenous and first nations people, and twice now you've commented on Stephen Harper. I agree, and I've agreed that he's part of this problem, but so is your government. That's the piece you're not recognizing. Indigenous people—any victims of violence—need to ensure that the one who perpetrated that violence understands that violence in a really important and intimate way, because indigenous people have given a lot to this country not to have this kind of disrespect. When the Auditor General says for over a decade that this has been an issue, and you say there's no problem; don't look here; we need to find a better solution....

Indigenous people right across this country feel that this ministry, in particular, is out of touch, and we need to find creative ways to acknowledge that yes, we've failed. We're not saying to fire anybody. We're saying agree to that fact, so we can recognize what the real solution is here.

The solution wasn't to divide the ministry from INAC to Crown-Indigenous Relations and ISC and to have indigenous people sort out the mess, and to tell them to go into the labyrinth and try to find this in the ministry. No. I went through that mess for eight years as a national director for the Métis—

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

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: It was very difficult.

Madam Minister, the question is on the deputy minister's discussion with you, when she asked you to increase the structural mitigation fund, particularly. I want you to comment on just that fund. She asked for \$358 million. Will you provide that, yes or no?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: First, let me say that I have never said, "No problem, don't look here." I am the first to say that we are still in a colonial system that oppresses indigenous people, so let me be clear about that.

Secondly, what I will say is that we are doing everything we can to ensure the department is fully resourced to meet all of its obligations. As you know, budget deliberations are confidential. I can't explain to you the requests I have in front of the finance minister, but I can tell you that the Prime Minister's expectation of me is to fight for indigenous people's right to be self-determined and to have the equity to be able to do that.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

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

Mr. Michael Kram (Regina—Wascana, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the minister and staff for being here today.

Minister, I would like to read a couple of quotes from the report. At the bottom of page 19, it says, “We found that most of the department’s performance indicators tracked spending to measure its progress against the goals.” Then it goes on to say, “Spending is not a good measure because it does not mean that results are being achieved.”

Would you agree with that statement, Minister?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I would, and I would also agree with all of the Auditor General's recommendations, as I said in my earlier remarks.

Mr. Michael Kram: What will be the new performance indicators, other than money spent, to achieve actual improved results for indigenous Canadians?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I think you have it, the proposed plan, under paragraph 8.66—“Indigenous Services Canada should develop performance indicators”. That work is under way.

Maybe Joanne would like to speak a bit more about the work of developing those indicators.

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: Certainly. You'll see in the management action plan, under section 8.66, the steps and timelines that are identified to achieve new performance indicators that, in fact, are not focused on funding but on outcomes, and that relate back to the department's new departmental results framework.

• (1155)

Mr. Michael Kram: I'd like to turn now to page 18 of the report, where it talks about the Kashechewan First Nation. This nation has been evacuated every year for the past decade. Are they going to be evacuated again this year?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'm really glad you raised Kashechewan, because, in fact, Kashechewan, as you point out, has had a terrible experience with evacuation related to flooding, but Kashechewan has had some recent success, and that is through a new approach that the department has taken, the principles of self-determination. In fact, last year, I believe, Kashechewan used a land-based approach to evacuate from the anticipated flooding area, which allowed for community members to stay closer together, to stay united and to stay connected to culture and language.

Joanne, do you want to speak a bit more about Kashechewan?

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: Certainly. In fact, it's been a couple of years, Minister, that the “on the land” initiative has been pursued with Kashechewan. We have officials in the community, in fact, next week to meet with the community and take the best lessons from the last couple of years of on the land, which was also helpful during COVID.

It enables the members to hunt and to have their cultural practices in a way that does not disrupt them and have them come to cities, where we would be looking at other cultural supports, as was mentioned earlier. That initiative has been very strong, and we're studying it closely to make sure we can enable that sort of prevention.

To one of the earlier points, it is certainly a more economical pursuit than an evacuation would be, so it is all around a very, very good initiative.

Thank you.

Mr. Michael Kram: Yes. I understand that they are not being relocated to different communities, but they're still being relocated within that first nation. Is there any plan to not have to relocate them at all, or will they continue to be relocated every single year indefinitely?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: The first thing to realize is that those are the ancestral lands of the Kashechewan people, so there is a connection to that land. Any choice about moving from that particular flood area would be at the request of Kashechewan First Nation, and it would not be a good partner thing to do to insist that they move. This approach, as Ms. Wilkinson has pointed out, allows for self-determination in the course of the community itself wrestling with those very things.

Communities that face repeated and ongoing flooding also love their community. They also love their region. It is a hugely emotional deliberation for communities to decide whether or not they've had enough of the flooding and that they want to pull up everything, all their connections to that area, and choose a new area. It's not easy politically for the elected leaders of the community, and it's certainly very difficult to find consensus. We work with communities on their determined approach. Should Kashechewan at some point decide that it wanted to relocate, this government would work with Kashechewan to understand what that could look like.

The Chair: I'm afraid that is the time, Mr. Kram.

Finally, we have Ms. Shanahan.

You have the floor for five minutes, please.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you very much, Chair.

I thank the minister for being with us here today with officials from the department.

I'm very encouraged to hear about this innovation with advanced payments. I highly encourage it as a former commercial banker. Cash flow is a game-changer, especially when we're trying to address emergency situations, other equipment needs and so on.

I'm a long-time member of this committee, and I recall the late Michael Ferguson, a former auditor general, and his plea to this committee to make this issue a priority, to press the government on reconciliation and to provide outcomes to solving critical crisis situations on first nations reserves.

To that note, I'd like to ask the minister what has changed. Have we reacted in that vein? I'm thinking of the budgets we've had in the past, 2019 and so on. Have we made a difference here in putting money towards these issues?

• (1200)

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I think the short answer is yes. I mean, we are spending more towards the kinds of things that make equity more foreseeable in first nations communities, but I would say that the gap is still very large. I think the principle of truth, equity and self-determination, which is how the department governs itself, requires us to be fiercely honest with ourselves—all of us, regardless of our political stripe—that Canada is a colonial country; that we have significantly and intentionally underfunded indigenous people over 150 years; and that we are all now trying to figure out how best to get through this together.

Investment is a huge piece of it. I am grateful for a Prime Minister who has put reconciliation at the core and in fact at the centre of all our mandates as ministers, and certainly with our caucus, but it will take consistent and predictable investments and relationships and changes in law to lead to the kinds of trusting relationships that we hope to have. The trust is growing, and it's beginning, but we live in a system that can change rapidly. Indigenous people frequently talk to me about their fears if those kinds of consistent investments are not continued.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Minister, it's interesting that you and some of your officials made mention earlier of the idea of advance payments being based on that trust. We're the public accounts committee. We're here to look at the money, where it went, how it was spent and so on. I'm sure that I can anticipate future public accounts committees saying, "Wait a minute. This money went out to this community. How did it get spent?"

How do you intend to address those comments?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I think we can do auditing in a different way, where we look for patterns of abuse rather than micromanaging communities. Communities for a very long time have been extremely micromanaged in ways such that their financial transparency is above, really, the financial transparency required anywhere else. This is about changing that narrative and understanding that, just like every other system, there may be areas that need tightening and there may be areas that need loosening, but we need to continue to have those conversations around self-determination. Self-determination is the principle that allows us to be able to move forward with advance payments. Communities know for themselves how to protect one another and how to do so in an efficient way.

I see my deputy leaning in, so I'm going to let her have a quick word here.

Ms. Gina Wilson: I'll be very brief.

Despite the fact that an advance payment goes out, the full payment is still audited, or there is still detailed reporting on that. I just wanted to make sure that was mentioned.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: That's good to know.

Is there anything else you'd like to add? You mentioned something earlier about learning from dealing with the COVID emergency. Talk to us about that.

Thank you.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Obviously, COVID was a time that probably for most of us.... It's a blur, isn't it? During the time of COVID, we knew that indigenous communities would be very at risk of contracting COVID and potentially dying. In fact, outcomes from other indigenous populations were not so great, including in the United States. Of course, the government really needed to move quickly. One of the ways that we could move quickly—I have to compliment my predecessor, Minister Miller, on this work—was to ensure that communities had advance payments to be able to use in a way that they felt would be the best way to protect their communities.

The responses were diverse. Some communities did indeed set up forms of border control, if you will, and limited mobility. Other communities supported urban residents with food cards and other kinds of essential needs, so that elderly or at-risk people didn't have to go out. Others did a lot of public health information in culturally appropriate languages or traditions.

Val, you were really involved. Do you want to speak a bit about it?

Ms. Valerie Gideon: I would just say that it really was about making sure that communities felt empowered to take the actions they needed and felt engaged and didn't have to come to us every time to get authorization to do this or that. It worked very effectively.

The Chair: Thank you very much. The time has now escaped us.

Minister, I will leave one comment with you, because it's unusual for this committee to hear from a minister directly. Despite your reassuring words today, it does seem that something is not working. I think you would agree that given the repeated reports from the Auditor General, changing ways needs to result in measurable outcomes, and it doesn't seem we're seeing that. You're welcome to respond to that, if you like, in 30 seconds, but I did want to press that with you, because I think you'll be hearing that from the committee.

I want to take this moment to thank you as well for agreeing to appear today. We certainly appreciate it, and I thank you again.

If you'd like to take 30 seconds, you're welcome to do so. Then you'll be free to go.

Thank you.

• (1205)

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Again, I agree with the Auditor General. That's why we are developing an action plan with measurables that include more than the investments. They actually include the outcome measurement that I think is critical to changing any dysfunctional system.

I look forward to being part of that work, and I look forward to the report of the committee.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'll suspend now for five minutes, until 12:10.

I know the minister has a pressing engagement and a busy schedule, so she'll be leaving us. I believe the other officials are staying. I could be wrong on that. We'll find out in five minutes.

Thank you, all.

• (1205)

(Pause)

• (1210)

The Chair: I'm going to bring this meeting back to order.

Right off the top, I'm going to do the rounds similar to before. The first four members will each have six minutes.

Thank you for agreeing to continue with us this second hour. We appreciate it.

That clock is terribly wrong. Just ignore it if you're wondering how soon we're going to be out of here.

Mr. McCauley, you have the floor for six minutes, please.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thanks, Chair.

Ms. Wilkinson, in answer to Mr. Kram's comments, you spoke about setting goals and it not being based just on money spent.

Why are those targets not reflected in your departmental plans?

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: In fact, respectfully, Chair, they are reflected in our departmental plans.

We have indicators, as an example, in a number of—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Tell me where.

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: For example, we have the number of evacuees who return home within three months, which is at 97%.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I'm sorry, I'll be a bit more precise. I'm talking more around the infrastructure.

Actually, I looked at your departmental plan, and 60% of them don't have targets set for the result indicators. I'm curious why so many don't have targets set. They're to be advised or to be decided next year.

Specifically around the infrastructure, it's not even mentioned in any of the targets in the departmental plans. Knowing, of course, that the departmental plans set out the priorities for the year, why not?

Ms. Gina Wilson: I believe there is a departmental result on infrastructure in our departmental plan.

Can we pull it out?

Mr. Kelly McCauley: While I continue my questions, maybe someone can get back to me and tell me exactly what page, unless you have it in front of you and unless I missed it, which is very possible.

Actually, it's 50% that don't have actual targets set.

While Ms. Gideon is looking for that, I just want to get back.... You talked about how the money is clearly not, or doesn't seem to be, in the estimates to cover all.

Leaving this meeting, who specifically on the team is going to be saying that they will be accountable and responsible for ensuring that these infrastructure items, and other items highlighted in the report, are actually acted upon?

We asked the minister, and it was like...it's all of us. It's not all of us. It's someone from your department.

Who's that going to be? Is that going to be the deputy minister?

Ms. Gina Wilson: I am definitely responsible, as deputy minister, for administering policies and programs that I have been provided authority for from the government.

I'm also responsible for working with auditors. We're working collaboratively to develop, implement and monitor a management action plan in response to this audit.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: It will be you.

Ms. Gideon, do you have the page?

Ms. Valerie Gideon: We don't have the page number for you, but we can follow up with the page number. I have excerpts of it.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I have your departmental plan right here.

Ms. Valerie Gideon: I have excerpts of it under departmental result 6.

I would also say that under the first nation infrastructure fund we did have a target of 100 structural mitigation projects by March 31, 2024. We've surpassed that with 112 projects that are under way or completed, and with 63 completed.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Is that detailed in your departmental plan?

Ms. Valerie Gideon: As I've said, we will follow up with the specific page number, but we have, under departmental result 6, reference to specific infrastructure—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I've gone through it. It's not there, I'll tell you right now.

The fact that you showed up to the meeting and aren't aware of that... I guess I should say it's not surprising, but it is disappointing.

Ms. Valerie Gideon: I'm actually just referring you to the target that we set for the first nation infrastructure fund, which you noted is of particular interest to the committee.

• (1215)

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I'm talking about the department plans, which are tabled in the House of Commons and lay out your targets for the year to justify the funding ask to Parliament.

The minister sat here and lectured us, saying, "Well, I hope you will vote for the budget." This document backs up the money you're asking for, and 44% of what you have put in here has not set targets. You have result indicators. They're not part of this—

Ms. Valerie Gideon: Part of the rationale—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Let me finish, please, Madam.

Without targets set, it's to be decided next year or to be decided at a later time. It's not acceptable.

Will the money for the 112 projects be fully funded out of the estimates process for the main estimates? Will they be expressly funded for this year?

Ms. Valerie Gideon: To explain with respect to the indicators, we are working with partners on specific infrastructure reform strategies and the development of indicators—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: We're talking about separate things here.

The departmental plans lay out your departmental priorities for the year. These plans back up and justify the spending ask for the estimates from parliamentarians.

I am asking specifically why they're not noted for the 112 in the infrastructure or the other items from the Auditor General's report.

Ms. Gina Wilson: Maybe I'll take a stab at that one.

It is not actually 112 projects anymore. It is now 58 projects that are not funded. That's \$82 million. There is not a specific line item for those particular 58 projects. There is a broader line item for infrastructure; there is a line item for structural mitigation, and so on, but it's not specific to those particular projects.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I've gone through each of the departmental indicators. I really cannot find any that relate back directly to this damning Auditor General's report. I would think that the report is so bad—so bad that the minister had to show up—that they might be reflected as departmental priorities.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I have a very quick question for Ms. Gideon.

In the last meeting, you said, "We need to have funding specifically dedicated to the recommendations in the report." Do the estimates provide that funding, specifically dedicated to the recommendations in the report?

It's the money your department is asking for in the main estimates that just—

Ms. Valerie Gideon: We have funding that was secured in 2019 and 2020 over a multi-year period for structural mitigation, for capacity enhancement, for the FireSmart and fire protection areas, and for the first nation infrastructure fund—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: You're fully funded, then.

Ms. Valerie Gideon: Those will all assist in addressing aspects of the recommendations.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Are you fully funded to accomplish those recommendations?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McCauley. We'll have to come back to this.

Turning now to Mr. Dong, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Han Dong (Don Valley North, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

First of all, I want to ask Ms. Gideon if she needs more time to answer the question that my colleague just asked.

Ms. Valerie Gideon: I think what we were indicating is that we have indicators that speak to outcomes, although we are, in the MRAP, as Joanne mentioned earlier, indicating that we will be doing further work with partners.

For example, as she mentioned, we have the percentage of evacuees who have been returned to their community within three months. The result in 2021-22 was 97.9%.

We have the percentage of longer-term evacuees who have been returned home or have a scheduled date within two years of their evacuation. The percentage was 77.5% in 2021-22.

I want to briefly mention that on the health emergency side, we also have the percentage of first nations with all-hazards emergency plans that have a health component, and we have the percentage of first nations that are served by emergency management and health coordinators as well.

Mr. Han Dong: That's great.

I understand that the first nations and Inuit health branch of Health Canada became a part of Indigenous Services Canada when the department was divided into two.

What role did that play in helping the department respond to the COVID pandemic, for example? Does it help the department work with first nations to better prepare their response to emergency events, such as hurricanes, floods and wildfires?

Ms. Valerie Gideon: Absolutely, it does. Even before the pandemic in 2019, for the first time we were included with respect to accessing health emergency funding, which enabled us to put health emergency coordinators across all of the regions, which we did not have before. In fact, just prior to the pandemic, we were able to bring them all together, and I attended that meeting. We talked about the importance, for example, of mental wellness supports during all hazard and disaster emergencies, which had never happened before.

When the pandemic happened, we had a much more integrated model of emergency management than existed previously, when the first nations and Inuit health branch was part of Health Canada and we had Indigenous and Northern Affairs as a separate department.

Throughout COVID, we were able to take a much more holistic look at community needs, so we didn't treat it just as a public health emergency. We also looked at food security, infrastructure requirements and security. We were able to bridge the gap and be really one federal voice at the table with other partners like Public Safety and the Public Health Agency of Canada, supporting indigenous communities. It was absolutely much more effective, a much more efficient response mechanism than if we had been in two separate departments. Our relationship with the health portfolio was not weakened as a result of that. I know that it was something that people were concerned about, but that did not happen.

• (1220)

Mr. Han Dong: Did that decision help the department to be better prepared for natural disasters, given that climate events are happening quite frequently in the last two decades compared to the past? Would you say that the decision to divide the two departments is going to put us in a stronger position to respond to those events?

Ms. Valerie Gideon: I would absolutely say so. In fact, last spring we were able to include health emergencies in the emergency management assistance program terms and conditions. Health-related emergency costs are now eligible under the EMAT program, which was not the case before. That is one concrete example.

Mr. Han Dong: The work on the multilateral agreements is setting a new path of getting indigenous communities to the table, where decisions are being made. Could you please tell us how you got the B.C. trilateral agreement ready and the next steps of that agreement?

Ms. Gina Wilson: Maybe I'll turn to Joanne on the particulars of that agreement and next steps.

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: Absolutely. We currently have a trilateral memorandum of understanding in B.C., and we're working with the province and with the first nations leadership council, along with their leadership and experts, to move forward in terms of a full trilateral, multilateral agreement. The nations in B.C. are in the process of mandating that work.

Just last week, they mandated the development of a joint discussion paper that will work with some of the pieces that have come through the atmospheric river lessons learned and the work that

we've been doing with the First Nations' Emergency Services Society, which runs a whole range of programs from FireSmart to fire awareness campaigns and those types of things. That work brings all of those pieces together so that leadership can have confidence in the project's moving forward and bring all of that together into one multilateral agreement.

Thank you.

Mr. Han Dong: Is there any timeline on these discussions?

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: Certainly, they are ongoing discussions. There is a gathering coming up in British Columbia in May, where the intent will be to present the results of that discussion paperwork and have discussions with leadership—the province will be there as well—to try to bring them towards closure.

I don't think we have a specific target date. We do have the memorandum of understanding that is in place currently, so that continues to exist while we're developing the agreement itself. That will take some time, particularly around the financial component, but there is lots of positive momentum.

Mr. Han Dong: That's great. I'm a big fan of bringing people together at the same table so that everyone is on the same page.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dong.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, you may go ahead for six minutes.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Wilson, I want to bring up something important we discussed the last time we met, back in November. It hasn't been mentioned this time, though. I'm talking about the division of powers between the federal and provincial governments. Last I checked, the federal government still hadn't signed agreements with a number of provinces. Since this is an area of shared jurisdiction and since the provinces provide a lot of emergency management services, where do those yet-to-be-signed agreements stand? Has there been any progress? Is the federal government taking the matter very seriously?

• (1225)

Ms. Gina Wilson: Absolutely. We are in frequent contact with all the provinces and territories. The negotiations aren't necessarily intensive, but there's a lot of interaction and co-operation.

[*English*]

I would ask Kenza.

[Translation]

Ms. Kenza El Bied (Director General, Sector Operations Branch, Regional Operations Sector, Department of Indigenous Services): I'd like to make two things clear, if I may.

As of now, eight agreements have already been signed and are in force. In addition to those bilateral agreements with the provinces, we also have what we call

[English]

emergency management plans.

[Translation]

They are plans set by the indigenous nations and regional offices. The agreements and plans are two completely different things.

We are currently in talks to replace the bilateral agreements with multilateral agreements, under which the indigenous nations and partners will have a real say.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you.

Have any agreements with the remaining provinces been signed since the Auditor General's report came out in 2022, about a year ago?

Ms. Kenza El Bied: As I said, we have eight in force.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: That means five are missing.

Ms. Kenza El Bied: We are in talks with all the provinces to replace the bilateral agreements with multilateral agreements.

As Ms. Wilkinson mentioned, British Columbia is the only province we have signed a multilateral agreement with. We are actively negotiating, while respecting the wishes of the various indigenous nations. We are working with them to move this work forward. We can't impose our perspective, but we are working with them.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: What's the holdup with the other five provinces and territories?

Ms. Kenza El Bied: Here's what's happening.

I was in Edmonton two weeks ago. I met with all of Alberta's indigenous chiefs, and we discussed a multilateral agreement. They were very pleased with the work that had been accomplished and were in favour of the agreement, so we are going to keep moving forward.

We are meeting very actively with our partners in British Columbia, nearly every month. In Ontario's case, the talks are very far along, and we've provided funding to the Anishinabe Cree nation.

We are working on more advanced aspects of the agreement, not waiting until everyone is on board. We are continuing the discussions, we are there for them and we are making progress. We are finding novel ways to sign these agreements. The aim is to have everything in place by 2025, as you can see from the detailed plan.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you.

Again, though, here's my question, and it's quite straightforward. What or where is the holdup?

It's well and good to say that the agreements are going to be put in place and that you're in contact with the other parties, but the agreements are necessary for faster emergency response.

Ms. Gina Wilson: We are always open to discussion. We aren't causing the holdup.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: That means the holdup is at the provincial level. I do hope that you'll still be able to move the whole process along.

Ms. Wilson, I want to come back to the timetable we discussed in November, if you recall. I noticed that several dates had been added to the action plan, and I thank you for that. I have two specific questions, however.

First, when will the risk analysis we talked about be done? That will give us a real sense of the government's priorities in terms of prevention. Second, will we be able to see the risk analysis?

Ms. Gina Wilson: We will be ready to implement the new plan in a year.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: When we speak again on March 20, 2024, then, I'll have the plan in front of me and be able to examine it. Is that right?

• (1230)

Ms. Gina Wilson: Yes, that's exactly right.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Excellent.

As far as the priorities and timetable are concerned, one of the main issues that was raised the last time we met was the whole matter of climate change. How will climate change lead to increasing risks for first nations, and did you include factors that are going to get worse?

The Chair: Please keep your answer short.

Ms. Gina Wilson: The department has a climate change strategy, which addresses that aspect.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[English]

Mr. Desjarlais, you have the floor for six minutes, please.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thanks to the remaining witnesses for being present here today.

I've largely exhausted many of the questions I feel I had. In the absence, of course, of what I feel are satisfactory answers and a continuation of those important questions, I'll switch gears to speak more directly to the implementation of these policies.

One of them is first recognizing that the status quo is not working. Do you agree?

Maybe we could have all three members agree that the status quo isn't working, because I feel like we have to start from the basics here, given the minister's lack of answers. Maybe we could start with the deputy minister and go to both assistant deputy ministers.

Just quickly, do you think the status quo is working, and is it to the benefit of indigenous people?

Ms. Gina Wilson: The status quo is never a comfortable place for me. Certainly, it is not working, so I would say that the principle of continuous improvement in every aspect of what we do is absolutely essential. Definitely, here in the emergency management world, hot washes, lessons learned and continuing to improve are the way we see things.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Ms. Wilkinson.

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: Absolutely. That is the frame, and as you heard earlier we're continuing to make improvements in the areas that were identified, not only by the Auditor General but also by first nations leadership when we are in active response and recovery mode and looking to prevention and mitigation. We look to integrate those lessons at every step.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: You can also recognize, though, that there is a serious time loss when utilizing the.... The minister mentioned that you don't control the timelines if you're working with partners, in particular the province.

Why do you feel it's important to work with the province, knowing that you have total jurisdiction? The federal government has sole jurisdiction, as per the courts. In particular, the Daniels v. Canada Supreme Court decision of 2016 speaks directly to the government's unwillingness to implement or take full charge of jurisdiction it's awarded under the Constitution.

Why can't you act now?

Ms. Gina Wilson: There are capacities and capabilities the provinces and territories have that are not necessarily within first nations or within the federal government.

Provinces and territories, for instance, have helicopters. We don't have helicopters. There are different types of equipment required for different hazards. There's equipment, for instance, that we don't have: heavy machinery, for instance, that is required—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Knowing these things, why not procure some of these?

Ms. Gina Wilson: Why not procure them? Well, why not work with the province and territory, who have all of these—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: It's your jurisdiction, though. Why not do it? You can get a guaranteed response.

If you got a helicopter today, or if you got a fire truck today, the disaster that happened in Manitoba wouldn't have happened.

Ms. Gina Wilson: Fire trucks are different from heavy machinery. They are different from helicopters—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Okay. Why not buy a fire truck, then?

Ms. Gina Wilson: We have bought a fire truck.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Then why did this community burn down? Why did we lose eight houses?

A voice: I can speak to that—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: No, I'd prefer the deputy minister do so. It's important that the deputy minister answer.

Ms. Gina Wilson: I feel I can give an overarching reply, but I also feel, Mr. Chair, that I can refer to others for more information.

When it comes to fire equipment, definitely, the department does provide resources for that. There are a lot of complex factors in why a fire happens and why a fire truck is not immediately available in the community.

Valerie, do you know the details?

Ms. Valerie Gideon: I would just say that the fire truck in Shamattawa was under repair.

In Winnipeg, they are funded \$150,000 for a fire truck, and \$70,000 in terms of the O&M.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Do you know how much a fire truck costs?

Ms. Valerie Gideon: I don't know myself how much a fire truck costs in that particular community, because it would also involve shipping and so forth.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: It's definitely more than even the generous amount of \$300,000. It's more than that.

Beyond that aspect, and beyond the draft report, what plans do you have to make, rather than incremental change—which is unsatisfactory to indigenous people...? Is it the policy from cabinet that is restricting you from making certain that these problems never happen again? Why do these problems keep happening?

● (1235)

Ms. Gina Wilson: It is not the policy of cabinet to not allow changes to happen.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Well, then whose fault is it that this happened?

Ms. Gina Wilson: Whose fault is it? Do you want me to answer that? I mean, you're talking about the full report—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Yes. Your government is telling us—

Ms. Gina Wilson: My government....

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Your government is telling us that it is doing everything it can, but we have three failed audits.

It's important that we understand why, Ms. Wilson. I understand that it can be difficult, but Canadians need to know exactly why the deputy minister can't answer why a critical failure like this happened, which resulted in eight houses being lost.

Ms. Gina Wilson: You're talking about Shamattawa in particular.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: It is one example, but there are many failures we can go off.

Ms. Gina Wilson: The whole thing....

I think that's why we're here, Mr. Chair, to explain who's responsible. We're here to provide information. We're here to talk about all the details you want, but we're not here to blame anyone in particular, that's certain.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Accountability is important. Is the government responsible for this failure?

It's a fair question, I feel, Chair.

The Chair: The time's yours.

Yes, it is.

Ms. Gina Wilson: Everyone is responsible, to some degree, when it comes to emergency management.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Is the government responsible?

Ms. Gina Wilson: No, the government on its own is not responsible. Any—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Okay, if the Government of Canada is not responsible, who is?

Ms. Gina Wilson: I don't know. I guess this is an inquiry that will continue until you find out—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: The Auditor General said it was the Government of Canada. You said you accepted the audit. Do you accept that the Auditor General said Canada failed?

Ms. Gina Wilson: I do not accept that Canada has failed, no.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: No, the Auditor General said that. Do you accept her findings that your ministry's failed?

Ms. Gina Wilson: We accept the findings, absolutely. We accept all the recommendations. We're prepared to make plans to implement changes for all those recommendations.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: You wouldn't say the government failed, though.

The Chair: Mr. Desjarlais, that is the time. You will have another opportunity, but I want to flag that.

I turn now to Mr. Kram, who is splitting his time with Mr. McCauley....

Do you want me to be the splitter, or are you going to flag when you're done?

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I'll flag when I'm done. Thank you, though, sir.

The Chair: All right.

Good luck, Mr. Kram.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I want to get back to the departmental results. I'm going to quote right from the government website: "These reports provide details on departmental priorities expected results and related resource requirements for the upcoming fiscal year".

Again, there's not a single item in there from this horrendous study, listed as a departmental priority.

I go to Peter Drucker, who talks about not being able to improve something if you can't measure it.

We had Mr. Desjarlais trying to find out who's accountable for all this, and all we're getting back is word salad, or, "It's not us." How are we ever going to get by these roadblocks if no one's ever responsible, no one's ever accountable and it's always someone else's fault?

I guess it's Harper's fault, of course, but that's a given.

How are we going to get past this? We have your own departmental plan, which doesn't list this as a priority, and the response is, we have a different study.

Ms. Gina Wilson: I would suggest that we've done better than incorporate some high-level language in a departmental plan. We have a very detailed management action plan before you that outlines particular milestones and very specific activities. That is a plan.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Action plans don't translate into official documents, such as the estimates process, to get the money.

Section 8.17 of the AG's report says: "The department told us that it had insufficient funding to cover all eligible structural mitigation projects."

Is that still the case?

Ms. Gina Wilson: It's a case of understanding that we do have infrastructure funding and that we do have these 54 projects available, but.... Maybe Rory can take a stab at that.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Do you have the money approved for those or the funding set aside for the process to approve?

Mr. Rory O'Connor: Sorry, could I go back? Could I have a moment to lay it out in context?

There have been 129.8—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I'm not looking for context. I'm just looking for real, straight, simple responses. We've now heard there are 52 mitigation...sorry, 58—

• (1240)

Mr. Rory O'Connor: There are 58, at an estimated cost of \$82.5 million.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Is the money approved for that, or is there...?

Mr. Rory O'Connor: What I would say is there's over \$1 billion set aside for other community infrastructure projects, of which structural mitigation is one of the asset classes, so on a—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Will the structural mitigation projects be prioritized? Will we see at the end of six months or a year that every one of these projects has at least been started?

Mr. Rory O'Connor: I'd just add on to that. In addition to that, given the importance of structural mitigation, there was \$12 million that was set aside, directed specifically towards that.

In terms of the prioritization, that's being done with the communities. We've reached out to communities. We're working with the communities. Some of those may no longer be the priorities of the communities. We're talking about, government-wide, 8,342 projects that have been completed and are ongoing. It is—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Yes, but specifically on the 58, what am I missing here? There are 58 projects. If they've been identified as mitigation, who decides that it's no longer a priority and it gets bumped off?

Mr. Rory O'Connor: That would be done in consultation with the communities, so—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Are communities saying, “We don't want this work done, so don't work on this”?

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: That's the conversation that officials are having with each and every one of the nations that have projects represented within the 58 that remain. As we mentioned earlier, budget 2019 provided \$12 million annually, specifically for structural mitigation. We continually look to leverage other sources of funding, whether that's through the funding that Mr. O'Connor mentioned in terms of broader infrastructure, working with Infrastructure Canada, and sometimes working with provinces where there's overlap and so on.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: The 2013 report asked that the department do an analysis of what the costs will be if the mitigation work is not done. That report has never been done. That analysis has never been done.

If these 54 are not done, what are...? We've seen that it's \$3 to \$5 for cleanup services after the fact, for every \$1 that could have been spent on prevention. If these 54 are not done, has an analysis been done on what the costs will be?

Ms. Gina Wilson: It's 58 projects.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: It's 58. I'm sorry for saying 54.

Ms. Gina Wilson: No, there has not been a specific analysis done on what would be.... We would like to continue to work with those communities to in fact invest in those projects, so—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Is it the communities' fault that the analysis hasn't been done?

Ms. Gina Wilson: No, it's not the communities' fault. It—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: It was in the 2013 report. It's been 10 years now. It was recommended 10 years ago.

Ms. Gina Wilson: I'm sorry. I....

Mr. Kelly McCauley: It's the analysis on what the costs will be if these infrastructure projects aren't done.

Ms. Gina Wilson: Oh. Okay. I'm sorry. That's another subject. I didn't understand.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: We're hearing that there are still 50-some left to do, yet there's no real—

The Chair: Mr. McCauley, that is the time, unfortunately.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thank you.

I will share my last second with Mr. Kram.

The Chair: That's very kind of you. Yes. As I said, that's why I wanted to go to Mr. Kram first. I knew how that was going to end.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Ms. Yip, you have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Jean Yip: I somehow knew that was going to happen.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Ms. Jean Yip: My question is in regard to recommendation 5, ensuring that emergency management service agreements include

services provided and standards, and also services for marginalized groups.

How is the department working to ensure that emergency management services on reserves are culturally competent and in line with community needs, specifically for indigenous elders, women and youth?

Ms. Gina Wilson: Definitely, communities work with elders, and so do we as part of the work we do. We also do gender-based analysis.

Maybe Joanne and Valerie would have something to add very quickly.

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: Certainly, when we're working with communities, most often from a GBA+ lens, elders, pregnant women, small children and those types of individuals are identified as priority one for evacuations. They're often evacuated first. We do also work with communities to ensure that things like language supports for elders whose first language may not be the language of the host community where they're going are provided for them, and that mental health and other supports are there to ensure that there is that wraparound.

We're also trying to further the training of community members so that they can then take on some of these positions when the community's evacuated. Young people, for example, can assist with security at hotels and those types of things. On the food that is provided, we take every step we can to make sure that traditional foods can be used where it's appropriate. Those types of things are where we try to make a difference.

Thank you.

● (1245)

Ms. Jean Yip: Okay.

What about those who are physically disabled? They may need more specific emergency management assistance.

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: Yes. Absolutely. They are often evacuated as priority one as well. There was reference earlier to the first nations and Inuit health branch. We work closely with them to ensure that if there's a nursing station in the community, for example, or if an escort is required, those folks travel together, their medications are available, and those health records are available as people are transiting out and coming back home.

Thank you.

Ms. Jean Yip: Ms. Gideon, did you have anything you wanted to add? Okay.

For the people watching at home, in terms of emergency management, what are the provinces responsible for that we may not be aware of?

Ms. Kenza El Bied: In terms of emergency management response in... I'm sorry. Can I ask you to repeat your question? For those who are watching at home....

Ms. Jean Yip: Yes. In terms of emergency management, what are the provinces responsible for that we may not be aware of?

Ms. Kenza El Bied: I would say we have been working with all of the provinces. We have been promoting our work; we have been promoting the Auditor General's report, the recommendations that we are working on. There is a lot of work happening in Alberta, B.C., Manitoba, the Northwest Territories. We're even having a conversation with the Northwest Territories and the Yukon government. Ontario is well advanced. I would say that most of the provinces are aware of the work we are advancing right now.

Ms. Jean Yip: I guess my question is more specifically this: What do the provinces do in terms of emergency management that—

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: Yes. Certainly provinces, generally speaking, have wildfire management. They have the evacuation support that the deputy mentioned earlier. They do that heavy lifting in terms of getting people out, helping to identify the risks, and also making sure nations are listened to, because as was mentioned earlier, part of the new approach that we're working on with provinces and territories and leadership is to make sure that first nations leaders have a strong voice at the table.

By way of example—and it ties into the question earlier around signed agreements—where there are not signed agreements sometimes we're able to push the boundaries there and pay attention to what nations are looking for. Wabaseemoong, for example, is a nation in Ontario that is located closer to Winnipeg than perhaps to some of the traditional areas where the Province of Ontario would normally evacuate them. There is no signed agreement between the provinces of Manitoba and Ontario in terms of having evacuees go back and forth across those provincial lines, but in the case of Wabaseemoong, because it was so important to the community to be based in Winnipeg, the Province of Manitoba, the Province of Ontario, ISC, Public Safety and the community worked together to make that happen, so that the community could evacuate to Winnipeg, where they had close family connections and those types of things.

There doesn't have to be a signed, sealed and delivered agreement in place. There is an understanding that when life and limb are at risk, people pull together and find the best solutions and try to respond to every need the community has put forward.

Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That is the time.

[Translation]

Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The public accounts committee likes to take a look at what the reports say as well. On pages 300 and 301 of volume II of the Public Accounts of Canada 2022, I noticed a variance between the authorities available for use and the authorities used by the Department of Indigenous Services for its various programs.

A total of \$152.2 million was not used for contributions for emergency management assistance for activities on reserves, and a total of \$413.8 million was not used for contributions to support the

construction and maintenance of community infrastructure. I realize that long-term infrastructure projects can take a while. We have been talking about building infrastructure to prevent and mitigate risk and adapt to climate change for a decade.

In concrete terms, can someone tell me why, on one hand, we're hearing that there isn't enough money and, on the other, we're seeing so much money going unused by the department?

● (1250)

Ms. Valerie Gideon: Thank you for your question.

The emergency management assistance program receives annual core funding, but we always request additional funding for the potential reimbursement of emergency expenditures. We always budget for enough funding to make those reimbursements, but it's very tough, because we don't ever know how many emergencies will impact communities each year or how much they will cost.

This funding is set aside for that purpose.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: I see.

Ms. Valerie Gideon: As Mr. O'Connor explained, if a community isn't able to move an infrastructure project forward, we reprofile the investment so as not to drop the commitments made in relation to the project. We don't want to penalize people if they have trouble finding equipment, for instance, or if they run into logistical challenges.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: You said that more than just \$12 million had been allocated to prevention. Can you tell me approximately how much is put towards prevention each year?

Ms. Valerie Gideon: In 2019-20, we received \$69 million over five years for structural mitigation work, which is basically prevention. Over five years, \$47.72 million was put towards wildfire protection, and \$43.6 million was allocated to improving emergency management coordination capacity within first nations communities or organizations.

That money is really for prevention and is on top of the \$12 million invested in infrastructure every year. We always try to work with communities to maximize resources invested in other community infrastructure sectors and increase resources allocated to infrastructure-based prevention.

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

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

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll begin with a quote:

In 2011, at the end of her mandate as Auditor General of Canada, Sheila Fraser summed up her impression of the government's actions after 10 years of audits and related recommendations on first nations issues with the word "unacceptable". Five years later, my predecessor, Michael Ferguson, used the words "beyond unacceptable".

We are now into decades of audits of programs and government commitments that have repeatedly failed to effectively serve Canada's indigenous peoples.

She said we have failed to serve Canada's indigenous peoples. She went on:

It is clear to me that strong words are not driving change. Concrete actions are needed to address these long-standing issues, and government needs to be held accountable.

Deputy minister, can you guess who said that?

Ms. Gina Wilson: You're asking me to guess who the quote is from?

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Yes, the quote. You heard it before, three times.

Ms. Gina Wilson: It was the Auditor General.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: It was the Auditor General of Canada.

Ms. Gina Wilson: That's great.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Exactly. And it's a damning result. It's important that Canadians understand that you see that clearly, as the head of this department, as its official, and that you take it seriously and know this is horrific. All of us, whether members of the government or members of the opposition, agree that it's horrific. Even members of the government understand—elected members of the Liberal Party understand—that it's important to get accountability on this. It's important, though, that Canadians also see that same will reflected in its ministry.

When I asked just previously who you thought was responsible for this failed audit, you said it wasn't the government. I can bring up the quote. I can ask you in the next round of questioning as well, but I'll give you another opportunity. Who do you think the Auditor General is talking about when she says there's been a failure of the government and the "government needs to be held accountable"?

Ms. Gina Wilson: My response was not that the government is not accountable. The government is definitely accountable. We're here presenting to you. My view was that it was not solely the government that is accountable for emergency management in Canada or for this particular audit. I personally am definitely responsible for administering and making sure the management action plan, in response to the audit, is implemented and monitored.

• (1255)

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: She said the government failed to effectively—

The Chair: Mr. Desjarlais, you have time for a brief comment only. I'm afraid that's your time.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: She said the government failed to serve Canada's indigenous people. Would you agree with the Auditor General?

Ms. Gina Wilson: The Auditor General said that in her remarks, but it's not in the particular audit. I'm responding to the audit. I'm not going to respond to the Auditor General's speech.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: You're not going to respond to the Auditor General? Wow.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We turn now to Mr. Kram.

You have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Michael Kram: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank my colleague, Kelly McCauley, for being so generous in sharing his time.

To the witnesses, I would like to return to the Kashechewan First Nation in northern Ontario.

First of all, let's rewind a bit. This is the first nation that has been evacuated every year for the past decade, which I find embarrassing. What I find particularly concerning in the report is that this is listed as a success story, because instead of being evacuated to neighbouring communities, they are now being evacuated only to different areas within the first nation.

I wasn't able to get a final answer from the minister. Is the plan going forward for the Kashechewan First Nation to just continue to be evacuated every year indefinitely within their first nation?

Ms. Gina Wilson: The plan going forward is to work very closely with the Kashechewan First Nation on its vision of how to move forward, its requirements, its needs and its priorities.

Mr. Michael Kram: Is the Kashechewan First Nation happy with the status quo?

Ms. Gina Wilson: I'm not going to try to speak on behalf of the Kashechewan First Nation, except to give some degree of voice to the fact that the Kashechewan First Nation continues to be very active in working with us. We are very close to the ground in meeting with Kashechewan, and we are working with them very closely.

I can't speak on their behalf specifically.

Mr. Michael Kram: Okay.

Has this particular first nation communicated with you about a desire to not be evacuated every year?

Ms. Gina Wilson: Yes.

Mr. Michael Kram: Okay.

Is there a plan moving forward for them to not be evacuated every year?

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: I'll just emphasize that, as I said earlier, the "on the land" initiative is at the request of Kashechewan First Nation. We are responding to their request to be evacuated on the land.

As I mentioned, we have officials in the community next week to go through the plan for this spring's approach. In terms of the possible relocation that you mentioned, there is a steering committee that meets regularly, as we mentioned when we were here in November. That steering committee continues to meet. There is a new chief in Fort Albany, which is a very close first nation that is also impacted by these events. It has a very close relationship with Kashechewan. Those discussions continue, and we'll continue to take the lead from leadership in terms of where they seek to take this forward.

Thank you.

Mr. Michael Kram: I would like to turn now to the Peguis First Nation in Manitoba, which is outlined on page 17 of the report.

I was concerned about the report indicating that.... This community was evacuated in 2011. Over 10 years later, 86 residents were still unable to return home because of insufficient housing. This report is a year old.

Are 86 residents of that first nation still unable to return home due to insufficient housing?

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: We'll need to confirm the exact number for you. I don't have the exact number with me.

Certainly, we are working very closely with Peguis leadership, making sure that people can get home as soon as they can. They have had multiple floods. That's why we're working with them on prevention and mitigation, and in terms of housing.

We're finding ways to build back better, so that houses are not on the flood plain. We can move them to a different location. They have lot servicing and those types of things. It's not just a matter of moving the house from one location to the other. There's a lot of support networking that goes into that plan.

Certainly, we're advancing with Peguis on a community plan to respond to these repeated incidents that they face.

• (1300)

Mr. Michael Kram: Okay.

It's taken 12 years to build houses for these 86 residents.

How many more years do you think it will take before these houses can be built for these 86 residents?

Ms. Gina Wilson: I don't necessarily think we've set a particular date for when all the houses are going to be done. What we can do is come back to you with more specific details on where the housing situation is currently.

Mr. Michael Kram: Yes. If you could submit an answer in writing, I would find that helpful.

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

The Chair: That is your time, yes.

Mr. Fragiskatos, you have the floor for five minutes to end us off today.

It's over to you.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the officials, again, for being here, certainly, and for the work that you have in front of you. I think this is one of the most challenging issues facing the country, to put it mildly. You are, in many ways, on the front line from the government side in trying to confront those issues.

Let me ask a general question on the report.

In response to the recommendations made, which do you consider to be the most important? What will be the course of action to address it specifically?

Ms. Gina Wilson: They are all important. Even the Auditor General will say they are all equally important.

However, for me, I would say that the shift that's required from moving from a response and recovery mode to a prevention and mitigation approach.... Greater investment and attention to that can significantly reduce the costs and damages when events occur. No one has mastered this yet. Provinces and territories are trying to make that shift. Countries around the world are trying to make that shift to mitigation resilience and risk reduction.

It's an important message, I would say, for this committee, and it's an important message for the Auditor General and all to continue to amplify this.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you, Deputy Minister.

How do we make that change? How does government pivot in that direction? What are the things that government is currently doing to go in that direction that you would highlight as the keys?

Ms. Gina Wilson: It is certainly now recognized that more efforts, like prevention and moving in ways to address mitigation.... Like I said, no one has mastered it yet, even at the United Nations.

I was reading recently about the Sendai framework, which recognizes that all countries need to be moving towards more disaster risk reduction. It clearly states that governments are responsible, but it also states that all stakeholders, including the private sector, individual citizens and communities, are also responsible.

I think it is for all of us to be aware of this and to understand that we all play a role in it.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I asked a question of the minister about international engagement that exists. I mentioned Australia as a particular example, but now you have mentioned the United Nations.

To what extent are we involved in those conversations, understanding emergency management through that lens, understanding what other countries are doing, their practices and incorporating those stories of success, where they exist, into what we do here and tailoring our response accordingly?

Ms. Gina Wilson: I know that we work with Public Safety, definitely, to engage in those negotiations at the United Nations, such as the Sendai framework or the broader disaster reduction.... What is it called?

Ms. Kenza El Bied: Disaster reduction, and, as the deputy said, we are really embedded with Public Safety, and we participate in those conferences now. Since COVID we have been participating in a virtual way.

This year, three weeks ago was the first time that Public Safety and other departments have had a chance to attend the conference in person after having participated virtually. We are collecting this information and working with other departments to get those lessons learned.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: With what I think will be my last question—and I am just looking at the chair—I want to go back to this point on advanced payments, just to understand this. There has been a policy change to reflect the desire to move in that direction.

What was the approach before? Would previous Canadian governments literally ask for receipts after the fact and then reimburse? Is that how it went? If so, what was the effect of that on emergency management in general?

• (1305)

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: Yes, grosso modo, that was the approach. In fact, as mentioned earlier, with the advance payments, certainly there will be accounting after the fact.

The advance payment is to ease the cash flow on the nation and to ensure that they have those resources available to deploy imme-

diately, particularly when there is imminent risk, as we look at a risk-based approach in terms of ensuring that people have those resources on hand.

The Chair: That's pretty much it, unless you want to be very speedy.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: On that point about accounting after the fact, could you elaborate?

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: Certainly. We work directly with nations to ensure that we can assist them, if need be. Some nations do not need our assistance in that regard, but when communities may continue to be struggling in terms of band offices being affected or those types of things, we will work directly with the nation to ensure that we have appropriate accounting on record and that any additional payments that may be needed pursuant to those advance payments are made.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you to all the witnesses for appearing today to hear from members and to answer all our questions. We appreciate your coming, and I'm sure this is an issue that will continue to grip the committee. We will turn our attention to the final report and leave it at that for now.

Are you going to say something, Mr. Genuis?

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I was just going to ask if it had ever been considered to appoint a special rapporteur to work on this issue.

An hon. member: Oh, oh!

The Chair: All right.

Thank you very much, Mr. Genuis. I deserved that for asking.

I am going to adjourn the meeting.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the Copyright Act. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the Copyright Act.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <https://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la Loi sur le droit d'auteur. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre des communes.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la Loi sur le droit d'auteur.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante :
<https://www.noscommunes.ca>