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Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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• (1300)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 40 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(g), the committee is meeting today to undertake a study on “Report 8: Emergency Management in First Nations Communities—Indigenous Services Canada”, of the 2022 reports 5 to 8 of the Auditor General of Canada, referred to the committee on Tuesday, November 15.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses. From the Office of the Auditor General, we have Karen Hogan, Auditor General of Canada; Glenn Wheeler, principal; and Doreen Deveen, director. From the Department of Indigenous Services, we have Gina Wilson, deputy minister; Valerie Gideon, associate deputy minister; Joanne Wilkinson, senior assistant deputy minister, regional operations, by video conference; and Kenza El Bied, director general, by video conference.

Ms. Hogan, you have the floor for five minutes.

Go ahead, please.

[Translation]

Ms. Karen Hogan (Auditor General of Canada, Office of the Auditor General): Madam Chair, thank you for this opportunity to discuss our report on emergency management in first nations communities, which was tabled in the House of Commons on November 15, 2022.

I would like to acknowledge that this hearing is taking place on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe people. Joining me today are Glenn Wheeler and Doreen Deveen, who led this audit.

Emergencies such as floods and wildfires are happening more often and with greater intensity across Canada. These emergencies disproportionately affect many first nations communities because of their relative remoteness and socio-economic circumstances.

Over the last 13 years, more than 1,300 emergencies have occurred in first nations communities, causing more than 130,000 people to be evacuated and displaced. Echoing our 2013 audit in this area, we concluded that Indigenous Services Canada had not provided first nations communities with the support they needed to manage natural emergencies. Over the last 4 years, the

department has spent about \$828 million on emergency management for first nations communities.

We found that the department’s actions were more reactive than preventative. Although first nations communities had identified many infrastructure projects to mitigate the impact of emergencies, the department had a backlog of 112 of these projects that it had approved but not funded.

Indigenous Services Canada was spending 3.5 times more money on responding to and recovering from emergencies than on supporting communities to prepare for and mitigate impacts. According to Public Safety Canada, for every \$1 invested in preparedness and mitigation, \$6 can be saved in emergency response and recovery costs.

• (1305)

[English]

Despite our 2013 recommendation, Indigenous Services Canada still had not identified which first nations communities most needed support to increase their capacity to prepare for emergencies. If the department identified these communities, it could target investments accordingly. For example, building culverts and dikes to prevent seasonal floods would help minimize the impact on people and reduce the cost of responding to and recovering from emergencies. Until the department shifts its focus to prevention and invests in infrastructure, communities are likely to continue experiencing greater effects from emergencies.

We also found that capacity needs of first nations were not identified. For example, although the department provided funding to first nations for about 190 full-time or part-time emergency management coordinators, it did not know how many more were needed for first nations to have the capacity to manage emergencies.

Since 2009, 268 communities have been evacuated, some more than once. While the majority of these evacuations lasted less than a month, 90 were more than three months long, and some lasted multiple years. One has been ongoing for over 10 years.

Indigenous Services Canada did not ensure that emergency services were culturally appropriate and comparable to services provided in municipalities of similar size and circumstances. The department did not define comparable services. It also did not consistently monitor the services provided to first nations communities by provinces and other service providers.

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

We are now into decades of audits of programs and government commitments that have repeatedly failed to effectively serve Canada's indigenous peoples. It is clear to me that strong words are not driving change. Concrete actions are needed to address these long-standing issues, and government needs to be held accountable.

Madam Chair, this concludes my opening remarks. We are pleased to answer any questions the committee may have.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Thank you.

We will now go to Ms. Wilson for five minutes.

Ms. Gina Wilson (Deputy Minister, Department of Indigenous Services): *Kwey kakina.*

Hello. *Ullukkut. Tansi.*

Thank you for having me. Before we begin, I want to acknowledge that we are on the land of my ancestors, my relatives, and we gather in the traditional, unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

Meegwetch. Thank you for inviting me to appear, and the team here with me, before the House Standing Committee on Public Accounts. I am grateful to the committee for taking an in-depth look at the report of the Auditor General of Canada on managing emergencies in first nations communities. I'd like to thank the Auditor General and the staff for this detailed report.

We agree with the seven recommendations in the report, and Indigenous Services Canada is committed to acting on each recommendation with a detailed plan.

The work we are doing with first nations partners to address the critical gaps that exist in emergency management in fact closely aligns with the recommendations outlined in the Auditor General's report.

[Translation]

Our work is guided by two key principles: first nations must have input into their own emergency management planning and response. And they must be full and equal partners in decisions that affect their own communities.

Our shared focus is prevention. We are developing emergency management plans and multilateral service agreements with first nations that clearly establish the protocols, roles, responsibilities,

and funding for the various partners within emergency management governance structures.

[English]

An example is the tripartite memorandum of understanding on emergency management that we signed in 2019 with British Columbia, the British Columbia Assembly of First Nations, the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs and the First Nations Summit. This memorandum of understanding has proven to be effective. In February 2022, Indigenous Services Canada approved an additional \$5.7 million for the 2022-23 fiscal year to the First Nations' Emergency Services Society through the emergency management assistance program.

We've also been making significant investments in infrastructure to mitigate the impact of emergencies in first nation communities. Since 2016, and as of June 30, 2022, ISC has invested \$121.1 million, excluding operating expenses, to support 103 structural mitigation projects, 50 of which are now completed. These projects will benefit 107 communities serving approximately 116,000 people. ISC has also invested in additional first nation emergency management coordinators across Canada who help communities prepare for and respond to emergency events in a culturally relevant manner.

Regarding our support role in emergency preparations and response, I would like to highlight our work with first nations and partners regarding potential flooding along the James Bay and Hudson Bay coasts, including Kashechewan First Nation. Since 2016, ISC has supported an annual precautionary evacuation of Kashechewan First Nation. Since 2020, we've supported Kashechewan and Fort Albany first nations on the land initiative, where residents can temporarily move to higher ground on their traditional lands.

Another recent example is hurricane Fiona in September. First nation chiefs and leaders in the Atlantic region played a key role in assessing the immediate needs of citizens and determining the assistance needed, and were already preparing in advance of the storm. Their dedication ensured the health and safety of affected communities.

● (1310)

[Translation]

In addition, Indigenous Services Canada mobilized an emergency management team and stayed in active communication with all parties involved, resulting in a coordinated and appropriate response and assistance.

We have continued to work closely with the communities to develop and provide recovery support and assistance.

Overall, our continued priority is to ensure the health, safety and well-being of first nations and address the gaps that exist in emergency management.

I'd like to thank all of our partners for working with us.

[English]

I thank the committee for inviting us here today.

Meegwetch. Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Thank you, Ms. Wilson.

I'd like to welcome Mr. Vidal and Mr. Gaheer to committee today.

We are now ready to begin our first round for six minutes.

Mr. Vidal, go ahead.

Mr. Gary Vidal (Desnethé—Mississippi—Churchill River, CPC): It's Mr. McCauley.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Okay.

Mr. McCauley, go ahead.

Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair. Thanks for filling in as chair.

AG Hogan, thanks for this report. I didn't think it could get worse than the Veterans Affairs report, but here you go.

I want to start with the AG's comments, both present and past. In 2011, Sheila Fraser, after 10 years of audits and ignored recommendations, said the results were unacceptable. Mr. Ferguson follows up five years later and says it's "beyond unacceptable". Then the current AG says, "We are now into decades of audits of programs and government commitments that have repeatedly failed to effectively serve Canada's indigenous peoples."

I have the 2013 report here. Every single recommendation was agreed upon by Indigenous Affairs—as it was called at the time. We have audit after audit and recommendation after recommendation that are blown off by the department, with decades of failure to serve our indigenous people. Yet the department repeatedly just says, "We agree with the recommendations."

I have two questions, and I'm going to be very blunt here.

Why should anyone on this committee, the Auditor General, and anyone in Canada believe Indigenous Services when they say they agree and they're going to act on it?

As a follow-up question, why should I or anyone else in this room as an MP not immediately head up to the House, stand in the gallery and demand that every manager involved in this file be immediately terminated for this absolute, abject, seemingly wilful negligence?

This is low-hanging fruit and decades of failure—again, agreed, agreed, agreed. How do we get past this? Why should we not be calling for the dismissal of everyone who has been attached to these horrific results?

• (1315)

Ms. Gina Wilson: Is there a question there, sir?

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I had two questions.

Why should we believe Indigenous Services when you say that you agree to these, when departments agreed in the past and have done nothing?

Again, why should we not be in the House of Commons demanding dismissal and termination for everyone involved in this negligence, this seemingly purposeful, wilful negligence on this file?

Ms. Gina Wilson: I believe that is directed at me, Madam Chair, so I will make an attempt to respond to that.

I would take some exception to the words about having "blown off" those recommendations or that we have completely ignored them. As deputy head and primary accounting officer, I would say that we've managed all of our programs well, our terms and conditions set out by Treasury Board, with balanced budgets.

Can we do better? Yes, and the Auditor General has given us seven recommendations that help move us forward, and I thank her for that.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I appreciate that. I know that you say what you kind of have to say, but this is like three audits in a row that are just damning, wherein the department says, "yes, we agree", and then goes off on their way and does not deliver on what they agreed upon. What are the consequences for the last nine years since the last report for the bureaucrats and the management involved on this file for this failure?

I'm going to disagree with you. I don't believe that there have been.... I don't think that in any way you can look at this and say, "yes, we've accomplished a lot" or "yes, we're serving the people".

Ms. Gina Wilson: Madam Chair, I am hoping through this particular meeting that we can demonstrate that we have in fact made progress. Through our deliberations and the responses we'll give, we will hope to prove to you differently, that in fact we are managing this as well as we can at this point in time, Madam Chair.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Last year, 95% of the executive level and above in management in Indigenous Services received bonuses totalling \$3.3 million. Do you believe it is warranted to be rewarding what—I'm going to repeat—is such abject failure?

Ms. Gina Wilson: Performance bonuses are not in my realm to talk about, Madam Chair. I would leave that to Treasury Board and others who make those decisions. That is beyond my decision.

Thank you.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I'm going to answer that for you. I think the answer is no.

We're spending more—and it has been identified repeatedly—on recovery than on being proactive. Who is making the decision to prioritize the reactive rather than the proactive in the mitigation? Whose decision is that?

Ms. Gina Wilson: I agree, actually, that we need to shift from that response. I agree that we need to make this shift in Canada more broadly and in the first nation emergency management world, and I want us all to put our attention, our focus and our efforts towards mitigation and preparedness. I—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Whose decision would it be to do that? It seems like a no-brainer. It's been identified. Who needs to say “this is what we're doing”?

Ms. Gina Wilson: I don't think, actually.... This concept of communities and countries and municipalities, all parties, actually, wanting to move increasingly toward mitigation and preparedness is not a new concept, certainly not—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Please, I'm looking for an answer. Who needs to make this decision to say “focus on the mitigation and not the cleanup”? It has been identified in this report. For some nations, for 10 years now we've been going through this.

Ms. Gina Wilson: All jurisdictions need to make that particular recommendation. All EM experts—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Does your department have no say in that?

Ms. Gina Wilson: We have a say in that, and all emergency management experts in fact do repeat that message: that we need to be focusing more on mitigation and preparedness.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: What is it going to take to get your department to focus on that?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Could we have a short answer, please?

Ms. Gina Wilson: We are definitely working towards that shift, sir.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thanks, Madam Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Thank you.

We now move on to Ms. Bradford for six minutes.

Ms. Valerie Bradford (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all of our witnesses for joining us today for this very important report.

I will address my first few questions to the Auditor General.

I'm looking at page 8 of the report and specifically the graph that looks at the “greatest unmet structural mitigation needs”. It indicates that they were in British Columbia and Alberta, by a long shot, when you look at it. In the case of B.C., it seems to be “[e]ligible but unfunded” that jumps out at you, and in the case of Alberta, it's “unreviewed”—projects that haven't been reviewed.

Do you know why this is? Why is there such a discrepancy between the situation in B.C. and Alberta versus the rest of the country?

• (1320)

Ms. Karen Hogan: Madam Chair, that's a question I would suggest you actually ask the department. You have the luxury of having the deputy minister here and she would be better placed to answer that.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Okay, that's fine. Thank you very much.

I will address that to you, if you don't mind. I know that this is obviously an issue that's of personal concern to you, so I would like to know how you feel about that.

Ms. Gina Wilson: Is it my turn now?

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Yes, it's your turn. Thank you.

Ms. Gina Wilson: On those particular projects, I can't speak to the regional variations that exist, but I would say as a starting point that I think we would certainly want and prefer to be funding all 112 of these projects. I'll explain this with some context, if I may.

This department has a finite amount of resources that are appropriated each year. There are 112 and I think we're actually down to about 96 or 94 unfunded mitigation projects.

There are also thousands of unfunded infrastructure projects at large across first nation communities in Canada. This is something we do not know. It's everything from school renovations where kids can learn to water projects that lead to the lifting of drinking water advisories. I'm not even going to get into housing and homelessness. These are the choices that this department, with its first nation partners, ends up making: What do we fund this year? What do we fund now? What do we fund next month?

The announcement that was made yesterday was actually quite hopeful for me, as it was about Canada's national adaptation strategy to protect communities and build a strong economy. I connected, for instance, with the Infrastructure deputy minister today and they confirmed that, yes, for the disaster mitigation adaptation fund indigenous recipients are eligible and they'll fund 100% of eligible expenses for their projects. We're going to be working closely now with Environment Canada and Infrastructure to try to get more projects funded.

Thank you.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: According to the report's recommendation 8.36, the department should “address the backlogs of eligible but unfunded structural mitigation projects and of unreviewed structural mitigation projects to effectively allocate resources to reduce the impact of emergencies on First Nations communities.” It seems the same ones get hit over and over again.

What can the department do without additional funding? Are there things that you could do that don't necessarily involve additional funding?

Ms. Gina Wilson: That's a great question. What can the department do? We ask ourselves that question a lot, and then we ask ourselves if we are making that decision unilaterally or making that decision with first nations.

Certainly, when it comes to infrastructure funding, we try to work as closely as possible in partnership with those first nations and determine priorities collectively. Sometimes the mitigation priorities don't move up quickly enough. Perhaps the community is looking for housing before it is looking to clear up the eroding shoreline. Those choices come down to very difficult ones for both the department and the community, but I appreciate the—

Ms. Valerie Bradford: I want to make sure I get this in.

From 2018-19 to 2021-22, 13 first nations communities were evacuated at least three times, and four of the 13 have not applied for funding for non-structural preparedness and mitigation activities. Why did some of the most heavily affected communities not apply for funding?

Ms. Gina Wilson: I'm going to defer to Joanne or Kenza on that one, to speak directly to those particular communities.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Okay, thank you.

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Regional Operations Sector, Department of Indigenous Services): I would say that we are increasingly reaching out proactively to nations that have not had the capacity in the past to put those types of proposals together. We've tried to lighten the burden for nations in terms of those application processes and, as the deputy mentioned, really work in partnership with them so that we are at the table together with the nation, with the province, with ourselves and federal partners throughout the system to bring those solutions forward in a way that does not burden them on the application process.

Thank you.

● (1325)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Thank you.

There are six seconds left.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Okay.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Now we move to Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné for six minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné (Terrebonne, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair. You are doing a very good job.

I thank my colleague Mr. McCauley for his snacks, which are doing us all good today.

We heard a rather interesting introduction from our Conservative colleague about how devastating it is to read that after three reports from the Auditor General and from the previous Auditor General, there is little or no improvement. Despite the recommendations that have been made and accepted, we see that absolutely nothing has been done, even though these are the same problems. There may have been projects, no one is saying otherwise, but they are not enough. We know that climate change will intensify and that the number of forest fires and floods, among other things, will increase. Yet we are still in reaction mode rather than prevention mode, despite all the recommendations that have been made in this regard. This is a real problem.

So I would like to put a question to the Department of Indigenous Services.

I don't think anyone here is denying climate change. Knowing that it's going to increase over time, are you in a position, first of all, to finally do prevention on reserves, or are you just going to continue to react to emergencies, which ends up costing six times as much?

Ms. Gina Wilson: We're increasing some things, but I'm going to hand over to my colleague.

Ms. Valerie Gideon (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Indigenous Services): Thank you very much for your question.

We are in a period of transition. We are certainly also making demands for funding that would allow us to meet all the needs that have been raised.

The current program has always been structured to respond to emergencies. So we have resources for that. We also have the capacity to apply for funding, on an annual basis, to respond to claims for expenses that have been incurred to deal with emergencies and put strategies in place.

The responsibility for emergency management lies primarily with the provinces and territories. So we absolutely have to work with them and involve First Nations partners. Our response depends on the willingness and ability of the provinces and territories to make the transition to preventive measures.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: The department has signed agreements on emergency management services in six provinces. What about the other provinces and territories?

Ms. Valerie Gideon: We are in discussions with the provinces and territories.

It's also important to know that even in provinces where we don't have a formal agreement, when there are emergencies, we work closely with them. For example, during Hurricane Fiona, we worked very closely with the provincial governments, as well as with first nations partners, even though we don't have a bilateral agreement with each of those jurisdictions.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: We are always told that there is a wonderful collaboration, but we see that, in the reports, nothing improves. So it's fantastic to talk about collaboration, but the agreements should have been signed a long time ago.

When we talk about urgency, usually it goes faster. Why have these agreements still not been signed?

Ms. Valerie Gideon: Some aspects also depend on how other jurisdictions and first nations partners prioritize. It must also be recognized that the number of emergencies we face each year has increased rapidly and these are occurring across the country.

● (1330)

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: All right.

When you talk about collaboration, if I understand correctly, it is in cases of emergency, but we know that these emergencies will increase. So I will repeat my first question.

Given that these emergencies are going to increase, isn't it time to finally sign agreements with all the provinces to work on prevention rather than reaction?

Ms. Valerie Gideon: We agree with you, and we also prioritize agreements with our first nations partners, not just the provinces and territories.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: We agree with you in terms of first nations partners. The mentality that comes to us from British colonization is finally changing.

First nations obviously need to be consulted, but they should be more than consulted; there should be investment in building their capacity. This was raised by the Auditor General. They need to be able to establish their needs, but also be trained.

Has this been done?

Ms. Valerie Gideon: We have a budget allocation to increase the capacity of communities in this regard, but it is relatively modest. However, that funding has allowed us to fund emergency management coordinators in first nations communities and agencies across the country. There are currently 196, but we hope there will be more.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: I think my time is up.

Thank you.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Thank you.

We now move to Mr. Desjarlais for six minutes.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais (Edmonton Griesbach, NDP): Thank you very much, Madam Chair. You're doing a great job.

I want to start by recognizing how tremendously difficult this is for me and for many members across Canada as they continue to witness increases in very violent storms, wildfires and floods.

When I was first elected, it was on the premise that I would be able to do less harm in this place and that indigenous people's contribution in this place could in fact help to reduce harm in our communities.

The fact that this report echoes failures over decades is something I'm ashamed of. It's something that all Canadians are feeling ashamed of right now, too. It's deplorable to know that in our country this is the reality still facing indigenous people right now.

I had an unfortunate time responding to an emergency disaster in northwest Alberta in 2019. It was the Chuckegg wildfires. We saw the provincial government try their best to react. We saw indigenous communities try their best to react. We lost 16 homes, and the indigenous community had to take that cost. Canada still, to date, has contributed nothing.

I want to get to the bottom of who is responsible. I echo the Auditor General's comments in asking for accountability. This is de-

plorable. I'm outraged. If it wasn't Friday, I'd probably have more energy to yell about this.

There are no words I can use to express the difficulty that the indigenous people I met with experienced during these wildfires and floods. I can't reproduce the words in any way, shape or form. I can only plead with the deputy minister that she take her responsibility more seriously. Know that we cannot see another report like this in a decade. It's unacceptable that the public service has known about these failures for decades, and, as Mr. McCauley mentioned, they sit on shelves. Indigenous people are told, "We accept these, and we're going to be partners."

I had the deputy minister here about a year ago talking about clean water issues, which are still prevalent. They were supposed to be done years ago. She's no longer the deputy minister; I recognize that. You're now the deputy minister.

There are real costs to inaction. Real people are going to be hurt without your doing this.

I need the deputy minister to be as forthcoming and honest with Canadians as possible so that we know as parliamentarians, as duly elected members of this country, how to fix this. Shielding and defending the government right now is not going to work. We cannot, in this committee, tolerate continued defence of a government that will not act on this.

Madam Chair, I'm sorry about how angry I am about this. I know you understand as well. You've been in this committee long enough to know how deeply disturbing this is. I need to know who's at fault. I need to know whom to hold accountable. If it's not the deputy minister, then you need to tell us who. We need answers, and we've been waiting for two decades. Who is responsible for these failures?

Canadians are losing faith in the system. I don't have faith in Indigenous Services Canada. Canadians don't have faith in Indigenous Services Canada. The only one who seems to have faith in Indigenous Services Canada isn't even the Auditor General or members of Indigenous Services, from your statement this morning.

I need to know where the problems are so we can fix this.

First of all, we need to have a system that is accountable. I need to understand what accountability measures are also important in this discussion. Who is accountable to the deputy minister? Who is at fault for the continued failure noted in this audit? Why is it that indigenous communities continue to face the same failures in their community? Who is responsible?

● (1335)

Ms. Gina Wilson: I believe that's a question for me, Madam Chair.

Before I get into that, I want to ask for clarification—maybe offline—with respect to which community you're referring to about non-reimbursement. I'm happy to follow up on that.

I completely agree with you that, as indigenous peoples working around this table, we are here to reduce harm to indigenous peoples. I believe we're all committed to that.

You want me to be very honest and very clear about where the responsibility lies. I would say it is with all of us. I say that only with great respect, but the department does not—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: I don't know if I can take that as an answer. We need to actually have action items here on this, and—

Ms. Gina Wilson: The department—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: I've spoken to the deputy minister in the past, and she gave me the same response you're giving me now, that it's all of us. It's about partnership with indigenous people. Indigenous people need to be the ones to have the onus on them. It's indigenous people who need to come to the government. It's someone other than me.

Someone has to take accountability for this. I'm tired of coming here and asking the same question. It's like I'm talking to a wall or a room of nothing. Who is responsible?

I know the Auditor General made comments to us—which I can't directly cite in this meeting—along the lines of the involvement of politics in the system. I know from working in governments in the past, and on behalf of indigenous treaty governments as well, that the political short-sightedness of the government comes at the cost of the long-term stability of first nations. That is an issue, and it's something that Indigenous Services Canada and Crown-Indigenous Relations have never ever mentioned.

Although we know that this is the issue, we need the deputy ministers to act on behalf of Canadians and to demonstrate where the accountability is going wrong. We need to have tangible, concrete answers. Who is responsible? Is it the minister, yes or no?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Mr. Desjarlais, you'll have to hear the answer in the next round.

Thank you.

Ms. Gina Wilson: Thank you. I'll continue with my response. I was going to say that a lot of this—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Ms. Wilson, we'll hear the answer in the next round.

We will now begin the second round of five minutes, starting with Mr. Vidal.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the committee for having me here.

Thank you to our guests for being here.

The colleagues previously, starting with Mr. McCauley and going all through my colleagues here, have made very clear the frustration and the concern at the table.

I'm going to start with the Auditor General.

In your report and in your opening comments, you talked about being frustrated that it's almost a decade later and we go on. This discussion is obvious. I would like to frame this in the context that this frustration should go way beyond the Ottawa bubble, beyond the people sitting at this table. For me, somebody who represents a riding in northern Saskatchewan that is home to the second-largest population of indigenous people in our country, this is very personal. Frankly, this is not about the frustration in the Ottawa bubble; it's about the frustration of people in these communities whose lives are being affected. Their quality of life is being affected. It's not just in northern Saskatchewan; it's across this country.

With that context, I have a couple of questions. Rather than beating the dead horse that's been talked about, I want to come at it with a different approach.

Auditor General Hogan, you very clearly said that the time has come for concrete action. Out of your recommendations, what's the one concrete action that you would suggest would have the biggest impact on preventing us from being here again in 10 years?

Ms. Karen Hogan: If I could figure out a way to package all seven in one concrete action, I would do that for you, but I can't.

• (1340)

Mr. Gary Vidal: I'm giving you only one.

Ms. Karen Hogan: I honestly think it needs to start with an acknowledgement that it's time for all levels of government to invest in preparedness, the things that we just don't see. It needs to be done. For that to be done properly, Indigenous Services Canada needs to have a handle on the magnitude.

We talk about identifying the communities most at risk—some that historically may have experienced natural disasters more often. You also need to understand the magnitude, so every community needs to be included and considered. Until you have the lay of the land to know how much funding might be needed and how much capacity might be needed, you won't know how much you need to invest in that preparedness—

Mr. Gary Vidal: I'm sorry. I don't mean to be rude and cut you off, but I'm given me a limited amount of time.

Thank you for that.

That all goes around this lack of a risk-based approach to this, and all the way through to the proposal-based approach. It's such a flawed model of how we do this.

It seems to me—and this is more of a statement than a question—that the people who are accessing the funding to solve their issues, from a mitigation perspective, are the people who best play the bureaucratic game and find their way through this proposal-based system. If we're not out doing the actual risk-based assessment to find the areas we need to invest in, to be proactive and preventative, we're going to keep coming back to this spot.

I'm going to move on, because I know I'm limited in time.

Last week in the House of Commons, the minister, in responding to your report, and in an answer to a question from my colleague, said:

In fact, the Auditor General's report noted that, while Indigenous Services Canada is doing a great job helping emergency management of those crises, we need to invest more in protection and in adaptation.

I have two quick questions on that.

One, I've scoured the report. I didn't find anywhere in there where you state that Indigenous Services Canada is doing a great job. I did some word searches, and I did some digging. Is there somewhere another report, an appendix or something, that these people get that we don't get? Do you agree they're doing a great job here somewhere that I missed?

Ms. Karen Hogan: This the only report we have out there, so it's not like you've missed it.

What we found about the response to emergencies.... I agree it is responding to emergencies and helping communities recover from that, but—

Mr. Gary Vidal: In fairness, when I look at the responses in the report—and I'm not sure this is a real word, but it's bureaucratese—it's like fluffy stuff saying, "We're going to do this, we're going to support this, and we're going to engage in this", but there's nothing concrete. There's nothing saying, "We're going to go and do this thing that will make a difference on the ground next week."

Ms. Karen Hogan: This is exactly why, in my opening remarks, I said no combination of strong words or soft words is driving change. Concrete actions are needed now. I do encourage the department to come up with a more comprehensive action plan that's more fulsome, so action can be taken. Who needs to do what and by when needs to be really clear for action to happen.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Those sound like measurable outcomes to me.

In your report, on page 19, you state:

Spending is not a good measure because it does not mean that results are being achieved. Without better performance indicators, the department could not assess progress in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

This wasn't specific to sustainable development and some targets there, but that flows across the spectrum. There's this old saying that goes, "What gets measured gets done." If we have a target and we're aiming for something, at least we know what we're achieving. Would you agree?

Ms. Karen Hogan: Absolutely. I find that I have that comment often. Government is excellent at measuring outputs, but not at measuring outcomes, and that needs to be fixed.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Thank you.

We move on to Mr. Dong, for five minutes.

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

I want to thank the deputy and the team, and also the Auditor General, for coming and talking about this very difficult topic.

We already heard the very passionate remarks by the member from the NDP. It really struck my heart. We know this has been part

of the frustration that's been going on for so many years. The Auditor General just talked about two AGs before her, and it is very frustrating.

It's not the Liberal government or the Conservative government. It's becoming a habit with the ministry. How do we change this culture, starting with this committee and this meeting? That's the question I'm asking myself.

When I look at these numbers and the findings, I was looking for a key area. How important is it to have the first nation community directly engaged? It's very important to leave the management of emergency or mitigation in their jurisdiction.

Can the deputy talk a bit about that? Has that been seen as a priority in your department?

• (1345)

Ms. Gina Wilson: I appreciate that comment, because we try to strive toward consistently working with first nations in all matters relevant to them. Sometimes that's a little harder to do. Sometimes that takes more time, but it is so worth it, because in the end the outcomes are better.

On this front, as well, in the emergency management area, we actively pursue the establishment of negotiations and agreements. If a community calls us and wants to talk about emergency management, we are there. We're not ignoring and completely turning them around. We're actually reaching out to the provinces, territories, and anyone who wants to work with us on emergency management.

Mr. Han Dong: Hold on there. There are still 112 unfunded projects. I'm very happy to hear that you are proactively reaching out to communities, but we have to do it better. We have to show more willingness to work with them.

You mentioned the province. Can you talk a little bit about the multilateral co-operation among the federal government, provincial government and first nations? Can you give us some examples from the past? Tell us—try to convince us—that things are happening and things are improving, because by the finding of the AG, I'm just not convinced that we are changing the direction.

Ms. Gina Wilson: Thank you so much.

When there is not a piece of paper that outlines the final agreement, ISC will still work with all the parties and provide funding to many of the jurisdictions. As I said, we're actively seeking partners, and we do find small wins. For instance, when a first nation coordinator in my home community, my friend Céline Brazeau, manages the pandemic for the community in such a way that it keeps people safe, that to me is a win. When we reach out all days and hours, 24-7, talking to every community in the Atlantic during, before and after Fiona, and we get the sharing of information, for me that's a win.

Should we do more? The answer is absolutely yes.

Mr. Han Dong: Do you currently have any trilateral agreements signed, to your knowledge?

Ms. Gina Wilson: Yes, we do. As I mentioned, we have the agreement in British Columbia. It's complex, because there are many first nations in British Columbia. It took the active, driving push of the province, first nation organizations and the federal government to make that happen.

We have bilateral agreements with many provinces and territories as well—British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, Prince Edward Island, Yukon and the Northwest Territories. We need to move those and shift those more towards multilateral agreements.

Mr. Han Dong: What did you learn—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Thank you.

We move now to Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Following on from my colleagues' discussions, I think we are at the point where it has been confirmed that the recommendations will be accepted. The intentions mentioned are good. That said, we need a timetable. You need to be able to tell this committee, which is made up of elected representatives of the people, that you are going to solve this problem over the next few years, and how long it will take. Will it take three years, five years or more?

How long do you think it will take to finally fund the projects that are necessary for the well-being of first nations people? Are you able to answer this question?

• (1350)

Ms. Gina Wilson: We will prepare a report for our next meeting with this committee and will keep it regularly updated.

[*English*]

The department does not set its own budget. Parliament does that. I would like your support to ensure more resources to first nations for emergency management going forward. If parliamentarians were to approve increased resources to the department, we would be happy to administer them.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: I have numbers in front of me. The actual spending for Indigenous Services Canada was \$16 billion for 2020-2021. The main estimates are \$39.6 billion for 2022-2023. We're talking about more than double that. I think the budget looks adequate.

Can you provide us with a timeline of concrete measures?

Ms. Valerie Gideon: The increase in funding also includes funds set aside to settle some significant litigation. This funding is not just for service delivery. We still need to have funding specifically related to program accountability. So our funding is not a global budget envelope with no accountability or conditions. That's what the deputy minister is saying. We need to have funding specifically dedicated to the recommendations in the report.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: I see.

So the extra \$17 billion in the main budget for 2022-2023 is for agreements. It's still \$17 billion.

Ms. Valerie Gideon: This includes several budget and expenditure items.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: The budget that has been allocated to prevention projects is \$12 million—

Ms. Valerie Gideon: —a year.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Yes. Then it would take the department 24 years—

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): We'll have to save that for the next round.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): We will move on to Mr. Desjarlais for two and a half minutes.

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

I want to return to the question of accountability. I think it's an important one, and it's probably the most critical question of our time in relation to how Canadians understand settler-indigenous relations.

When Canadians come together and expect their ministry to work, they pay taxes and they do everything right, but the system keeps failing them. It's failing not just indigenous people, but all Canadians. Many of them want to be allies with indigenous peoples, but the institutions they entrust to do this are failing.

I want to know exactly how to hold your ministry accountable in the continued violence against indigenous people like we're seeing here. Is it money? Is it the minister? Is it the department?

We hear from scholars oftentimes in committee about the structures of this place and how the structures of this place are inappropriate to be dealing with indigenous people. They put the onus on indigenous people. You want partnerships, rather than accountability. You want indigenous people to be in line, in a queue, rather than directly met through their treaty and non-treaty obligations. These are real, systemic problems.

Indigenous Services Canada is an old ministry. It's one that helped to administer, back when it was amalgamated with INAC, some of the most terrible and egregious systems in this country. Are Canadians expected to trust this system to deliver these results? No. They shouldn't have to be. That's why they should be listening to how we, as a government, can create structures that can be more accountable.

I am determined now. The fact is that we're going to continue to see, after many audits and three auditors general, the continued failures at ISC. I believe that there is a situation. It's not necessarily the people operating the system, but the system itself is broken. No matter who leads the department, it will continue to have these results.

My question is simple, and I'll return to it again. Who is responsible for these actions within the jurisdiction of the federal government, beyond platitudes of partnerships?

I want to know who is responsible.

Ms. Gina Wilson: You asked before who is responsible and I was going to continue with a response that I now have the chance to give. I thank you for that, because I want to say again—and I know you don't want to hear it—we are all responsible to an extent.

It is money, but it's not only money. I would say that if you, as a committee, want to hold us accountable, ask us to come back and provide you with a comprehensive action plan. Ask us to come back and demonstrate to you—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Can you provide that comprehensive action plan in writing to this committee, please?

Ms. Gina Wilson: We are going to be doing that through—

• (1355)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): It was sent to the members.

Ms. Gina Wilson: It is preliminary, but we are supposed to come back with a detailed action plan.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Yes. The action plan was sent to the members.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: We have the action plan, but not—

Ms. Gina Wilson: Yes. That is the preliminary.... We had one week to turn that around, so we have a little more time to provide a detailed one.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: I would agree with Mr. McCauley that the department had 20 years to provide a more comprehensive response.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Thank you.

We now have to move on to Mr. Kram for five minutes, please.

Mr. Michael Kram (Regina—Wascana, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today. It's certainly a very emotional meeting, but I'd like us to get into some of the specifics.

Most of my questions will be for Ms. Wilson, but if Ms. Hogan or any of the other witnesses wish to intervene, feel free to do so.

On page 18 of the report, it highlights the case of the Kashechewan First Nation in northern Ontario. This first nation has been evacuated every year for the past decade. They used to be evacuated to Thunder Bay and to other far away communities, but during the COVID-19 pandemic, they were evacuated to higher ground within the reserve.

Now that the pandemic is over, will this first nation continue to be evacuated to higher ground within the reserve, or will they continue to be evacuated to Thunder Bay and to other faraway places?

Ms. Gina Wilson: I think that if plans are not already in place, we won't make that decision on our own. I'd ask Joanne to speak to the current status of discussions with Kashechewan.

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: Certainly.

I would say that, with the on-the-land initiative for Kashechewan, certainly COVID was a factor, but it was not the only factor. The nation's leadership and community members were very interested, from a cultural perspective, in doing that on-the-land piece. Getting back to some of the previous questions, it is a more cost-effective way, beyond how fantastic it has been from a cultural and safety perspective. The numbers we've seen there are now about \$140 per person per day for that on-the-land initiative versus \$235 per day when they were evacuated to host communities like Thunder Bay. That's a tangible piece that we are able to then redirect and, as folks have said, move towards prevention as opposed to continuing down the recovery path.

I'll just note that there were questions earlier about previous audits. After the 2013 audit.... Before that, the emergency management program was very much only a recovery-based program. That 2013 audit sparked a discussion around the four pillars of emergency management. This is how we've been able to do these types of projects with nations like Kashechewan that are at risk. They are at risk every year and are looking to find ways beyond diking, because there is a dike there, but it creates within the community kind of a dust bowl effect.

We're working with the community and working with the province to make sure that we're finding ways by which people can be safe but can also explore that cultural piece so that it is not just about an evacuation but also building on other pieces that are important to the community.

Thank you.

Mr. Michael Kram: I'm just doing some quick math on that one. There were 1,825 band members. Instead of spending \$235 per day, it will now cost only \$140 per day. Given that it's a six-week evacuation, that means the cost goes from about \$18 million down to \$10 million.

My next question is this: What happens to that \$8 million that gets freed up? Will it be used for prevention or a permanent solution? What happens to the freed-up \$8 million?

Ms. Gina Wilson: I think that's the direction we're going in.

Joanne, I think you referred to being able to redirect those resources to prevention.

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: Yes, the way the budget works is that we don't receive a massive amount of money to start. Our aid-based funding is smaller than that, and we go and seek funding to supplement it, based on actual costs. However, absolutely, as we're able to build that case study around the significant reduction in costs, we would look to go back and have discussions, as the deputy has said, around the tangible difference in those costs and seek to have that redirected towards prevention.

Mr. Michael Kram: This case was covered last week by the news outlet TBnewswatch, and I'd like to read a quick quote from that article. It says:

The evacuation efforts are necessary because federal officials forced the community to relocate to a flood plain in 1957—and until a federal commitment to help the community move permanently to higher ground becomes a reality.

1957 was a long time ago. How much longer do you suppose the community of Kashechewan will have to wait until there is a permanent solution in place so they don't have to evacuate every year?

• (1400)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Give a short answer, please.

Ms. Gina Wilson: I think those are longer-term discussions that continue with the community.

Joanne, do you want to comment very quickly?

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: It is an active discussion with the Kashechewan and Fort Albany first nations around what the communities' wishes and desires are in terms of the longer-term plan.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Thank you.

Mrs. Shanahan, you have five minutes, please.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thank all the witnesses for being here today.

I also thank my colleague, Mr. Kram, for really sussing out that essential tension between whether we are continually in this catch-22 where we're throwing money at simply solving emergencies and saving lives, or whether we are able to do the right thing soon enough and capture some of that money and then putting it into prevention.

I do have a question for Ms. Wilkinson. What do you mean by saying that, prior to 2013, emergency management was on a recovery basis only? What does that mean?

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: By “recovery”, I mean expenses that were made for communities to evacuate and then to be repatriated home. That was essentially the extent of the program. Following 2013, it was extended to cover the four pillars of emergency management—prevention, mitigation and those types of activities—so it became a broader program after that audit.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Okay, so we're still in the early stages, I would say, of a completely new way of doing things.

As my colleagues around the table know, I'm very much a process-and-management person, so I'm intrigued by that, because it's the frequency of events. I think I heard one of the witnesses saying that. It's the frequency of events that of course is catapulting us into a whole other level.

That being said, I'm hearing progress. There's one thing I do want to ask perhaps Ms. Wilson about, and then maybe the Auditor General.

This government split Indigenous Affairs at one point, and I remember that it was quite a shocking event. I don't know that it happens very often. As we know, it's now Crown-Indigenous Relations and, of course, Indigenous Services, your department. What effect did that have on this kind of transformational effect on how the department did things?

Ms. Gina Wilson: I wasn't there at the time, but I can only imagine that it was highly disruptive.

Valerie?

Ms. Valerie Gideon: Thank you for the question.

Absolutely, I was there, and learned about it in *The Globe and Mail*, just like others.

I was at the first nations and Inuit health branch of Health Canada, and that is a really important factor in terms of Indigenous Services Canada, because that branch became part of Indigenous Services Canada, along with other sectors of the former Indigenous Affairs.

What that did was actually give us an opportunity to include health emergencies within the emergency management assistance program's scope, and in a postpandemic.... We're not quite postpandemic, but in a COVID recovery type of time, it has been so essential for us to ensure that when we have emergency evacuations we are thinking about mental health cultural supports, and that when we have health emergencies, we're thinking about infrastructure and we're thinking about other aspects of how to ensure we're responding to and also mitigating risk over time. I would say that in this space this has been such an important transformation.

The other aspect is that our mandate is different. The enabling legislation that has established Indigenous Services Canada is very different from the legislation that Indigenous Affairs was founded upon. I would encourage all members to really look at that legislation, because it speaks to the transformation of services towards self-determination of indigenous peoples. That includes health and other sectors of responsibility in this department.

• (1405)

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: That's very encouraging.

How much time do I have, Chair?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): You have a minute and two seconds.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: That's excellent, because that brings me to a point that has been made. The Auditor General made the very important point—and she has done so over a number of reports—that it is outcomes that are important, not outputs.

My colleague Mr. McCauley made a remark earlier about performance pay and whether these people deserved their bonuses and so on. I'd like to remind Mr. McCauley—and I know he knows, because he sits on the government operations committee—that performance pay is based on individual performance—HR, management, that kind of thing—whereas it's departmental results, which I know Mr. McCauley enjoys perusing regularly, that provide outcomes.

When we look at something, Auditor General Hogan, like the fact that we started out in 2015-16 with 100 water advisories and now we're down to 31, I believe, is that the kind of outcome we're looking for?

Ms. Karen Hogan: Well, I think in that respect the report focused on long-term drinking water advisories, and the commitment to lift all of them had not been reached.

More broadly, the important statement there was that a long-term solution had not been reached. There are so many short-term drinking water advisories that fall just short of the year mark that are repeated over and over again. Until you have given capacity to communities to help manage their own water treatment plants and you have found a long-term sustainable solution, lifting half of long-term drinking water advisories is progress but not the outcome. Every Canadian deserves safe drinking water.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: But progress is where we want to be.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Thank you.

We will now move to our third round, starting with Mr. McCauley for five minutes.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thanks, Madam Chair.

To address your comment, Mrs. Shanahan, I don't think any spin you put on this can justify bonus payouts for such miserable results, period. Not a penny of it is justified.

Paragraph 8.17 of the AG's report talks about 112 infrastructure projects that are identified but not funded due to insufficient funding. I have to say that I find it extremely odd that this government has \$150 million to pay Elon Musk to subsidize wealthy people to buy electric cars when we have insufficient money for the infrastructure. I almost think that perhaps you should put a charging station as part of the infrastructure to get this government to react.

How much cost in emergency relief is projected because of the underfunded, and therefore not completed, mitigation projects?

Ms. Gina Wilson: I'm sorry. If I could better understand the question you're asking—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I'll repeat it. There are 112 infrastructure projects identified but not funded due to insufficient funding. How much in emergency relief cost is projected because of the underfunded, and therefore not completed, mitigation projects?

Ms. Gina Wilson: You'd like an extrapolation of that.

Ms. Gina Wilson: I don't know if there actually has been an analysis done looking at—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Has an analysis been done?

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Article 6.50 in the 2013 report states that your department should be doing that analysis of what the costs are. It just goes to a continual—

Ms. Gina Wilson: Would you like an analysis?

Mr. Kelly McCauley: That was nine years ago, and it still has not even been started.

You talked about a lack of funding. Are you aware of any projects that have gone to the Treasury Board Secretariat for this infrastructure and been turned down?

Ms. Gina Wilson: Individual projects do not go to Treasury Board specifically. We go to—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: So you've never had funding turned down by the Treasury Board for any infrastructure projects.

Ms. Gina Wilson: Treasury Board actually would operate on the basis of a broader ask around infrastructure—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Have you ever had a broader ask around infrastructure turned down or reduced by Treasury Board?

Ms. Gina Wilson: No.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Okay.

I'm curious. How can we be saying in this department that we're underfunded, but the department's never been turned down for funding requests by the Treasury Board?

Ms. Gina Wilson: The actual process, Madam Chair, is that you actually get policy approval of an initiative, and then Treasury Board—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Where's the problem? We know that there's a lack of funding. We know that the Treasury Board has never turned down any funding requests. Is it just a lack of political will to put a project together?

You've stated that you don't have the funding and that you want more funding. Who's not asking for it? What's the issue?

Ms. Gina Wilson: Well, sir, we are asking for it. It's not a matter of not asking for it. I'm not sure if you're clear on how—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Was that incorrect earlier when you said that you did not have enough funding or that you had insufficient funding?

• (1410)

Ms. Gina Wilson: I think you're incorrect, because you're actually asking what we have.... The process is not being understood here, is what I'm saying.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: If 112 identified infrastructure projects have not received funding, why have they not received that funding?

Ms. Gina Wilson: If you'd like me to explain how the process works, I'd be happy to do so—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: No, I'm not asking about the process.

Ms. Gina Wilson: —because the question doesn't align with the process.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Ms. Wilson, 112 identified projects have not received funding. Has the department asked for the funding for those?

Ms. Gina Wilson: We do not go to Treasury Board with every individual project. That is not how the process works.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Has the dollar amount been put together in a bucket, so to speak, and put forward for funding? How are we not getting the funding?

Ms. Gina Wilson: Yes, in fact we are putting those numbers together for an actual fulsome costing of all infrastructure projects.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: What's the funding cost for those 112 outstanding ones?

Ms. Gina Wilson: We don't have the details of that yet. We're just calculating those. We will be issuing a "what we heard" report on infrastructure consultation.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: How old are those 112 projects?

Ms. Gina Wilson: I don't have the details of—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Are they new? Are they several years old, like we've seen with some of the other issues?

Ms. Gina Wilson: I would ask Joanne and Kenza if they know the details of all 112 projects.

Is it in there?

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Would you be able to get back to us in the committee?

Ms. Gina Wilson: It's in there.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Okay.

Section 8.34 talks about, again, an incredible amount of mitigation projects waiting for funding eligibility. I guess some of these have been known since 2013. To quote the AG, "As a result...communities are likely to continue to experience emergencies that could be prevented or mitigated by building the infrastructure."

Again, I have to go back: What is the cost of not funding this infrastructure? I think it was identified that we're paying three dollars for cleanup or repair for every dollar we could have been spending on mitigation to prevent this. Nine years ago, the AG at the time suggested that we should be performing this analysis.

Do we know how much we're going to be spending because we haven't been doing these infrastructure projects?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): The answer will have to wait for the next round.

Thank you.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): We will move on to Mr. Gaheer for five minutes, please.

Thank you.

Mr. Iqwinder Gaheer (Mississauga—Malton, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for making time for the committee.

My questions are for Indigenous Services Canada, and the deputy minister in particular.

The OAG noted that the department had done a gender-based analysis plus, which revealed that indigenous elders, women and youth were more likely to be negatively affected by emergencies.

I'm not entirely aware whether the department factors in these considerations when planning for emergency services. I'm wondering, how does the department plan to incorporate its gender-based analysis plus into its emergency services planning?

Ms. Valerie Gideon: Sure, I can do this one. I'm actually the GBA+ champion for Indigenous Services Canada, so thank you so much for the question.

We have a community of practice within the department of all sectors and have focal points specific to GBA+. We also have a core team of individuals who have the strong expertise to be able to support the guidance in terms of the analysis.

Every time we do either a budget submission or a Treasury Board submission, our departmental results report or any aspect of our reporting, we ensure that there is an intersectional analysis conducted with respect to the level of risk and what we are doing specifically in terms of mitigation. That would also include any policy submission to cabinet.

Mr. Iqwinder Gaheer: Great. Thank you.

To the deputy minister, I'm new to this committee. I'm just subbing in. I notice that you're from, and your professional career started in, an indigenous community. How has your upbringing and connection to the land influenced your view on emergency management and the need for that transformation?

Ms. Gina Wilson: I wasn't expecting that question, but it should be an easy one to answer.

Yes, I grew up in the Kitigan Zibi first nation. I lived there. I went to school there.

I would say that lived experience, actually for both Valerie and me, is very much part of the work that we do. I worked in the community for many years. I worked on community development initiatives, a crisis shelter and an addictions treatment centre. I ran the health and social services program in Kitigan Zibi. I certainly learned a lot. My hat is off to all people who work in community, because it is the toughest job I've ever had.

Mr. Iqwinder Gaheer: What are some of the recent successes the department has had in advancing emergency management services? Do you have a number in terms of how much money has been spent in the last 10 years or so on this particular issue?

● (1415)

Ms. Gina Wilson: You broke up there for a moment, but I believe you're looking for some expenditure results.

Perhaps I'll ask Joanne or Kenza if they want to take that.

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: In terms of success stories, I think we have spoken about Kashechewan and the on-the-land initiative. That has certainly been one of them.

I think the work that we are also doing in terms of multilateral agreements is critical in terms of having first nations as full and equal partners around emergency management tables.

We've also done a great amount of work in British Columbia, for example, where we have provided a significant amount of funding to the First Nations' Emergency Services Society. These are first nation partners who are actively working on the ground to deliver emergency services, including FireSmart and a number of other prevention projects.

We've also done a great deal of non-structural mitigation, so outside of the infrastructure area. We can certainly get back to the previous question around the costs of those projects. Non-structural mitigation includes everything from capacity development to the emergency coordinators we've spoken of, on-the-ground things such as radio systems, and connection to provincial systems required for the safe evacuation of folks. There's lots happening on that front.

We met just this week with Peguis First Nation, which is a first nation that is also continually at risk. We have, there, provided a number of advance payments, rather than waiting for all of the claims to come in. I referred earlier to "recovery-based". That's what recovery-based means, in terms of the financial aspect: We get the claims in, and we pay the claims out, for those eligible expenses. We're now trying to increasingly move to providing advance payments to nations, as with Peguis, so that they are not put at risk from a financial perspective. We take on that risk. We work with them in terms of determining the eligibility of their claims. It lessens the financial risk for them, having to put out that money in the first place.

I will leave it there. I don't want to use up all of your time.

Thank you.

Mr. Iqwinder Gaheer: Thank you so much.

My final question is for the deputy minister. I find that a report can sometimes leave out certain nuances. Is there anything that you want to add that's not quite captured in the report itself?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Please give a very short answer.

Ms. Gina Wilson: I just want to recognize all the emergency management professionals from every province and territory, federally and in first nation communities for all the hard work they're doing.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Thank you.

Mr. Iqwinder Gaheer: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): We now move on to Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you very much.

I would like to point out that the answers to my colleague Mr. McCauley's questions are in the Auditor General's report. I'm surprised you don't have them.

It states that the department estimated the total cost of the 112 projects to be at least \$291 million. However, this amount is underestimated. In fact, when the item-by-item review was conducted, it was found that there were no costs associated with some projects. If you go to Treasury Board, I would advise you to improve the quality of these figures.

I'll go back to my earlier question. Right now, we see that the annual budget for the First Nations Infrastructure Fund is currently \$12 million per year. That would mean that it would take about 24 years for the department to fund its projects.

What are you going to do to ensure that it doesn't take 24 years, given that the number of emergencies is increasing?

Ms. Valerie Gideon: We currently have 94 projects, and we have estimated their total cost at \$358 million. We're continuing to get more detailed information on the projects to get a better understanding of what the needs are. This will continue to evolve.

As I mentioned earlier, we have to take into account the number of emergencies and recovery costs that are increasing every year. We're really going to have to keep evolving our estimates because things are changing rapidly.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Indeed, costs may increase, including labour costs. In fact, this is to be hoped for, because since the cost of inflation is very high, one wants wages to follow.

With regard to the timetables I was talking about earlier, you mentioned that you were going to make an action plan.

Can you commit that the action plan will include a clear timeline to address the Auditor General's requirements and recommendations?

Ms. Gina Wilson: I like your suggestion.

• (1420)

[English]

I'll take that on.

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Excellent. You can be sure I will ask again if there is no timeline to the action plan.

I have another question for you about first nations. Of the 13 communities that had problems, four of them did not apply for funding.

Why were you not in contact with these communities? How can you explain that the most affected communities were not contacted and assisted in completing their funding application?

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Give a short answer, please.

[Translation]

Ms. Valerie Gideon: I wouldn't say that we did not communicate with these communities. It's related to the fact that they haven't submitted their application. As Joanne mentioned earlier, we will continue to be more proactive. We have some funding for community capacity building. In addition, emergency management is also part of the coordinators' role.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): We have Mr. Desjarlais for two and a half minutes, please.

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

I recognize the short time, so I would like to offer some quick questions, and I hope for some quick responses.

In relation to the first nation infrastructure fund, which I understand the department has until March 2024, under that dedicated stream, there is an annual budget of \$12 million to fund structural mitigation projects. Short of what Mr. McCauley was saying in relation to the Treasury Board, is that enough funding to ensure that projects that are requested on behalf of the ministry are funded?

Ms. Gina Wilson: Joanne, can you explain the first nation infrastructure program and some of the details?

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: You are correct. The funding that we have available specifically for structural mitigation is \$12 million a year. We spend 100% of that funding. As Associate Deputy Minister Gideon mentioned, the cost that we have estimated currently for the 94 unfunded structural mitigation project proposals is \$358 million.

We seek to leverage investment opportunities, not only internally but with other partners. The deputy mentioned Infrastructure Canada. We work with all partners who can bring those types of funding proposals forward. Within [Technical difficulty—Editor] our own operations, as we work with nations and as they prioritize their infrastructure needs, we work with them to align those resources as well as we can, depending on the priorities of the first nation.

Thank you.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Let me be clear. It was said that there were funding capacity issues. You're saying that there's a need for \$358 million. The question that's important, and it relates to my first question, is in relation to accountability.

If it's not the Treasury Board, are you making the request for finances to achieve this target to the minister?

Ms. Gina Wilson: Yes.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Has the minister responded to your request for increased finances?

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Do you believe that there will be an increase beyond \$12 million to this fund?

Ms. Gina Wilson: She's very supportive.

Ms. Gina Wilson: It is up to Parliament to appropriate those dollars to us. We'll gladly take them.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Do you think it would be anywhere near the actual need of \$358 million?

Ms. Gina Wilson: I can't say.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: You're not sure.

Ms. Gina Wilson: I don't know what those—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: How much did you request of the minister?

Ms. Gina Wilson: No, no. I'm not going to go there.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: You don't know how much you requested.

Ms. Gina Wilson: For the \$12 million.... You're asking me—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Your assistant deputy minister said there was \$358 million in needs requested to your minister on behalf of first nations partners. You also said that first nation partnerships are really important to the ministry and that you act on behalf of those requests.

Regarding the \$358 million, did you request that amount from the minister?

Ms. Gina Wilson: Yes.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Thank you.

Now we'll move on to Mr. Vidal for five minutes.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm going to follow up and I'm going to throw my accountant's hat back on for a little while. This is kind of fun. I don't get to do this very often at INAN.

I'm going to go back to this projects thing, because I think we need to drill into that a bit further. In the report on page 9, it talks about April 2022. There was a \$291-million funding gap. Ms. Gideon just talked about that number now being identified as \$358 million. I think I'm comparing the numbers correctly.

According to Public Safety Canada in their 2019 "Emergency Management Strategy for Canada", for every \$1 invested in preparedness and mitigation, \$6 could be saved in emergency response and recovery. I'll do some simple math on the back of a napkin. If we invested in these 112 projects, or whatever that number is up to in projects now, since April 2022, that would create \$2.148 billion that would be available to invest in other areas. That could go to housing. That could go to schools. That could go to mental health. It seems like a pretty good return on investment to me.

Does that make sense? Let's get up front and get ahead of this, and keep \$2 billion in the coffers to invest in other things. Does that make sense to you?

• (1425)

Ms. Gina Wilson: It makes sense, and I'm open to all suggestions around alternative modes of financing and calculations. I will reread the transcript very closely to make sure I understand the math you're putting forward, and I will discuss it with the team. At first blush, it makes a lot of sense.

Mr. Gary Vidal: It's simply \$358 million times six, based on the Auditor General's numbers in the report. I don't think that's hard. You talked about needing more resources. There's a source of resources. There's \$2 billion, so let's consider that.

Deputy Minister, you talked about actively pursuing agreements with communities, or these multilateral agreements. However, the Auditor General's report says that in budget 2019, \$1.4 million was directed over three years to invest in these multilateral agreements. As of April 2022, no agreements have been signed.

In your opening comments, you talked about one.... I'm sorry. I get that everybody likes to play the language games. You talked about a tripartite memorandum, but it's a memo of understanding. I've been around long enough to know that there's a difference between a memo of understanding and an agreement. I've been around northern Saskatchewan. I've been with my mayor's hat on to many memo of understanding signings.

Of that \$1.4 million, \$790,000 has been invested in this pursuit of agreement. What did we spend the \$790,000 on if we have zero agreements today? Did we spend \$790,000 on one memo of understanding?

Ms. Gina Wilson: Regardless of whether an agreement is put in place or not, there is active work going on to build capacity as part of those negotiations. For instance, a lot of emphasis is put on emergency management plans, just as it is on the outcome documents that are signed. However, make no mistake, we want them too, but there's also a lot of value when first nation communities are part of that planning. The process of developing them is just as important as the outcome.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Fair enough. I totally get that.

Is there a number of agreements that we have that are really close to being signed, then? We've spent more than half our money on this project. Are we going to come back and say that we need another few million dollars? Are we close on any of them at least? We have zero signed. Are we close on any?

Ms. Gina Wilson: Without giving away anything on other parties in the sense of negotiations and where we're at, I know, for instance, that I'm actively involved in discussions with British Columbia and Ontario.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Are we close?

Ms. Gina Wilson: That says to me that we're closer, if I'm directly involved.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you.

I'm going to get one more quick question in here before the chair cuts me off.

You commented that even if there weren't agreements, we would still work with communities. Fair enough, I get that. I would suggest to you that if you're working with communities, provincial people, municipal governments, first nations and the federal government and you don't have an agreement in place then I think we're reactive and not proactive. I think we're going to be very slow to react to an emergency if we have to start pulling that together all of a sudden. I would argue that's a much slower way to get the work done.

Please prove me wrong. Do you have a response that would prove me wrong?

Ms. Gina Wilson: I want to be very clear, if I have time, on this point.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Could you give us a short answer, please?

Ms. Gina Wilson: Regardless of an agreement being put in place—bilateral, multilateral or first nation—all first nation communities have been receiving and will continue to receive the help they need to protect their people and infrastructure during an emergency. Provinces and territories continue to protect all citizens in their areas.

I wanted to make sure that was very clear. Not having an agreement in place does not mean that the services are not there, particularly for response.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Thank you, Ms. Wilson.

We'll move to Ms. Bradford, for five minutes.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Thank you, Madam Chair.

It's been a very impassioned session this afternoon. I think it's because we all realize the seriousness of the situation and we're frustrated with the chronic lack of progress. I think all of us around the table—all parties and those of us virtually—really want to see substantial progress made. It's because we care so much about this community.

I'm looking again at the Kashechewan situation. I want to follow along Mr. Kram's line of questioning.

This poor community has gone through evacuations. Some have been precautionary and some have been after they've been flooded over and over again. We can only imagine how disruptive that is. Now you have this situation in which you temporarily move them to higher ground, onto their traditional lands. We know the definition of insanity is continuing to do the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.

Why is this only temporary? Is there any consultation with the community to see if they would like to be permanently relocated on their traditional lands that are at higher elevation? Then they could maybe get through a year without being disrupted and uprooted.

• (1430)

Ms. Gina Wilson: Joanne?

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: That is a discussion that is led by the first nation. It's a decision that the first nation would need to make. We would never impose that on a nation.

It's a very active discussion. It has been a very active discussion in that community for many years.

I wouldn't qualify it as temporary, necessarily. The two years of on-the-land initiatives have been something that the community has requested. If they request it again this year and the risk continues to be high, then we would absolutely support them in undertaking that initiative.

Thank you.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Do you have any sense of how they might be trying to come together as a community to reach a decision? Are they thinking of doing a referendum on it?

You said they've been debating it for many years. I agree that it's their decision. You'd think they might want to make a decision so they could move forward.

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: We've certainly supported them in terms of providing space and time for them to have some of those discussions. We've provided assistance to them in terms of some of the research that they might want to undertake, or those types of activities.

Again, it's really for the first nation to determine.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: I agree. I know these things are really hard. It's just unfortunate to see them go through that same disruption over and over again. I've had a few flooded basements in my life, and that was minor compared to this.

What resources could help regional offices to assist them to establish or upgrade their regional plans? Who could answer that for us? Would that be the deputy minister?

Ms. Gina Wilson: We do have many regional plans in place. That's if you're referring to the plans and not the agreements.

Joanne, I'll turn to you again. You're regional operations. You know the regions. You'll probably answer better than I would.

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: Absolutely, we are working actively with our regional offices. As Associate Deputy Minister Gideon mentioned, with the new indigenous services department, we have brought the health organization and the former Indian and Northern Affairs offices into one active discussion. We are working to ensure those plans are integrated from those organizations. We are ensuring there is collaboration. We are introducing some standard templates, those types of things, to make sure we have the information that's required to ensure they have the resources and they're able to support communities.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Would you say that the work of the OAG report aligns with the work already under way at the ISC? Could you provide us with some examples?

Again, I'm getting back to Ms. Wilson on that.

Ms. Gina Wilson: I actually did refer to that in my opening remarks. I do believe the seven recommendations do align with a lot of the work that we are undertaking. I actually find it quite helpful, particularly in the area of risk. I believe we have a better understanding of what the Auditor General is holding us to when it comes to a comprehensive and detailed risk register. When we have these conversations, the Auditor General is very open in terms of going back and forth, talking to us and giving us some understanding of the expectations. I certainly have found that very helpful.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Are the seven recommendations ranked in order of importance? Are they just random, or are all seven equally important, in your opinion?

Ms. Karen Hogan: Obviously, we think that all seven should be implemented. The time frame and what alignment works best for the department is up to the deputy minister, but all should be addressed, absolutely.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Again, getting back to Ms. Wilson, was there anything you would have liked to see in the report that you feel should be there but wasn't covered?

• (1435)

Ms. Gina Wilson: Well, for instance, I think the focus on first nation voices as full and equal partners, as well as other services providers.... To be very clear, ISC is not the sole service provider for emergency management services. Not to criticize the report, but I'm not sure if it comes across very clearly that we do not do direct delivery. The rationale behind that implies that we should be the delivery agent. I would advise that that would not be a good way to go, and probably not acceptable to first nations, which want to be self-determining in that respect.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Thank you.

We'll now move to Mr. Kram, for five minutes.

Mr. Michael Kram: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you again to the witnesses for being here.

I would like to follow up regarding the Kashechewan First Nation. The Auditor General's report was covered on the news outlet TBnewswatch.com last week. The title of the article is "Hajdu accepts conclusions of AG report on First Nations emergency management". The article reads, "and until a federal commitment to help the community move permanently to higher ground becomes a reality."

The article implies that the first nation is waiting on a federal commitment to relocate it. Can the witnesses elaborate? Have you received an application from the Kashechewan First Nation?

Ms. Gina Wilson: No, we haven't, and I'll turn back to Joanne to respond. It's a very complex situation for both Kashechewan and Fort Albany first nations, in terms of making this really important decision.

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: As I said, it has been an ongoing discussion among community members and with us over a number of years. Certainly, there was a previous comment that one would think there would be community ratification. They have done that before, in terms of looking at the options. There is no unanimity in terms of what the longer-term goal would be. Of course, relocating an entire community the size of Kashechewan is not a quick, simple, or inexpensive proposition.

In terms of looking at what planning would be necessary—should it be the community's confirmed desire to move to higher ground, and if it made that decision—there would need to be significant planning. There would need to be a significant funding envelope identified, which does not currently exist for that type of relocation. Certainly, as I said before, it is the lead of the first nation to determine its desire in that space.

Mr. Michael Kram: Okay, but we just freed up \$8 million a year, two years ago, for a community of 1,800 persons. Where are these complexities? What's the holdup?

That seems like a pretty straightforward thing to do to just relocate them to the same grounds that they are relocated to every year already. What seems to be the holdup?

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: Well, I would say that the evacuation is not to a fully developed community. The community of Kashechewan has infrastructure, schools, housing and those types of things. The evacuation to higher land is to a camp that we bring in. We funded tents—not tents in the sense of a camping tent, but hard-walled tents—and infrastructure that is temporary and usable for spring.

It is not a permanent encampment piece that we have developed up there. It's not another community that they've gone to in order to evacuate, as they would to a community like Thunder Bay, for example. It is a temporary place for them to evacuate to for a specified amount of time. It's not a new community.

If they were to relocate permanently, that's part of the planning that would have to take place around the broader infrastructure: water treatment plants, schools, health services and all those types of things that don't exist permanently on the land that is used for the back-to-the-land evacuation.

Thanks.

• (1440)

Mr. Michael Kram: When was the last time anyone from the department talked with the Kashechewan First Nation about their plans?

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: I know there have been ongoing discussions. I don't have a date for you, but we can certainly come back to you with a date. I would say that it would be within the last few months.

Mr. Michael Kram: Yes, if you could provide that date for the committee, that would be helpful.

Can you walk the committee through what the process would be in terms of relocating to higher ground? Do you have to fill out a form? Do you have to fill out a lengthy form? It seems like it should be simpler for a community of 1,800 persons that was forcibly relocated 65 years ago.

Ms. Gina Wilson: There's no form. There's no application or proposal or process. This happens very infrequently, and I would say that it is extremely complex to do because, first of all, as Joanne said, the community needs to make a decision and you have different views within the community on where to go, if they go, when they go and how they go. All of these elements need to be determined within the community.

I would say that our role would be to support that process, to be part of, as Joanne said, funding research—whatever is required. That has been the role of Indigenous Services. CIRNAC would be involved in that, too, because there would be land issues and so on. All that is to say, again, that it's not an application. It's not an easy process. It's an extremely complex one.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Thank you.

We now move to Mrs. Shanahan for five minutes.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Chair, I was trying to catch the eye of my colleague Mr. Desjarlais to see if he would like to share my time. That's for two and a half minutes.

This is a very important subject, and I think we all want to see progress. I am hearing some very good things in this room today: There seems to be all-party support that there needs to be more investment in this issue. Nobody wants to be penny-wise and pound foolish, if I can use that old saying. The money has to be put up front, and we'll reap the benefits later on.

Deputy Minister, I think you, in answer to a question, were talking about how nobody wants to see ISC as the delivery agent. Can you talk a bit more about that?

Ms. Gina Wilson: I guess one of the things Valerie Gideon mentioned was that Indigenous Services Canada is working hard towards service transfer, which means first nations running many of the services, programs and operations that we currently undertake.

Gone are the days when ISC will go into communities and deliver programs and services. Those days have gone way past. First nations would not appreciate that whatsoever—first nations that want to move to self-determination and take on control. But they want to be able to take on programs that are working, programs that are funded well and programs that will actually make a difference. The rationale that we should be the sole delivery agent would just not be acceptable.

On that basis, I would say that first nations are actively working with us in all parts of the country to look at taking on services and programs and to look at new funding agreements that offer them more flexibility. I think the work is very slow-moving. Personally, I would love to see things move a lot more quickly, but we move at a pace that is comfortable for first nations, and that's where we're at.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: That is good to hear.

It's time to move over now to Mr. Desjarlais.

Thank you very much.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Mr. Desjarlais, go ahead, please.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: What's the remaining time?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): You have two minutes and 35 seconds, and then we'll add on your two and a half.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Okay, that's perfect. Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Mrs. Shanahan, for allowing me some additional time.

I want to thank all the members of the committee for what I think are very excellent questions. I think this is the kind of allyship that many people expect across the country for what I think is really important work, so thank you for that.

I want to pick up from the deputy minister's last comment, which I sympathize with. If we had infinite resources in this country, it would be my hope that we would address these issues. The issue is that we do, in fact, have enough resources, but we may not have the political will. That's the tough part I can't grapple with.

You mentioned time, so with the existing first nation infrastructure fund's annual budget, which is \$12 million, given the existing number of projects that are currently being asked of the department to fund, it would take approximately 24 years for the department to fund all of the existing projects you've reviewed. Those are just existing projects, not even accounting for the ones that are not even reviewed yet, which, in my province of Alberta, unfortunately, account for the highest number.

We point to a figure in exhibit 8.4. Alberta first nations have been getting projects submitted to the ministry for years and years, and they are not even being reviewed, not even being touched. It says that these are unreviewed applications and proposals under the fund. If we accounted for any of the unreviewed ones, we'd be seeing a wait time of 30 years. Under the existing funding formula of the first nation infrastructure program, it would take over a quarter of a century to just make sure that the existing projects that are being requested and reviewed would be funded. This is simply unacceptable, 25 years from now. We're talking near 2050, when we would hopefully see more work towards climate adaptation.

Unfortunately, we see that this is not the kind of fund that is equipped to deal with the emergencies that are facing first nations, certainly not in my province, where more than half of the applications go unreviewed every single day, and there seems to be a continued failure to make sure that there's a comprehensive plan, as my colleague Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné mentioned. It's imperative that we have full measurables.

I would also like to ask more specifically about the fund itself. When this fund and your work to advocate—let's call it—with the minister.... It's important for members of Parliament, like the members who are assembled today, to know that, when a ministry requests funding, parliamentarians know about it so that we can ensure that you get that funding. Having the minister and solely the minister responsible for declining the applications is simply unacceptable in Canada.

To the Auditor General's point of accountability, this is a tool that this committee needs. I think we got that today. I was very pleased to hear the deputy minister make mention of the fact that she had advocated for, at the very least, \$358 million of the existing first nation proposals, which one of our colleagues mentioned, with the minister directly. We know that fact, and that's an important fact for parliamentarians to recognize: that on the record the deputy minister has, in fact, stated that she asked the minister for \$358 million to ensure that these projects are fully funded, excluding the ones that are unreviewed.

Should we see accountability from this? I really do need to ask this question. Will that be enough to ensure that the existing projects are funded, as well as the projects that are still awaiting review? Is it sufficient for that?

• (1445)

Ms. Gina Wilson: I want to contextualize my answer by indicating that the first nation infrastructure fund, the capital facilities management program we have, funds infrastructure broadly for housing, school renos, water treatment plants, structural mitigation projects—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Clean water, for example—

Ms. Gina Wilson: —dikes, roads, bridges, etc.

What we need to do as part of our program and part of our operations is to work with first nation communities at the regional level or at the local level in order to make priority decisions of allocations for their communities.

Sometimes there aren't enough resources, I would say, to fund all of those projects at this point in time. If parliamentarians were going to allocate those resources to us, we would definitely be able to fund more projects.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: What's that number? How much money do you need from parliamentarians? You mentioned that you need money from the parliamentarians. How much can we give you?

Ms. Gina Wilson: This will come through the regular process of appropriating dollars to us, and I'm given a time limit here to answer, so I can't—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: We just need the number.

Ms. Gina Wilson: I can't come to you with a proposal, sir. I need to be able to go through the regular process—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Is it at least more than \$12 million? That's what you have now.

Ms. Gina Wilson: The amount of overall infrastructure dollars we would be seeking is definitely more than \$12 million.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you. That's good.

How much time do I have?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): You have two seconds.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much for that response, and thank you to my colleagues.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Now we move to Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, please, for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

I have a very direct question for the Auditor General.

How many people are concerned, in total, by the 112 projects on hold?

• (1450)

Ms. Karen Hogan: I apologize, but I don't have all these details. I can't estimate the number of people involved.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: When you did your audit, was this information available?

Ms. Karen Hogan: No, it wasn't. So we did not include it.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: You are saying that Indigenous Services Canada did not have information on how many people a project is helping. It was not clearly stated.

Ms. Karen Hogan: My colleague who has worked on this confirms that it was not.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Is not knowing how many people are affected by a project not a problem?

[English]

Mr. Glenn Wheeler (Principal, Office of the Auditor General): Madam Chair, we focused on the actual projects that were listed, as opposed to how many individuals were impacted by each of those projects. That's not the way the data is laid out, so that information was not available in the data—

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: This is a management audit, though, isn't it?

Ms. Karen Hogan: Yes. If we knew how many people live in a community, I suppose it would be easy to know how many people a project is helping. On the other hand, if a project was only targeting five houses, we would need to know how many people live there, and whether they make up the whole community. We did not try to get these figures. We limited ourselves to showing how many projects had not yet been assessed or received funding.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: It would be important and relevant to our work to know how many people are targeted by the projects. We need to know whether the measures are effective. Is \$358 million helping enough people? Is it enough or is it too little? That would give us a better perspective.

Ms. Karen Hogan: The important thing is that the projects that are set up help all the people in the community as well as the generations that follow. I don't know if it's that important to know these numbers. The goal, I think, is to limit future negative impacts on the community.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Some communities may have, for example, 1,800 people, while others have 30,000.

Ms. Karen Hogan: A community of 1,000 people might be located in an area where there is a lot of flooding. This community should be helped first, even if it is small.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Exactly. That was actually my second question.

Ms. Karen Hogan: It is this risk that we would like to see assessed.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: I fully agree, however—

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: I'll finish my sentence.

There is a second thing I would like to see in the action plan, and that is the priority given to each of the projects. We agree that when it is a matter of life and death, priority will be given to the project that will solve the problem as soon as possible.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Thank you.

We now move on to Mr. Vidal for five minutes, please.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I can go ahead. I'm also going to claim the two seconds from Mr. Desjarlais.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): That's fine.

Mr. Gary Vidal: I thought I was done, but I'm going to just come back with a couple of other questions.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Do you want to go? Go ahead.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Mr. Vidal, will you be going and not Mr. McCauley?

Mr. Gary Vidal: Sure, I will.

I'm going to go back to where I started in the very beginning, with some comments around the quote from the minister in the House the other day. I want to get back to Auditor General Hogan, and then also to the deputy minister, on just a couple of thoughts on that quote.

The second part of the quote, which we never got to in my first round, was the end of that, which says, "we need to invest more in protection and in adaptation."

Just for clarity, I want to get the Auditor General's opinion. In fact, are we saying we need to invest more money or do we need to direct our investments in better ways? There is a clear distinction there between redirecting resources to the right places and adding new resources.

Ms. Karen Hogan: I'm not sure what the minister meant when she made that statement, but my observation would be that in a world where there are limited resources to be invested, being able to prioritize those most in need would be the first. When there are more resources available, then addressing all issues, absolutely, would be the ultimate goal. But you really do need to prioritize those most in need first.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Fair enough.

When we take some of the statistics or some of the facts you include in your report, for example the \$3.5 to \$1 or \$6 to \$1—I think you know what I mean in the context of those numbers, as you're very familiar with those—and the number I talked to you about before, freeing up \$2 billion that we could redirect somewhere else, I don't think it's always about more money. I think it's about money being better spent in the right places, where we can get a better return.

We talked about outcomes and results, and I guess that's kind of where I was going with that.

• (1455)

Ms. Karen Hogan: I'm absolutely in full agreement with you. Money is not the solution to every problem, but money does help build mitigation measures here to help reduce the potential spend on the recovery side.

I appreciated your calculation. The only caveat I'd offer up to that calculation is that it's "up to \$6". Not every dollar invested will result in a straight \$6.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Fair enough.

Ms. Karen Hogan: But I endorse the point and the spirit behind your calculation.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Put the money in the right places.

Ms. Karen Hogan: Put the money in the right places, to those who need it the most, yes.

Mr. Gary Vidal: That circles all the way back to the risk-based assessments and risk-based strategies, rather than proposal-based.

I always joke that in my vast experience, and being on these files for three whole years now, one of the frustrations is that we get stuck in these “here's how we do it” boxes. We don't think outside the boxes; we don't think of new and different ways. Part of that is the systems. Part of that is the systems we create within our bureaucracy, where we create spaces for people where they have to be safe and they can't make decisions out of...and I get that in large organizations. That's not even necessarily a criticism, but an observation.

I'm going to come back for a second to the context of how we spend the money, spending the money in the right places.

There was a PBO report that was released on May 18, 2022, and it talked a lot about the increase in spending in both ISC and CIRNAC, from 2015-16 all the way to 2022. It compared those to the results that were recorded in all the departmental results, and it did an analysis of all that.

I would look for your comment on this conclusion. It says:

The analysis conducted indicates that the increased spending did not result in a commensurate improvement in the ability of these organizations to achieve the goals that they had set for themselves.

It goes on with a bit of an explanation about how some of the targets and whatever get moved around, but in the very end it says we did not achieve these commensurate improvements based on that. In fact, it says, “Based on the qualitative review the ability to achieve the targets specified has declined.” If you go further into the report, it talks about spending increasing by 115% over those years, but the results achieved....

My colleague, Mr. McCauley, was talking about the challenge of people being held to account for their performance bonus, and the comeback was that that doesn't necessarily impact department results because it's personal goals and personal things. But if none of that is connected, if we don't connect the personal outcomes to the departmental results, where's the incentive to get it done? Where's the incentive to get the job done when it's personal results, not corporate results? We need to get outcomes.

Maybe, Deputy Minister, I'll let you respond to that, in the context of your department. Would you agree that we need to find a way to make sure we're getting better results by whatever processes are included in your department?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Give a short answer, please.

Ms. Gina Wilson: I agree. I'm an optimist and I believe in continuous improvement. I believe in working smarter, yes.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Thank you.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for coming and answering questions on an emotional and challenging issue. Thank you for that.

I'd also like to thank the committee for all your great questions.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Great job, Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Thank you very much.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: And you can thank the clerk.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Yes, I'd like to thank the clerk, our translators and our analysts.

Is the committee in agreement to adjourn the meeting?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): The meeting is adjourned.

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