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Chair: Mr. Ken McDonald



Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

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• (1410)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Ken McDonald (Avalon, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number eight of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans. Pursuant to the motion adopted by the House on May 26, 2020, Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on June 1, 2020, the committee is proceeding to a briefing by the minister and the officials on the government's response to the Big Bar landslide.

Today's meeting is taking place by video conference. The proceedings are public and are made available via the House of Commons website. So that you are aware, the webcast will show the person speaking rather than the entire committee.

For the benefit of members, the minister and witnesses, I would like to mention a few rules to follow.

Interpretation in this video conference will work very much like it does in a regular committee meeting. You have the choice at the bottom of the screen of the floor, English, or French. As you are speaking, if you plan to alternate from one language to the other, you will need to switch the interpretation channel so that it aligns with the language you are speaking. You may want to allow for a short pause when switching languages.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When you are ready to speak, you can flick on the microphone icon to activate your mike. I remind everyone that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

Should members have a point of order, they should activate their mike and state that they have a point of order. If a member wishes to intervene on a point of order raised by another member, I encourage him or her to use the "raise hand" function. To do so, you should click on "participants" at the bottom of the screen. When the list pops up, you will see that you can click on "raise hand" next to your name. This will signal to the chair your interest in speaking and will keep the names in chronological order.

When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute. The use of headsets is strongly encouraged.

Should any technical challenges arise—for example, in relation to interpretation—or should a problem with your audio arise, please advise the chair immediately and the technical team will work to resolve the issue. Please note that we may need to suspend during

these times, as we need to ensure that all members are able to participate fully.

Before we get started, can everyone click on the top right-hand corner of their screens to ensure they are on gallery view. With this view you should be able to see all the participants in grid view. It will ensure that all video participants can see one another.

I would now, of course, like to welcome our witnesses.

With us today we have the Hon. Bernadette Jordan, Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard. Welcome, Minister.

Accompanying her today we have Timothy Sargent, deputy minister; Jean-Guy Forgeron, senior assistant deputy minister, strategic policy; Jen O'Donoghue, assistant deputy minister and chief financial officer; Sylvie Lapointe, assistant deputy minister, fisheries and harbour management; Dominic Laporte, assistant deputy minister, human resources and corporate services; Mario Pelletier, commissioner of the Canadian Coast Guard; Andy Smith, deputy commissioner, strategy and shipbuilding; and Rebecca Reid, regional director general, Pacific region.

I welcome each and every one of you. Thank you for attending. I know some of you have been here before. Of course, I'll give a big thank you to the minister for making herself available for two hours today.

Minister Jordan, you have the floor for your opening remarks, for six minutes or less, please.

Hon. Bernadette Jordan (Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard): Thank you very much.

Good afternoon, everyone. It's great to be here with you today and to speak to the members of this committee as the Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard.

I would first like to congratulate you, Mr. McDonald, on your election as chair, and I thank the other members for serving on this very important committee. As you know, I've had the honour not only to serve on the committee but to serve as chair, and I will say that for those three and a half years, I enjoyed immensely working with you all.

• (1415)

[*Translation*]

I know how important it will be to listen to the advice of members of Parliament as we work together in the weeks, months and years ahead to manage the challenges and opportunities facing the fisheries and oceans sector.

[*English*]

I appreciate the invitation to discuss Canada's commitment to our salmon fisheries and, in particular, the measures we have taken and will continue to take under very difficult circumstances caused by COVID-19 with respect to the landslide along the Fraser River at Big Bar in British Columbia.

I am accompanied today, as you mentioned, by Deputy Minister Tim Sargent; commissioner of the Coast Guard, Mario Pelletier; and many others. After my opening remarks, my officials and I will be happy to answer your questions.

As you know, the Government of Canada is committed to building strong partnerships to help manage our salmon fisheries. This commitment was clearly demonstrated by the unprecedented emergency response last summer to mitigate the impacts of the landslide at Big Bar, north of Lillooet, B.C.

We have been working hard and in close co-operation with the Province of British Columbia and impacted first nations. An incident command team, jointly led by the federal government, the Government of British Columbia and first nations governments worked together over the summer to respond to this crisis. The work continued over the fall, this past winter and spring and was supported by other departments and agencies, stakeholder groups, and geotechnical and hydrological experts.

I would like to stress that this group of dedicated professionals and volunteers has put long hours into dealing with this very complex logistical challenge.

In January, after a request for proposals, Peter Kiewit Sons ULC, was awarded a \$17.6-million contract to work on rock remediation. This work involved building a road down the side of a mountain to gain access to the site to allow for removal of massive rocks. It involved water blasting of huge boulders so that they could remove obstructions and slow down the water flow.

My first trip to British Columbia as minister was to Big Bar in January so I could see first-hand the progress and work being done to address this critical slide. Initial blasting in February was followed by a second round of blasting that began in March. Road work continues in order to secure overland access and, throughout the process, an archeologist has been working directly with two local first nations, and they've been working hard to preserve the natural history of this site.

We all hoped the problem could be resolved quickly, but resolving the blockage has been a massive undertaking, and it is going to take considerable resources to address this adequately. Making sure we do everything possible to ensure the survival of these fish populations means we need to plan for every outcome and put mitigation measures in place. That's exactly what we are doing.

As minister, the protection, conservation and restoration of our wild Pacific salmon stocks in British Columbia is an extremely important priority for me. My actions are guided by Canada's wild salmon policy implementation plan. This plan speaks to the importance of maintaining the biodiversity of these important stocks as well as their significance to indigenous people, commercial and recreational fish harvesters and British Columbians overall. Nearly half of B.C.'s chinook salmon stocks are in decline, with Fraser chinook on the verge of collapse. More than ever, we need to ensure that our wild stocks are protected.

The actions our government has taken to fully address the 75 recommendations of Justice Cohen's 2012 report from the commission of inquiry into the decline of sockeye salmon in the Fraser River have been integrated into our ongoing habitat, science, aquaculture and fisheries management work. As members of this committee are well aware, we've made a good start, but we have much more work to do to protect our wild Pacific salmon.

We are committed to working with the Province of British Columbia to ensure that Pacific salmon strategies are coordinated, coherent and connected. We collaborated closely to create the \$142-million B.C. salmon restoration and innovation fund, a federal-provincial cost-shared program funded jointly with the Government of British Columbia. This fund will support the fish and seafood sector in British Columbia to position itself for long-term sustainability.

We made an additional contribution of \$5 million to the Pacific salmon endowment fund to support the Pacific Salmon Foundation, which is doing incredible work and is an important voice in the development of plans and programming to protect and restore wild Pacific salmon and its habitat.

We announced \$15 million in additional annual funding to support stock assessment, coded wire tagging and catch monitoring of Pacific salmon. These investments contribute to our obligations under the Canada-U.S. Pacific Salmon Treaty and are targeted towards better managing west coast salmon fisheries.

Last, we are investing \$107 million to support the implementation of the renewed Fisheries Act, including money for stock assessments for major fish stocks across Canada.

As I mentioned at the outset, indigenous and coastal communities have been and will continue to be on the front line of salmon conservation. We will continue to work with first nations and other key stakeholders to improve our understanding of trends in salmon stocks, protect and conserve salmon habitats and ensure the sustainability of Canada's salmon populations.

Last August, my department released the “State of the Canadian Pacific Salmon” report, the first-ever overview of how salmon are responding to climate change, in which DFO scientists presented and discussed observations and research on Pacific salmon populations and their ecosystems.

Over the next year and beyond, my department and I will expand our focus on these and other actions to preserve and rebuild Pacific salmon stocks with a real effort on measures to ensure that salmon recover and thrive for future generations of Canadians.

With that, Mr. Chair, I am happy to take your questions.

● (1420)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. You were a bit over the time, but I'm sure we'll make that up along the way.

We'll start now with our questioning. On the Conservative side, we have Mr. Arnold for six minutes or less, please.

Mr. Mel Arnold (North Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Welcome back, Minister, to the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans. It's your first time back here as minister after spending a few years both as a member and the chair.

Now that you've been the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans for half a year, what do you consider to be the four or five greatest threats to the future of the Fraser River salmon stocks?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: First of all, Mr. Arnold, I very much appreciated working with you over the three and a half years I sat on the FOPO committee. I'm looking forward to the discussions we'll continue to have and the good relationships that we had over the past few years.

A number of different issues are facing the Fraser River salmon stocks. The Big Bar landslide of course is a significant one. The landslide was massive. It was 33 storeys high and 17 storeys wide, so we're talking about a significant impact on the Fraser River and on the ability of the stocks to move directly.

Climate change is obviously a challenge for the salmon stocks. We're also very concerned of course about the complete decline of the chinook specifically. We're doing everything we possible can to continue to address that. Of course, habitat restoration is going to be a challenge. Coastal restoration is a challenge as well.

These are all things we're actively working on to address the decline in the salmon stocks.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you, Minister.

According to DFO, the landslide occurred somewhere between October and November of 2018, about 14 months before Peter Kiewit Sons was assigned the contract in the middle of January 2020. Within this 14-month window, we saw about two months of activity in July and August of 2019, but no work on restoration of the fish passage occurred until January 2020.

Current modelling has indicated that salmon may not be able to pass the site when flows are high. Flows are expected to be high this year because of the high snow pack, and there may be insufficient passage for the fish as a result.

Does the department have a plan for what needs to be done next if the fish passage doesn't happen naturally?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: We have been actively working on remediation efforts since we were first notified about the slide, and automatically started working with the communities, the province and the first nation community last summer to move the salmon through the area as quickly as we could. Unfortunately, some of the work had to be put on hold because of the weather. During the fall there were high water levels and flooding. Once Peter Kiewit Sons was hired, work began immediately, as well as continual planning we were doing for the site.

One of the things we have done to mitigate the challenges is to set up two working groups. As the work is being done they are working on the next measures in case things don't work. We're continually looking at how we can best go forward. We know this is a huge undertaking. As I said, this was a massive slide and it's going to take a significant amount of work and resources to clear it, and we're continuing to look at different ways we can mitigate the challenges we're facing so that the Fraser River salmon can get through.

We know how critically important those fish are to the communities, as well as to the culture of British Columbia, so we continually look at other ways to address the concerns.

● (1425)

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you, Minister.

Does the department have a plan to restore the fish stocks that were basically wiped out because of the lack of passage last year? The Pacific salmon have a multi-year cycle; they only spawn once and then die. The spawning cycle that was lost last year will take years to recover.

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Mr. Arnold, we're continuing to look at both long-term and short-term plans and measures to help with the recovery of the salmon stocks because of the Big Bar landslide. To help support many of the upper Fraser River salmon that are in a poor state, we're currently considering investigating emergency conservation enhancement options that include hatchery components.

It's important that we continue to consider all of those options as we go forward, and we're committed to supporting the recovery of these fish.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, how much time is left?

The Chair: You have 25 seconds.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Are there any more overflights of the river to ensure that fish passage isn't blocked?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Right now we have a number of different measures in place. We will start the Whooshh system, the pneumatic fish pump, which is being built right now, to get the fish over the passage, as well as a natural fish passageway. Those are just two of the measures.

We are continuing to look at other ways that we can help support to make sure that the fish can get through this year.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we move on to Mr. Hardie for six minutes or less, please.

Mr. Ken Hardie (Fleetwood—Port Kells, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

It's good to see you, Minister Jordan. You used to sit right next to me and I'd get the benefit of your opinions up very close, in fact. It was good.

I want to start with the most recent news on this project, and then work backwards, which has to do with its cost. We went in with a contract with Peter Kiewit Sons for \$17.6 million. The latest news is that it's going to be \$52.5 million, and maybe even more.

Are these cost overruns per se, or has the scope of the project changed?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: These would not be cost overruns, but measures that we know have to be put in place. We knew right from the start that this was going to be a significant project. The first phase was the contract with Kiewit Sons for the \$17 million. Obviously, we hoped it would do everything it needed to do, but we knew right from the beginning that this was going to be a huge undertaking and that we would continue to find the ways necessary....

It's critical to make sure that these fish get through the passageway. This is something that we'll continue to work with the province on, as well as the first nation communities, because we know how important it is to make sure those fish get through.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Mr. Chair, we heard estimates that the slide may have occurred around early November 2018, and it wasn't even until, I guess, June last year that even the local communities noticed something was wrong.

What does this say about the need for, if you like, more constant and better monitoring of the state of the river?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: I think one of the things that we have to remember is that this is an extremely remote location. This area is not monitored on a regular basis—even the local communities were not aware of the slide. As soon as we were aware of it, we moved very quickly to address the challenges that we saw.

The boots on the ground work that was done by the people in the first nation community, by DFO and by people from the province working to get the fish over the passageway last summer was very inspiring to see. Everybody came together with a common goal. They knew it had to be done, and over 60,000 fish were moved manually by this group of people.

I think that just goes to show how critically important this is and that people are willing to get on board and do whatever they have to do to make sure that the fish get through the passageway.

• (1430)

Mr. Ken Hardie: Speaking of boots on the ground, I understand that the minister's boots were on the ground very early on in the process during a delightful visit to this area in January. You had a first-hand look at the working conditions, in addition to the technical conditions of actually getting equipment down to the side of the river to do this work.

Paint a picture if you can as to what you saw when you were there, and how cold it was.

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: It was probably the coldest I've ever been outside.

I was sworn in at about 1 o'clock in the afternoon on a November day, and by about 4:30 I had heard about Big Bar. Therefore, this has been a priority for our department and me since the very start. It was important for me to get to Big Bar. I was fortunate enough to go with my parliamentary secretary, Terry Beech, to see the slide first-hand. It is a significant slide—it's almost unbelievable. It's really quite awe inspiring to see the amount of work that has to be done to clear that passageway. The slide itself, as I said earlier, was equivalent to a 33-storey high, 17-storey wide building.

I got to meet with the chiefs from the first nation communities while I was there. They, like me at first, were saying why don't we just move the rocks? It's not just a matter of moving a few rocks: it is going to take a huge effort to clear that passageway. It's been really quite a good story to tell about the amount of work that we've been able to do in co-operation with the first nation communities there, and the province, to make sure that we clear that passageway.

Mr. Ken Hardie: When we recognized there was an obstruction and worked to get salmon around the obstruction, a number of things were tried: scooping them up, trucking them up above the obstruction, etc. We understand that the survival rate of the fish that went through some of these processes was not good at all.

Given that there's still an obstruction there, have there been any estimates as to how many successful transplants we are going to be able to accomplish around this barrier?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Last year, we were able to move 60,000 fish with help and then 220,000 got through on their own. We are continuing to work now with what's known as the Whooshh system or the pneumatic fish pump, which we feel will have a significant impact on our being able to move more fish, as well as the natural fish passageway that's also being constructed at this point.

I don't know, Deputy, if you have anything you would like to add there with regard to what we're expecting to see go through this summer.

Mr. Timothy Sargent (Deputy Minister, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): I'd like to pass it on to our RDG from the Pacific region.

Ms. Rebecca Reid (Regional Director General, Pacific Region, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): I can provide a response to that. What we're expecting this year is relatively low returns of chinook stocks and sockeye as well. We aren't expecting a lot of fish to come through, but we are ready with enhancement measures so that when the fish arrive, we'll be able to support them and take them to some hatchery facilities to ensure maximum spawning success.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

Thank you, Mr. Hardie.

Madam Gill, I understand you're giving your time to Mr. Arnold for six minutes.

Mr. Arnold, when you're ready, please.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, what plans are in place to deal with the recovery of those lost stocks? What's going to be taking place in the next six months, the next year or the next two years to recover those stocks that were hit so hard last year? We know that it's the very early runs that have the most difficult time getting through.

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Our government, as I said, is considering measures, both short term and long term, to help with the recovery of the stocks. We know there's going to be a poor state for many of the upper Fraser River salmon, so we're looking at emergency conservation enhancement measures, including the hatchery component. I will say that, as of June 3, the holding facility is already in operation, but we're also continuing to consider all options when it comes to the recovery of these stocks.

I'm not sure, Deputy, if there's anything else that maybe you would like to add.

• (1435)

Mr. Timothy Sargent: Rebecca, I'll pass it over to you.

Ms. Rebecca Reid: Yes, we do have a number of mitigation measures in place. Of course, the first thing we want to do is to restore the natural fish passage, and the measures the minister referred to will greatly support that. In addition to that we have our hatchery facilities, the temporary storage, and we have plans to move fish to hatchery facilities.

In addition to that though, for the longer term, we're undertaking a study to look at the enhancement needs above the Big Bar slide and doing a study to see what kinds of measures need to be put in place to provide that longer term support for those fish.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I didn't realize it was supposed to be the Bloc's turn right now. I believe this time was supposed to go to Mr. Fast, so I'd like to pass the remaining time on to Mr. Fast.

The Chair: Go ahead when you're ready, Ed.

Hon. Ed Fast (Abbotsford, CPC): Thank you.

Minister, you mentioned that you visited the Big Bar slide. You mentioned boots on the ground, so you know that rock slides are actually common along the Fraser River. DFO was made aware of the Big Bar landslide in June of 2019. However, based on satellite

imagery, I believe the slide occurred between October and November of 2018. We lost precious time in getting remediation in place, perhaps six to eight months of lost time.

I'm assuming that DFO does regularly monitor the Fraser River for slides. Is that correct?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: That is correct. We do surveillance when there is fishing going on. If there was no fishing at that time, we would not have been monitoring it at that time for the slide. Once we found out about the slide, we quickly acted on what we had learned and started work right away to mitigate the challenges we were facing from the slide.

Hon. Ed Fast: How much satellite imagery does DFO actually use to monitor what's happening along the Fraser Canyon?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: I'm going to refer that question to my deputy, please.

Mr. Timothy Sargent: Again, Rebecca.

Ms. Rebecca Reid: First of all, just from an aerial surveillance perspective, we have regular aerial surveillance that goes on, up and down the river, when there is fishing taking place.

From a satellite perspective, that is technology that we are using more and more. I think it is something we will move toward to be able to use it more effectively. I would see that as further development down the road.

Hon. Ed Fast: Could you see an expansion of the number of overflights that take place outside of fishing seasons, at least on an occasional basis, to make sure that slides such as this don't go unnoticed, because those delays create significant challenges for the survival of our salmon?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: As I've said, we're taking a number of things into consideration when we look at how we're going to deal with the Fraser River in the future. I'm sure that's one thing we could consider as well and that we will look at.

Hon. Ed Fast: Could we ask you to report back to the committee on what additional steps are being taken to ensure that we get a timely notice of any slides that occur so that remediation can take place if necessary?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Yes.

Hon. Ed Fast: Thank you.

As you know, the wild salmon on the west coast are facing an existential threat. You mentioned the chinook. A timely response to many of these issues is critical.

I notice you referenced the Cohen commission report. How many of the recommendations of the Cohen commission have you actually fully responded to, or in other words, completed your responses; and how many are still outstanding?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: As of 2018, Fisheries and Oceans Canada has acted on all 75 recommendations in the Cohen commission report. We recognize that acting on many of the recommendations is ongoing as well as incremental. Many commitments to ongoing actions are reflected in the wild salmon policy of the 2018-22 implementation plan, which outlines specific activities and approaches that will be led by the department towards restoring, maintaining the health—

• (1440)

Hon. Ed Fast: Minister, I wasn't asking—

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Yes. I'm still talking. You asked me a question. I'm trying to answer it.

Hon. Ed Fast: I know. I am sorry, but this is my time. I didn't want you to read talking points. I just want a simple response as to how many of those recommendations you had responded to. You mentioned that you had taken action on all of them.

We've gone through those recommendations and there are many that both the commercial fishing industry and the recreational angling industry would say have not been acted upon. They may have been reviewed, there may have been a written response, but action has actually not been taken.

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: As I was saying—

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Fast. Your time has gone way over.

Hon. Ed Fast: All right.

The Chair: Perhaps the minister can respond later or provide some answers in writing at a later date.

Hon. Ed Fast: I'd appreciate that. Thank you.

The Chair: Now we'll go to Mr. Johns for six minutes or less, please.

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair; and thank you, Minister, for being here today.

Thank you to the department for bringing me and our former colleague Fin Donnelly to Big Bar so we could see first-hand the challenge that exists there.

Minister, we know that some of the stocks were weak before the Big Bar slide. I just want to hear, do you have a clear plan on how you're going to activate recovery actions for salmon that were affected by Big Bar, but also for those other weak Fraser River salmon stocks?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: As I've said, we are looking at a number of different measures to deal with the Fraser River salmon stocks, particularly because of the Big Bar landslide. We're investigating emergency conservation enhancement options that include the hatchery. We have already started. The holding facility is now open for that operation.

Of course, with the renewal of the Fisheries Act, we have also committed to building stocks as well as rebuilding plans. Those are all things that are ongoing.

There are a number of different challenges facing salmon. Habitat restoration is one that we're working on with the BCSRIF program, with communities engaged in that, as well as on coastal ero-

sion. There are a number of different measures we're taking to help protect those stocks.

Mr. Gord Johns: I'd love to dive into some questions on that. You talked about hatcheries. We know there are a number of DFO-operated hatcheries in B.C., but there's none, to my understanding, in the middle or upper Fraser, where the salmon that were affected by the Big Bar slide reside. If there were hatchery facilities in that area, they could be used to help accelerate the recovery of these impacted populations. What is the plan around that, Minister?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: There actually is a plan around using hatcheries for the upper Fraser River.

I could maybe turn that over to the deputy to further address that question.

Mr. Timothy Sargent: Rebecca, I think you're best placed to answer that.

Ms. Rebecca Reid: There is a feasibility study under way right now to look at the existing infrastructure that's available above the Big Bar site from a hatchery perspective and what it would cost to invest in those facilities to support the enhancement activities. There definitely is some work that has already started to respond to that exact question, and—

Mr. Gord Johns: Is there a commitment from the department to accelerate that project, just in light of the crisis we're in?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Our commitment right now is to do everything we can to mitigate the challenges we're facing because of the Big Bar slide. Those are all parts of that solution. We want to make sure that we do everything we can so that there's natural passage of the fish, but we will be looking at other measures to make sure we're addressing the ongoing challenges with the reduced stocks.

Mr. Gord Johns: You talked about habitat and the BCSRIF program. To our understanding, again going back to Fin Donnelly, who is now the chair of the Rivershed Society, and to many of the organizations working in the Fraser, they're saying that we need about \$250 million just for the Fraser, and I think coastal people believe we need about \$500 million in restoration, just in the next five years. Right now the \$148 million falls quite far short of what is needed.

Can we get a commitment from you that you'll do what's needed to bring our stocks back in terms of restoration and habitat protection?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Mr. Chair, I'm having a hard time unmuting my mike. I apologize.

I will tell you that we have worked very closely with the [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

• (1445)

The Chair: You're muted, Minister.

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: I apologize. I'm not sure why that keeps happening.

I will say that, as you are aware, the BCSRIF fund is a program that we jointly manage with the Province of British Columbia. We have over \$70 million worth of projects already approved. We're continuing to assess projects on a regular basis.

We know that a lot needs to be done for the salmon stocks, but we do need to work with the province to make sure that we're able to continue with this program.

Mr. Gord Johns: I appreciate that. I know that in my riding, many, many applications were denied. The coastal people and the people out there who are doing the volunteer work, mainly recreational fishers, are saying this is necessary. They feel that the government is not investing even close to what's necessary.

You talked about the Cohen commission, which I appreciate your bringing up, and the implementation of its recommendations. Certainly, we know that Justice Cohen said that open-net aquaculture has a significant impact on Fraser River stocks, especially sockeye. We know that right now we're seeing record amounts of sea lice, still open-net fish farms with PRV and disease-infected fish, and the massive die-offs that we've seen recently.

The government still hasn't come up with a plan to move to closed containment. When will that plan happen, and when will the implementation of that plan take place?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: As you know, Mr. Johns, my mandate letter was clear on moving from open-net to closed containment. We are continuing to do the consultation process, as you are aware. This is something that's extremely important to first nations communities as well as the B.C. government. We're working in collaboration and in consultation with them to do those things—

Mr. Gord Johns: I would argue that it wasn't very clear in the mandate letter because its expected that you'd be moving to closed containment by 2025, not—

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: We're continuing to work with the first nation communities that will be impacted, going forward, and we're finding solutions as we go.

The Chair: Thank you for that, Mr. Johns.

We'll go on now to the second round.

Mr. Calkins, you have five minutes or less, please.

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

Minister, on March 10, basically three months ago today, I asked officials at the committee about the status of the mothballed hatcheries that are on the Fraser and whether or not they could help to preserve the genetic material or genetic populations that are at risk right now.

What I'd like to know, Minister...and I'm assuming that you'll have to hand this question off to your officials. Ms. Reid had responded to the question and said they were looking at it. She said today that they're still looking at it or studying it. I want to know where that's at. Is it feasible to get Quesnel and Eagle River up and running again? If you're looking at hatchery solutions, and it's not Quesnel or Eagle River, then where is it?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: I am actually going to turn that over to my deputy.

Mr. Timothy Sargent: Rebecca, what's the latest on that?

Ms. Rebecca Reid: We do have a plan in place to do that work. As I said, it has started, but it is going to take some time. Even if all systems are go, some significant infrastructure investment is needed. It's those types of things. It is not an immediate plan by any means. We're starting on it immediately, but the results will take a couple of years.

I would like to add, though, that there are some existing facilities—for example, in Vanderhoof and in Quesnel—that are being used this year in addition to the DFO facility, so there is work under way to support those fish this year.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Are you talking about non-DFO hatcheries, community-based hatcheries that are able to help?

Ms. Rebecca Reid: Yes, that's right.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Were they not already at full capacity, Ms. Reid?

Ms. Rebecca Reid: We've been working with the Freshwater Fisheries Society and Go Fish BC in Vanderhoof, as well as the Spruce City Wildlife Association and the Quesnel River Research Centre. They're all being utilized. We're working actively with them to make sure that there is room for the fish to support the enhancement activities.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: How much new capacity are we talking about this year?

Ms. Rebecca Reid: I will have to look up the numbers for you. I could get back to you with specific numbers.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: I'd sure like to know that.

Minister, in your opening comments, you were asked by Mr. Arnold about your five priorities. I notice that fishing regulation changes and predator control weren't on your list. I hope that you'll take a look at that.

The Sport Fishing Institute and the sport fishing advisory board on the west coast are all talking about mark-selective fisheries in order to make sure that it's primarily hatchery fish that are retained. The sport fishing advisory board's report indicates that changes could be made to support the Fraser River stocks while still allowing more than adequate catches of those stocks that are not at risk.

Are you taking that report seriously? Are we going to move to mark-selective fisheries? If we're going to ramp up hatcheries in order to save some of the genetics of these populations above Big Bar—and you mentioned it in your opening comments—and we're going to be doing exactly what the Americans do, the Americans, I believe, mark virtually every fish that comes from a hatchery, while we do not mark every fish; I'm guessing that we mark about 10% of our fish, whether it's with coded wire tags or by clipping the adipose fin. If we're going to ramp up the hatcheries in order to preserve some of the genetic stocks, I hope we're looking at ramping up marking these fish. Can you clarify where that's at?

• (1450)

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Mark-selective fisheries are definitely something we are looking at. They are not the silver bullet, though, that's going to save the salmon stocks. There are also a number of questions that need to be answered around a mark-selective fishery before we can go ahead with it.

We are continuing to work with the groups. I want to particularly thank the Sport Fishing Institute for talking to me about this fishery and their ideas, which I think were very good. There are, as I said, still a lot of questions with regard to things like data collection, impacts on the wild Pacific salmon and consultations with first nations about a mark-selective fishery and how it impacts their fishery. There are a number of things that need to be addressed before we can move that way in a big way, but it is definitely something that we are looking at seriously.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Minister, you're aware that on the west coast in particular, a lot of lodges, outfitters and guides depend heavily on this resource. Last year's regulatory changes were particularly hard on these businesses and had an economic impact on them, now the closures due to COVID and the continuation of those regulations are compounding an already bad problem. When your assistant was at the meeting here a little while ago, he made a comment to suggest that the department's primary focus is dealing with the parts of the fish and seafood community that are directly in the business of basically commercial fishing.

Do you, Minister, believe that the Department of Fisheries and Oceans should be actively involved in making sure that these lodges, sport fishing organizations and businesses are also at the table? Are they not part of the mandate of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans?

The Chair: Sorry, Mr. Calkins. You've gone way overboard.

Minister, if it's possible, if you don't get to answer this question, could you provide the answer in writing to the committee, please?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Yes. Thank you.

The Chair: We'll now go to Mr. Weiler for five minutes or less, please.

Mr. Patrick Weiler (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I appreciate the opportunity to join the FOPO committee today to talk and ask questions about an issue that's very much top of mind for people all over B.C., but especially in coastal areas.

Like many other people, I've been following the regular bulletins on what's happening with Big Bar. I was wondering if you could mention why DFO chose to have these types of regular bulletins and if this is something that the ministry does for other projects.

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: I would say that the regular bulletins have been extremely important for the people in the communities as well as for the people in British Columbia. As you are well aware, the salmon population is something that's critically important to B.C., not only as a fishery, but also as a culture, so keeping people informed about what was happening at Big Bar was something we felt was extremely important to do.

I don't know, Deputy, if you have anything else you would like to add to that.

Mr. Timothy Sargent: Not much, but I'll say that of course we talk to the public about a variety of things that we do. Given the significance of Big Bar, we've done more communicating about the work we've done there over a longer period of time than I can recall in my time here.

Mr. Patrick Weiler: I was very grateful for the opportunity to speak with officials a few months ago on the same topic, so I don't want to go back to measures that were happening before that, but I was hoping, Minister, you could explain a bit about the type of fish monitoring that's happening in and around the Big Bar slide site and what's being done to monitor the fish migration upstream.

• (1455)

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: We monitor for fish in two ways, above water and below. We use hydro-acoustic monitoring and sonar technology to count the number of salmon successfully passing through the slide. We also use radio tagging, which involves inserting a tag into the fish's stomach and attaching it to its back. The radio tag emits a signal, and it's detected onshore. That can give us a better idea of how many fish are going through.

I am going to turn that one over to the deputy as well, because it's quite technical.

Mr. Timothy Sargent: I think, in turn, I'll pass that one to Rebecca, who has that at her fingertips.

Ms. Rebecca Reid: I think that was a really great answer.

We do the tagging studies, and we have sonar to measure the fish as they pass through the site.

We look at the spawning grounds as well to see how many fish have made it to the spawning grounds. Similarly, in the spring, we look to see how many of the fry have emerged and how many smolts have come down. We do that to some extent as well.

We have a number of different methods to test and evaluate the number of fish in the area that are coming into the Fraser and leaving as well.

Mr. Patrick Weiler: I read in a recent bulletin that there were a couple of salmon that have been identified near the site. I'm wondering when the salmon started arriving this year and how that has increased to today.

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: So far, only two chinook have been detected on site. That's not unusual, apparently, at this time of year. We're working hard to make sure we get the work done before the fish arrive. That was always a priority for us, to do as much as we could as quickly as we could before the fish arrive.

I don't know, Deputy, if there's anything else there that you want to add, but from my understanding, there have not been any fish arriving yet.

Mr. Timothy Sargent: That's correct, Minister. I don't have anything to add.

Mr. Patrick Weiler: Given that there have been a number of delays this year because of very adverse weather conditions, what risks does this delay pose to the timeline for the fish arriving?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: We're continuing to monitor for the fish as they come, and we're continuing to build the Whooshh system to get that in place as well as the natural fish passageway. This is, as I've said, an unprecedented slide. It's something that has needed all hands on deck since day one to make sure we can get fish through as quickly as possible.

We recognize how important it is to the communities in the area, as well as to B.C. and to the fish population, so we want to make sure we're doing everything possible. Of course, with putting in the Whooshh system, we have been faced with challenges because of weather and high water.

I'm not sure if there's anything else there, Deputy, that we wanted to add about some of the challenges.

Mr. Timothy Sargent: I'll just say that particularly at this time of year, the water is quite muddy, and it's often hard to detect the fish. We do have a fish wheel there, though, that's helping with that. The Whooshh system is installed. It's ready to go when we start to see significant numbers of fish coming in.

Mr. Patrick Weiler: Has there been any fish mortality detected this year as a result of the blasting and other activities that are taking place at the site?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: I am not aware of any, but I would turn that one to the deputy.

Mr. Timothy Sargent: There's none that we're aware of.

Mr. Patrick Weiler: Great.

Minister, you mentioned earlier in your responses that you'd set up two working groups as part of the response to Big Bar. I'm wondering how experts have been involved in these working groups, and how their advice has informed the decisions that have taken place to date.

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: As I said, we've had these two working groups there since, I believe, late December or early January. They work together to find the best way forward in case things don't go as planned. We want to make sure that we're not waiting until we find out if things are working before we have the next measures in place. We're going to continue to work with them.

We have a number of different professionals on site who are working with the first nations community. We have an archaeologist there to make sure we're keeping the land as it should stay. We have, of course, a significant number of engineers. The people from Kiewit have been exceptional in terms of keeping us posted on what they're doing.

I'm not sure, Deputy, if you have anything else you wanted to add there.

Mr. Timothy Sargent: No, that's pretty complete, Minister.

• (1500)

Mr. Patrick Weiler: Thank you.

A lot of the measures that have been discussed for Big Bar have really been focused on the short term. What type of solution is DFO considering to enable fish to pass through the site over the long term?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: I think the ultimate goal would be to clear it enough so that it's a natural passageway for the fish, so that it's not something that we have to continually monitor or maintain. Barring that, we will continue to make sure that there is a natural-like fish passageway there for the salmon to get through, as well as the Whooshh system this year, in order to help make sure that we get as many through as possible.

I think the primary goal ultimately would be to clear it enough so that we don't have to maintain it and we don't have to be concerned about it. We'll continue to work toward that, but in the meantime we are making sure there are measures in place to get the fish through.

Mr. Patrick Weiler: Great.

I understand that some of the different short-term measures will be viable under different flows of water. I know the natural fishway is going to require a certain level of water flow. I'm wondering if it's expected this summer, given the high water flow we've had to date. What level of confidence do we have that the flow of the water is going to make the natural fishway viable?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: I'm going to turn that over to the deputy.

Mr. Timothy Sargent: It's always tricky to predict the water levels. It depends on so many factors. We're just going to be ready for whatever happens. We have the natural fishway and we have the Whooshh system, and we're ready to use some of the other procedures that we used last summer, such as using trucks or even helicopter transport, depending on what the level of that water is going to be. Of course, we don't know yet how effective the blasting has been and to what extent the fish will be able to move naturally, or whether they're going to need some assistance.

Mr. Patrick Weiler: In the event that the natural—

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Nancy Vohl): I'm sorry, but I will have to intervene because the chair has asked that the vice-chair take the chair.

[Translation]

Can Ms. Gill take the floor?

The Vice-Chair (Mrs. Marilène Gill (Manicouagan, BQ)): I'll replace the chair for a few minutes.

I now give the floor to Mr. Arnold, who has five minutes.

[English]

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister, considering that the value of this contract has nearly tripled because of spending and the estimates for this year seem to be overshoot already, either the scope or the cost of the work at Big Bar was underestimated. What steps are in place to set achievements, or what achievable are there? What is being done to make sure that this project is properly costed and that there is a better assessment moving forward?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Madam Chair, I would not say that this is over cost. We initially put \$17 million into the remediation efforts, knowing that if it was not enough, we would have to continue with more. We're going to continue to make investments as required for this critical initiative.

We have to take all steps possible to clear this way. This is significant to the communities that it serves, and we're going to make sure that we do everything we have to do to make sure that the salmon populations can move.

It's taking some time, some effort and some money, but we know this is critical to the people of British Columbia, to the salmon stocks and to the first nations communities in the area. We're going to continue to do what we need to do to make sure that those salmon pass through.

• (1505)

Mr. Mel Arnold: Is there an estimate on what the total cost of this project is going to be, or is it continually under reassessment?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: We're continuing to make sure that we mitigate the challenges faced by Big Bar.

Right now we are working with Kiewit to clear the way as quickly as possible. The Whooshh system is being put in place and the natural fish passageway is being put in place. We need to make sure that we do everything we can to address the concerns.

Ultimately the goal is to clear the area enough so that it's a finished project, but until we have that done, we will continue to make sure we're investing where we need to.

Deputy Minister—

Mr. Mel Arnold: Very quickly, has the Whooshh system been tested on large fish that are the size of the chinook salmon that pass up the Fraser River?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Deputy Minister, can I pass that to you, please?

Mr. Timothy Sargent: Yes. Rebecca, could you comment?

Ms. Rebecca Reid: We have been working with the contractor for the Whooshh system, and the contractor has provided us with assurance that the system will work. Variable sizes of tubes are used for the body of the fish, and the tubes we have are appropriate for the types of fish sizes we have, so we have full confidence that it will work.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Minister, apart from the rock slide that occurred overnight in early May, have there been any other incidents of rockfall, either during or outside work hours at the work site?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: I believe there was a small slide in May that was outside of work hours. I believe it was two cubic metres or something like that.

Deputy Minister, maybe you can take that question.

Mr. Timothy Sargent: Actually, I'll pass it on to our chief financial officer, Jen O'Donoghue, who has been following this situation closely.

Ms. Jen O'Donoghue (Assistant Deputy Minister and Chief Financial Officer, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Chair, there was one incident. It happened when there were no workers on site. It was investigated and some remediation has happened since, but, again, it happened when workers were not on site.

Mr. Mel Arnold: I take it that if the workers had been on site, it would have been a different situation.

Minister, you mentioned the Fisheries Act review. I noted in the timeline that there was some delay in looking at the review of the Fisheries Act and the work with in-water blasting and removal of rock.

How much time delay was there from the Fisheries Act review before work started moving forward? What other issues caused delays in moving forward with the work on the Big Bar project?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: I would say that the major reason for the delay on the work was water flow. It was because of the floods that were happening in fall 2018.

Deputy, if there's anything I have missed there, can you add to it, please?

Mr. Timothy Sargent: I would say that is the key reason.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

What clear path does the department have to activate recovery plans for those salmon stocks that have been affected?

We keep hearing you're planning to plan, and that seems to be a mantra. We need to know if there is definite action taking place on the ground.

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Actually, Mr. Arnold, I believe what was said was that we've already started with the enhancement programs with the hatchery in the upper Fraser. That is already working as a holding facility for the fisheries.

We are also undertaking a number of different measures with regard to habitat restoration outside of the Fraser River in British Columbia in general. The B.C. SRIF fund has spent over \$70 million to make sure that we are dealing with a lot of the challenges facing the stocks.

Of course, we also have management measures that we put in place to deal with the stock assessment, and we'll continue to look at a lot of different ways that we can help. We know there are a lot of challenges facing the B.C. salmon right now, and we're working diligently to find the answers for those challenges.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Mr. Arnold.

We'll now go to Mr. Hardie for five minutes or less.

● (1510)

Mr. Ken Hardie: Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's good to see you back.

Now that we've had these numbers of months to look at Peter Kiewit's work, get an idea of the logistical challenges of getting things set up so they can even start to do the work, and now that we've been in there blowing up boulders and moving things around, what is the estimate of how much more time it's going to take until the passageway is open and as much back to normal as possible?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: One of the things I need to talk about here is the magnitude of the work that has been done so far.

With regard to getting to the site, in general, as I said, this is an extremely remote area. We had to put in roadways in order to be able to move boulders. Kiewit has done phenomenal work in terms of getting us to that point.

If I had an answer, Mr. Hardie, on when it was going to be done, I would be so thrilled, but right now it's all hands on deck every day to try to make sure we clear the passage and make sure we put measures in place to mitigate the challenges facing the salmon in the area.

Deputy, do you have anything else that you would like to add there? I know that we are working extremely hard to do as much as we can to get it done as quickly as we can.

Mr. Timothy Sargent: Just to add to that, as the minister said, we're doing enhancement, habitat restoration and fisheries management measures that we instituted last summer, and we're looking at more this summer.

We're working very hard on all fronts. However, the reality is we won't know what the result of the rock-blasting work that we did over the winter will actually be until the summer, when we can actually observe the fish when they come back and see if they're getting over. Even then there will be a bit of a lag, because we have to

count how many actually are able to get over, and it takes a little while to get that information.

That is why we need to have plan B, plan C and plan D all ready to go.

As I said, we have a very strong commitment to ensuring that fish can ultimately get over that barrier.

Mr. Ken Hardie: When we look at pictures of the scene, we see that the challenge of getting the work done is very obvious, but we also see that there are a lot of menacing cliffs sitting there. We understand this may have been a seismic event as opposed to the normal freeze and thaw, which can, of course, cause pieces of cliff to break away.

Nonetheless, has an assessment been done up and down that stretch of the river to see if there are other rockfaces that are ready to fall in?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Deputy, I am going to turn that one to you.

Mr. Timothy Sargent: That's a hugely complicated exercise. We're doing a lot of studies right now to understand the impact of this on fish stocks.

This is a particularly difficult place for us, just given its very remote location. It is not an area where anyone is around during a good part of the year.

In terms of a seismic event, that kind of analysis, obviously from DFO's standpoint, is not expertise that we have. Our expertise is around fish, and biology more generally. That would be more for NRCan on the federal side, and particularly the Province of British Columbia and its ministry of forestry and lands.

We have been working very closely with the Province of British Columbia on all of this. As has been said, they are actually responsible for the rock. The water and the things that move in the water are things that we're responsible for, and they've been paying for a significant part of our efforts on Big Bar, including the blasting. That's a question we would very much want to work with them on—

Mr. Ken Hardie: With respect, sir, I guess the fundamental question is whether there is a present risk that we're going to get another slide from the adjacent rock faces. Do we know?

Mr. Timothy Sargent: Geologists are not very good at predicting seismic events.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Okay. Fair enough.

The Watershed Watch people were very complimentary, by the way, of the work that has gone on, but they are less than complimentary about the long-term management of Pacific salmon. I think this committee is going to invest a fair amount of time.

Are you aware, for instance, Minister, that there are a lot of other obstructions, but they come in the form of flood mitigation up and down the river, which has cut off countless numbers of small streams that salmon used to use?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: There are a number of challenges facing the B.C. salmon populations, including, as you said, the flood challenges. Climate change with regard to habitat is definitely a significant challenge for the salmon. We are taking a number of steps. There is no silver bullet to fix the challenges we're facing with salmon populations.

I actually look forward to your committee doing a study to see what you think are some of the things that can be done, because we are working around the clock to make sure we are doing everything we possibly can to protect the salmon population and to grow the numbers.

As I said, the Fisheries Act has talked about rebuilding stocks. Those are all things we're working on now, but more needs to be done in terms of how we go forward to best protect these stocks.

I look forward to your committee doing some work on that and giving us some ideas on how that can best go forward.

● (1515)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hardie. Your time is up.

I know we're supposed to go to Madam Gill, but I think she has agreed to give her time to Mr. Johns. I will say a big thank you to Madam Gill for filling in for me a few moments ago. I really appreciate that.

When you're ready, Gord, go ahead for two and a half minutes, please.

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair, can you clarify that I have two and a half minutes and then two and a half.

The Chair: You do.

Mr. Gord Johns: Okay. Super.

I want to return to the question that I didn't have enough time to finish.

Minister, there was a commitment by the Prime Minister in the mandate letter to you to work with the Province of British Columbia and indigenous communities to create a responsible plan to transition from open-net pen salmon farming in coastal British Columbia waters by 2025 and to begin work to introduce Canada's first-ever aquaculture act.

British Columbians were expecting that the government was going to commit to moving from open-net salmon farming by 2025, not to having a plan.

Can you clarify whether it's a plan or a commitment to move to closed containment by 2025? People are wondering. There were many Liberal candidates in the last election who stated that it was a commitment to actually move to closed containment by 2025.

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: We're committed to moving to closed containment. That is something that was in our mandate. We're working now diligently with the province as well as with the first nations communities.

Of course, in the context of COVID-19, some things have had to be put on hold for a while to make sure we do this right. It's some-

thing we know is important to the people of British Columbia, but we also recognize that open-pen aquaculture is extremely important to some of our coastal communities. In terms of crustaceans, communities there rely heavily on it for their economic survival.

We can't do this unless we do it in collaboration and in consultation with these organizations. That's what we're going to do. That's what we're committed to. We have already started the process.

Mr. Gord Johns: I'm still not getting the answer. Is it a commitment to a plan, or is it a commitment to be at closed containment by 2025?

You talk about things being put on hold. I will tell you what's not put on hold, which is the sea lice epidemic that's going on right now, the massive die-offs in aquaculture that are impacting our wild stocks and the transfer of diseased fish to open-net salmon farms and the impact they are having on our wild stocks.

I want to get clarity. Is it a plan or is it a commitment to move to closed containment?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: We are working extremely hard with our first nations communities and with the Province of B.C. in order to make sure we're doing everything we possibly can to move to closed containment.

We know there are many communities that rely on open-net pens as their economic drivers. We are working with them to figure out the best ways forward, and we will continue to do that work.

Mr. Gord Johns: With respect to the contract that was awarded to Kiewit, my understanding is that one of the stipulations of the contract was that qualified local indigenous workers were to be hired when available. I have heard from a local company that was set to be hired by Kiewit, but they were cancelled at the very last minute.

What enforcement mechanisms does the department have to ensure that qualified local indigenous workers are hired? Also, in what ways has the working guidance of elders and knowledge keepers been incorporated into the day-to-day operations on the site?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: I'm going to turn that question over to the deputy, please.

Mr. Timothy Sargent: It is a number one priority for us to ensure that indigenous peoples are involved in the Big Bar remediation efforts. We've made sure that they're involved in the incident command room, for instance, and when the contracts were put together, it was very important to us that they were a part of that.

I'm going to ask our CFO, Jen O'Donoghue, who has been very much involved with the procurement process, to comment on some of those details.

Ms. Jen O'Donoghue: Thank you.

It is a very important part of the work that Peter Kiewit Sons is doing. We have asked that it have a benefits plan in place. We monitor it very closely, and if any concerns come up through engagement with first nations communities, we make sure that we are raising those. We have weekly meetings with Kiewit, and if there are concerns, we make sure that they are dealt with as quickly as possible.

• (1520)

Mr. Gord Johns: Ms. O'Donoghue, we want to work with you to make sure that we're bringing those to your attention, if we could, because there are concerns.

It has also been difficult for the public to know what's going on in certain areas, and the rationale of decisions. The department has certainly been more accessible of late. I have to give you a lot of credit on that.

There have been suggestions that an independent advisory panel that reports to the minister be implemented as a way to provide additional public confidence in the response. This would also help with some oversight of the concerns I just shared with you.

Is this something that the minister would consider?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: We've been very open and transparent about what has been happening at Big Bar since the inception. We put out weekly bulletins, and we engage with stakeholders and the communities in the areas to make sure that they feel they've been well informed. I've kept in touch with the MP from the area to make sure that he feels he has received the information he needs, as well as with anyone who has reached out to us. DFO has been extremely responsive in answering questions as they come forward.

Deputy, I'm not sure if there's anything else that needs to be added.

Mr. Timothy Sargent: I would only add that we have a joint steering committee where first nations are involved. As was talked about earlier, we've had very high levels of communications activity on this file.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

Thank you, Mr. Johns. Your full five minutes has expired.

Now we'll go to Mr. Bragdon.

I understand, Mr. Bragdon, that you may be sharing your time, so I'll leave that decision up to you as you go through your questioning. You can just indicate that you'll now share the rest of your time with whomever.

Thank you.

Mr. Richard Bragdon (Tobique—Mactaquac, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the fellow members on the call here today.

Welcome, Minister.

I just have a couple of questions, and then I'll be turning it over to Mr. Calkins.

Minister, how many salmon are estimated to have died in 2019 as a result of their migration route being impeded by the landslide and as a result of the subsequent stress?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: I'm going to turn that question to the deputy.

Mr. Timothy Sargent: Rebecca, I think you have those numbers at your fingertips.

Ms. Rebecca Reid: Yes.

First of all, as the minister said, about 60,000 fish were helicoptered over the site, and 220,000 migrated through the slide. For the most part, we lost, at the early stages, almost the entire stock. For the early Stuart ones, it was about 99%, and for the early chinook, it was about 89%. As the season went along, things improved. There was, particularly at the beginning, almost a complete loss of the fish and poor survival.

Mr. Richard Bragdon: Mr. Chair, are they expecting similar mortality rates this year, or what percentage of improvement will there be over last year? Do we have any estimates on that yet?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Of course, this year we're going to have different processes in place in order to help make sure that the salmon get through. With a pneumatic fish pump, with the natural passageway, the idea is that more fish will be able to get through. We are also willing to have people on the ground doing the transport, like we had last year.

Deputy, is there more you can add? I know that this year the plan is to significantly increase the number of fish that get through.

Mr. Richard Bragdon: Okay, thank you.

I'll give the rest of my time to Mr. Calkins.

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: The deputy's microphone was off.

Mr. Timothy Sargent: Sorry.

We do expect better performance this year. We have a lot more measures in place.

Even last year, once we were able to set up a way to transport some fish, we did see some better numbers.

The reality is that we aren't really going to know until the fish show up and we can observe them. We've done a lot of blasting. We've seen that a lot of the rock has been removed. However, even though we've had modelling done, how that affects the hydrology and the ability of salmon to actually get over that barrier we won't really know until the fish show up.

Mr. Richard Bragdon: Okay, thank you.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Calkins.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Thank you, Chair.

Minister, it seems to me that we're not getting answers to the question about whether or not the harvest reductions from last year and this year have succeeded. The harvest reductions on the west coast are meant to preserve and protect the Fraser River runs, but now that we have the Big Bar slide on the Fraser River, we know that we've just about lost everything from last year on certain runs of chinook. All of these closures, it seems, may have been for nothing, even though the intent was good.

When are we going to find out whether or not these closures have actually done any good? When can we get some information on this?

• (1525)

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: With regard to fisheries management decisions on the chinook salmon runs specifically, more than just the management decisions are going to make a difference in the salmon stocks. As I've said, there isn't one specific thing that's going to make all of the difference. It's about making sure salmon have the right habitat. Of course, the Big Bar landslide was something that nobody predicted was going to happen, and it has had an impact on the stock.

We are making sure that we're making decisions based on science, and we're making sure that we're doing everything we possibly can to protect those stocks.

Deputy Minister, I'm not sure if there's anything else you'd like to add.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Hang on. I get a chance to talk to department officials all the time. Minister, I want to talk to you.

Minister, you say all of these things, the whole suite and the whole gambit, yet it seems to me that every time the department talks at committee, they say the only management tool they have, basically, is fisheries closures.

We've lost the hatcheries upstream of the Big Bar slide. We know that the Quesnel and Eagle hatcheries have been abandoned. We have some community-based hatcheries up there too. We know there's active predation going on. The pinniped population on the west coast has gone up significantly. There are now academic reports suggesting that maybe some active management of pinnipeds to ensure the survival of the chinook coming out of the Fraser River is going to be necessary.

We're not talking about these things. We're talking about fisheries management regulations. We've shut down hatcheries and we're not actively managing predators. The only thing we're doing is taking away resources from the people who make their livings on the west coast, without taking a look at these other things.

Are we actually going to do something, other than just enact fisheries regulations, to preserve these valuable salmon stocks? It's time to do something different, because what we're doing clearly isn't working.

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: I actually do—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Minister, but we've gone way over time on the question part and that doesn't leave any time for an answer. If you could provide an answer to the committee in writing, we would appreciate it.

I would remind members that without the proper—

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order, please.

[*English*]

The Chair: Go ahead, Madam Gill.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's about interpretation. Because of the poor sound quality, there is no interpretation when Mr. Calkin speaks. I don't know if he has another headset. Otherwise, would it be possible for him to have one the next time, so that I can have access to all the interventions?

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you for that, Madam Gill.

I've been told that, due to the fact that Mr. Calkins doesn't have the proper equipment or is not using the proper equipment, interpretation is not available.

I remind members to try to use the proper equipment that's been recommended for this session. Comments must be able to be translated for the convenience of all members of the committee. If we run into the same thing again, somebody who has the right equipment may have to reread any question or statement from anybody who doesn't have the proper equipment. I just want to put that out there.

We will continue on now. We're getting near the end. We'll probably get through this meeting, and hopefully we can work on that malfunction in the next one.

We'll go to Mr. Weiler, for five minutes or less, please.

Mr. Patrick Weiler: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Just touching on some of the questions from my colleague, what impact does the Big Bar slide have on the chinook fishery across B.C.?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: I'm going to turn that over to the deputy minister.

Mr. Timothy Sargent: Once again, Rebecca, can you take that on?

Ms. Rebecca Reid: The species that are affected spawn above the Big Bar site. There are some chinook stocks, particularly, and sockeye, for the most part. However, the impact across the coast is fundamental because of the importance of those stocks, from an ecosystem perspective. Southern resident killer whales feed on them. They are important for our fisheries. They're certainly very important for first nations for food security reasons.

While the chinook don't represent the entire resource of chinook in British Columbia, it is important to consider those particular fish given that they're very important to the ecosystem and are relied upon by a number of sectors, by first nations, by recreational and commercial harvesters and by our whales. The implications are quite significant.

• (1530)

Mr. Patrick Weiler: Thank you.

My riding is home to the Pacific Science Enterprise Centre, and I know at PSEC researchers are studying the multiple factors that impact fish migration, physiology and fate, and how this affects migration and reproductive success.

Minister, I was hoping you could explain and elaborate on this whole-of-lifespan approach and how it helps in fisheries management.

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: I'm turning technical questions over to my deputy.

Mr. Timothy Sargent: Thanks. It's a technical question, but it's a very good question, because salmon have one of the most complicated life histories of any fish that we manage. We have to worry about what happens to them in fresh water, we have to worry about what happens to them as they go into the coastal areas, then we have to worry about what happens to them in the ocean and then all the way back again, so you really do need to take that life-cycle approach.

It means we have to recognize what happens in the ocean, which is probably the area we understand the least, quite frankly. We know there's climate change going on and we know there's acidification. That's why we've been looking at sending science missions to understand, with our international partners, what happens there.

Then on the way back, as some have mentioned, there are some complex predation cycles as well, interactions with sea lions and other potential predators like the SRKW themselves, and then we need to understand, as they go up the river, the impact of deforestation, for instance, and land use practices that affect both the river and where they spawn. Things like water temperature in the spawning areas can also be extremely important.

You have to put together all of these factors when you're modelling the salmon in order to understand why we're seeing some of these general trends or where they are going to go.

Mr. Patrick Weiler: Thanks for that technical explanation.

One of my colleagues mentioned earlier the B.C. salmon restoration and innovation fund, the BCSRIF.

Minister, could you explain what role it plays in ensuring we have healthy stocks of Pacific salmon?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: BCSRIF is a phenomenal program that allows communities to do enhancement, working on coastal restoration and working on habitat restoration. We have had great success with this program working with the Province of British Columbia as well as a number of the first nations communities that are very active in making sure the fish habitat is preserved and conserved.

We want to make sure that we continue to do that. We've already allocated \$70 million of the \$148 million in BCSRIF as well as, I think, 29 projects so far, so the money is flowing to the communities and the organizations that are doing this work.

Is there anything else, Deputy, that you'd like to add?

Mr. Timothy Sargent: Maybe Rebecca could add a little bit more colour.

Ms. Rebecca Reid: Sure. There have been 192 expressions of interest, and we've funded about \$70 million so far. There are a number of projects that will directly benefit these stocks in the Fraser River, and there's another round, a new round, going to be planned to come up relatively soon.

Mr. Patrick Weiler: Thanks for that.

That leads directly into my next question. How, if at all, has BC-SRIF programming been redirected to support efforts related to Big Bar and some of the stocks that have been impacted by the slide?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Deputy, I'm going to turn that one to you.

Mr. Timothy Sargent: Yes, again, Rebecca, I think you're close to that one on the ground.

Ms. Rebecca Reid: As I just started to say, we have funded a number of activities such as habitat restoration studies, boots-on-the-ground work, that are directly benefiting the stock. An example is the north Pacific survey that just came back. They went out to the ocean to look at what's going on out on the high seas.

There are a number of really great examples of how SRIF has supported and helped advance the studies and work for these stocks. Certainly we could provide a list as well with more detail, if requested.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

Thank you, Mr. Weiler.

We'll now go to Mr. Fast for five minutes or less, please.

Hon. Ed Fast: Thank you very much.

Minister, I appreciate your being here. We're asking tough questions, but it's important because I think you will acknowledge that our Pacific salmon face an existential crisis, especially when we hear that some 99% of our runs are being lost. That is shocking. It should cause dismay among everybody who values our Pacific salmon.

I met with people from the Pacific Salmon Foundation in December. In their estimation, harbour seals are consuming up to 45% of outgoing juvenile salmon. In other words, almost half of all the outgoing juveniles are gone before they ever get to maturity. That represents a real threat. We're also hearing this on the east coast, where grey seals have been identified by your department as a key factor in the decline of a number of species of fish.

Can you tell us what you're doing about the threat posed by excessive predation? I'm not talking about plans. This has been a problem for years. I would suggest it's a decades-long problem, and we need action on this. Do you have any specific action items to address this particular problem?

• (1535)

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Mr. Fast, you're absolutely right. The salmon is absolutely critical to B.C., and I don't mean just as a food source or for commercial harvest but to the very culture. It's so much a part of the identity of British Columbians that it's critical that we make sure we protect and do everything we can to build those stocks back up.

With regard to predation, with regard to seals specifically, there are a number of challenges with the seal population. We make our decisions based on the best available science. Ongoing science is being done now to determine what is happening with the seals with regard to the fish stocks, both on the east coast and the west coast. I'm not sure if the deputy can add anything to that in terms of specific things that are being done, but I know a great deal of work is being done around the science of seal predation.

Mr. Timothy Sargent: Yes, this is a pretty complicated issue. Of course, seals and various fish stocks have co-evolved over millennia. We need to understand the predator-prey interactions. Yes, seals can eat salmon, for instance, on the west coast or on the east coast, but seals also eat fish like hake that also eat salmon. So more seals can make life easier for salmon. It just depends where the seals are.

When we look at the diet of seals, certainly on the west coast, salmon are not the main part of their diet. We need to understand more about these interactions. There is a ceremonial hunt for seals on the west coast, but before we can take action, we need to understand the situation better.

Hon. Ed Fast: With respect, Mr. Sargent, the department has been discussing and studying predation for years. They know it's a problem and soft-peddling this as an issue isn't going to help our salmon stocks on the west coast. I really need to know what action is going to be taken to address predation, and not only here on the west coast. It is a huge issue on the east coast. Our recreational fishers especially are getting very antsy when they see their fish being taken by seals before those fish can even be landed. You know and I know that action needs to be taken now. It's not just about studying this endlessly without any action plan.

Minister, is your department still planning to expand the pneumatic tube system to get the fish past the Big Bar slide? It's my understanding that two pathways were initially established, and there's a concern, as my colleague Mel Arnold mentioned earlier, about accommodating different sizes of salmon. Some of them are quite large, and I'm not sure they're going to make it through that tube. Your comments on that would be very helpful.

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: My understanding is that we have been working closely with the company that is building the pneumatic fish pump in order to accommodate the size of the fish we have. Different sizes of tubes will be used. We are absolutely confident that they will make sure we can move our fish through the pneumatic system.

Deputy, I don't know if there's anything else there.

• (1540)

Mr. Timothy Sargent: This kind of fish is also moved using the Whooshh system in Washington state.

Hon. Ed Fast: Does that include large fish?

Mr. Timothy Sargent: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fast.

We'll go on to Mr. Hardie for five minutes or less.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Watershed Watch people have had a lot to say in and around the whole Big Bar situation. They said something curious. Mr. Calkins had brought up the whole issue of the hatcheries, and Aaron Hill, who is the executive director of Watershed Watch, as well as our old friend and colleague Fin Donnelly were talking about the growing pressure to get more hatchery fish produced. They say that's a really bad idea.

Can anybody comment on that? Why would they think it's not a very good idea to look to hatchery fish to replenish the stocks?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: One of the things that need to be kept in mind is what type of effect hatchery fish will have on wild salmon stocks. I think the concern is that it would be a challenge for wild stocks, and it looks as though we're giving up on wild stocks if we go with a large-scale hatchery.

Hatcheries do have a place, there's no question, in terms of helping the stocks and in terms of what we're doing at Big Bar, for example, with regard to capturing the fish now. They're actually now in the holding area so that we can maintain that stock.

We recognize that there are a number of people who have real concerns about hatchery fish simply because of the impacts they may have on the wild Pacific salmon.

Deputy, I'm not sure if there's anything else there.

Mr. Timothy Sargent: Those people include many first nations, for instance, who are quite concerned about the salmon stocks. I think there is certainly a worry here that the genetic diversity that's represented by our wild stock could be overwhelmed by large-scale enhancement, which isn't to say, as the minister has said, that there isn't a place for enhancement of salmon on the west coast.

Mr. Ken Hardie: It occurs to me that because the salmon are gathering just in front of the barrier—and I believe, Minister, you referenced this a little earlier—that it would be possible to scoop some up and instead of moving them along take them and involve them in hatchery operations, which should answer the DNA issues, one would think.

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: We're currently looking at a number of different measures. The hatchery at the upper Fraser is one option. As I said, we are already doing the holding facility there for them, because we want to make sure we protect as many as we can, and if it's going to be a challenge for them to get through, we want to make sure we have those genetic fish.

With regard to large-scale hatcheries, there are very real concerns about mixing those with the wild Pacific salmon and the genetics involved there. It's a challenge for a lot of first nations communities and it's a challenge for environmental groups. Those are all things we take into consideration, along with making sure that the chinook population in the Fraser right now is being looked at in a hatchery capacity. We're working with a number of organizations to see that it works out.

Mr. Ken Hardie: You could try to assess the value of the efforts that have been made over a number of years and a number of governments to address the situation with salmon on the Fraser. There has been no shortage of ideas and advice, etc.

Speak to us, Minister, about the conflicting advice, because it does not seem that you can really land on a consensus. Somebody says you can do this, and then somebody else comes along—like the hatcheries—and says no, that's a terrible idea.

What are we going to do to reach a consensus so that we can move forward not only with a doable plan but with a plan that can survive a change in government or a change in minister—something where we get some continuity and we actually move the needle?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: That's actually a really good question.

One of the things I will say is that we make all of our decisions based on science. It's something that we're strongly committed to.

We also recognize that we need to work with a number of different groups. Honestly, consensus in fisheries is never easy to achieve, but I think it is possible because we all want the same thing. We all want the same outcome, and that is that we all want to see better populations for the B.C. salmon. We all want to see them continue to grow in abundance. We want to make sure that they're there for generations to come. We want to be able to make sure that the southern resident killer whales have a food supply. These are all things that we have to take into account.

The thing that we have to remember is that there is no one answer to making sure that those populations survive. There are a number of different things that need to be done, and hatcheries may play a role in that.

We also recognize that habitat restoration plays a role in that, that climate change plays a role in that, that clearing Big Bar plays a role in that. These are all things that we're working on right now to make sure that we're doing everything that we possibly can to maintain those stocks, because once they're gone, they're not coming back. We need to make sure that we do everything we can to keep them as resilient as they are right now.

• (1545)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hardie.

Madam Gill, I understand that you're giving your time to Mr. Johns for the next question time slot, so I'll go on to Mr. Johns for five minutes or less in total.

Sir, you have the floor.

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you.

Ms. Reid, you answered a question and said that there were 192 applications for the BCSRIF.

Do you have the total value of those applications to the SRIF?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: I just need some clarification. Are you asking what the total was for the 192 applications that we had?

Mr. Gord Johns: Yes, what was the total in terms of...?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: I'm going to have to turn that to the deputy.

Mr. Timothy Sargent: Rebecca, you have those numbers.

Ms. Rebecca Reid: With regard to the 192 proposals, is it a question of how much money we spent?

Mr. Gord Johns: No. How much was the total value of the applications? Was it \$100 million, \$200 million...?

Ms. Rebecca Reid: I think it was around \$340-odd million. It was very significant.

Mr. Gord Johns: Right, so it was way oversubscribed.

One thing that there is consensus on—with indigenous communities, local governments, recreation fishers and commercial—is that we need more money to spend on restoration and habitat protection. You talked about climate change and the impact of it. A lot of these projects would be climate mitigation projects. You have approved \$70 million in applications when the ask was, on the first round, \$340 million. In my riding, there are groups like Coastal Restoration Society, indigenous communities and West Coast Aquatic that were rejected, all with great projects. Certainly, in the Fraser, it's the same thing.

My question is this: Is the government looking at ramping this up significantly in light of the situation with our wild salmon, which is becoming way worse, especially with Big Bar?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: I would say that we are continuing to monitor situations, and we're continuing to look at what needs to be done.

With regard to the applications that came through that were rejected, I am not really sure why. Everyone has criteria that they have to meet. We have actually committed \$70 million. It's a \$148-million fund, so there is still another intake of applications that will be coming forward.

Perhaps the deputy has something else he can add there, but I know that we are working to get the money out the door as quickly as we can.

Mr. Gord Johns: It sounds to me like you have approved just over 20% of the overall ask. Clearly, this program isn't adequate to serve the needs of coastal people.

This is something that we're hearing from the Skeena to the Fraser to Clayoquot, you name it. Every watershed is asking for money. These are thousands and thousands of volunteers, mainly recreational fishers, commercial fishers and indigenous communities. Most of them are volunteers. They want to go out and do this work, but they can't do it without some resources.

What is the government going to do to mobilize, really, a volunteer workforce, a group of people who want to go out and help with restoration and habitat protection? I think this is an opportunity being wasted, especially coming out of COVID. This could be a COVID response and a COVID recovery initiative that could transform coastal British Columbia and save our iconic wild salmon.

• (1550)

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: We've committed \$148 million under a two-year time frame. We've spent \$70 million of that. We still have another \$78 million to go. We have approved a number of projects. We know there's more that needs to be done. We know there are a lot of good projects out there and we're working very diligently to make sure we address as many of them as we possibly can.

Deputy, I'm not sure if you wanted to add anything else.

Mr. Timothy Sargent: I'd maybe add that, first, in terms of the oversubscription, certainly there are a number of criteria people have to meet. They have to have a proper plan. We're not going to give money to anybody who asks for it. There are terms and conditions.

I would say as well that this is a program we run in partnership with the Province of British Columbia. They also have to be satisfied that the money is going to go to good use.

This is not the only money we spend on habitat restoration. For the coastal restoration fund, for instance, about 40% of that \$75 million went to B.C. salmon projects. We also have a number of other things we do with groups, volunteer groups, with restoration—

Mr. Gord Johns: I appreciate that, but, for the record, our party wants to see that tripled at least. Communities throughout the whole coast are getting denial letters for very good projects. They could do their part to help bring back our wild salmon. Restoration and habitat protection has to be the number one priority for the west coast for this government. Salmon is our economy, our food security and our culture. It's having a massive impact on coastal communities. This is an opportunity. I'm just calling on the government to do that. I hope that Big Bar hasn't diverted good projects away throughout the coast.

Mr. Weiler asked a fair question and never had an answer to it, so I just want to follow up on that. Are any projects being diverted or postponed because of Big Bar?

Mr. Timothy Sargent: Perhaps, Minister, I can take that on.

The answer to that is no. The money we've used for Big Bar has come from a special allotment we have gotten from the centre. It has not been taken away from other programs.

Mr. Gord Johns: Okay. Thank you.

Again, I just want to reiterate a sense of urgency here.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Johns. Your time is up.

I want to say a special thank you to the minister and the officials for being here today. I understand some of them will be back again tomorrow, so we look forward to seeing you then.

I'll give the officials and the guests a chance to sign off now before we make a short statement to the committee.

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Thank you, all.

The Chair: I believe most are gone now.

I just wanted to say a big thank you on behalf of the clerk and the staff to the members for getting to the meeting and for submitting

so promptly last week the suggested list of names for the witness list for tomorrow's meeting.

As well, if all members are okay with this, I would suggest tomorrow's meeting with the minister and the officials be considered under Mr. Arnold's motion to invite the minister, but also under Ms. Gill's motion to study the impacts of COVID. I think there might be a slim chance of getting the minister back for another session. We're going to have her and the officials again tomorrow to deal with COVID-19, so if that's okay with everybody....

Again, a reminder to please try to sign on early. We want people to be able to do a test on the sound and the mikes and the interpretation.

As well, if somebody doesn't have the right equipment, it's unfair to Madam Gill and others, and even to the interpreters. If they can't understand what's being said because somebody does not have up-to-date equipment or appropriate equipment, it is unfair for the meeting to even be in progress. We're going to try to get strict on that going forward. Everybody should be able to understand what's being said and partake in the meeting going forward, and I want to make sure that happens.

Hon. Ed Fast: Mr. Chair, perhaps I could just raise one issue that came up during this meeting, and that is the suggestion that all questions have to be put through the chair. Is that correct? It has certainly not been the practice in any committee work I've done over my 14 years. We ask questions directly of the witnesses. I think it's implied that we're doing that through the chair. I'd hate for that to become a formal process because it just slows the process down.

• (1555)

The Chair: I've always assumed that if you were asking a question to a minister or a guest it was done through the chair simply by asking it.

It's a bit harder now, Mr. Fast. We're not in the same room and that makes it a bit more difficult. Maybe the intent is to make sure the chair is controlling what's going on, but for the most part I agree with you. They can hear the questions as well as I can, so there is no need to be saying, "Through you, Mr. Chair, or to you, Madam Chair", or whatever, at any time. I understand the question is going to the person it's intended for, and most of us identify who we want to answer it, if it is the minister or an official or another witness per se.

Hon. Ed Fast: Mr. Chair, that's no lack of respect for you. Trust me. You're doing a really good job, but I did want to add the second part of that.

Minister Jordan suggested she has the right to answer questions within any time frame that suits her. Again, that is not correct. The time we have to ask questions is ours as members of the committee, even in the House itself or the COVID committee. As you know, the length of the question reflects the length of the answer that's allowed, and the chair cuts off the person who is answering once that time has expired. I like the idea of being able to preserve our time respectfully. If you're asking a question, the minister needs to have time to respond, but if it's very clearly a yes or no answer, I don't appreciate witnesses running out the time so they can avoid other questions. I don't think that would be fair to the committee. I don't think it's fair to the parliamentary process. I'm in your hands, obviously, but I wanted to express those concerns.

The Chair: Yes, I agree to some extent, Mr. Fast, but I do at times allow time for an answer when time has run out. I try to be as lenient as I can. Everyone has to remember the time for questions is your time, each individual participant and committee member.

Hon. Ed Fast: Yes.

The Chair: If you don't think you're getting the answer, interject at any time and that goes for any member, but I also like to be respectful of the person trying to answer a question when they understand fully what you're saying.

If there is nothing further, I will adjourn the meeting and look forward to seeing everybody again tomorrow.

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