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Chair: Mr. Peter Schiefke



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• (1535)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Peter Schiefke (Vaudreuil—Soulanges, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting No. 44 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities.

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(5) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, November 21, 2022, the committee is meeting to study the Supplementary Estimates (B) 2022-23.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House Order of Thursday, June 23, 2022.

[*English*]

Appearing before us today from 3:30 and 5:30 are the Honourable Omar Alghabra, Minister of Transport, as well as, from the Department of Transport, Michael Keenan, deputy minister; Ryan Pilgrim, chief financial officer and assistant deputy minister, corporate services; Stephanie Hébert, assistant deputy minister, programs; and Nicholas Robinson, associate assistant deputy minister, safety and security.

From 4:30 to 5:30, we will have in addition, from the Department of Transport, Serge Bijimine, assistant deputy minister, policy; and Vincent Robitaille, assistant deputy minister, high-frequency rail.

Minister, on behalf of all of the members, I would like to welcome you to our committee and turn it over to you for your opening remarks.

Hon. Omar Alghabra (Minister of Transport): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, colleagues. It's great to be back with you.

Thank you for inviting me here to speak about the supplementary estimates (B) for Transport Canada and other agencies and Crown corporations within the federal transport portfolio.

I am also pleased to introduce the officials who are here with me from Transport Canada: Michael Keenan, deputy minister; Ryan Pilgrim, assistant deputy minister, corporate services, and chief financial officer; Nicholas Robinson, associate assistant deputy minister, safety and security; and Stephanie Hébert, assistant deputy minister, programs.

Mr. Chair, in past appearances before this committee, I've talked about how the COVID-19 pandemic, extreme weather events and

Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine have caused global supply chain disruptions that affect our supply chain here at home. Our government understands the impact that these challenges can have on Canadians, including the rising costs of living.

I've also stressed that the safety and security of the transportation system is my highest priority.

[*Translation*]

That's why I was pleased to introduce Bill C-33, the Strengthening the Port System and Railway Safety in Canada Act.

[*English*]

It addresses both of these priorities.

Bill C-33 would strengthen our supply chain, make Canada's transportation system more competitive and ensure that its operations are safe, secure, efficient and reliable. I look forward to seeing the legislation progress, as it would keep essential goods flowing and make life more affordable for all Canadians.

I also recognize the need to keep people moving. You will notice the high-frequency rail project mentioned a number of times in the supplementary estimates for both Transport Canada and VIA Rail.

As outlined in budget 2022, after years of important work, the time has come for some big steps forward for this major project. The high-frequency rail project would see a new, dedicated intercity passenger rail network connecting Toronto, Peterborough, Ottawa, Montreal, Trois-Rivières and Québec City. It would allow for faster, more frequent and more reliable trains with better service to major hubs and new links to communities.

There are funds in the supplementary estimates to support the procurement process and to select a private development partner to co-develop the project with the Government of Canada. A collaborative public-private partnership will help to maximize the project's benefits for all Canadians.

A new VIA Rail subsidiary will serve as the project delivery office and will serve as the strong public sector counterpart to a private development partner.

The funding would also support important activities like work on the impact assessment process, indigenous consultations, development of socio-economic benefits, municipal and public engagement, access to railway infrastructure and rail safety updates. Funding in the supplementary estimates would also help with work to assess opportunities for improving passenger rail service in south-western Ontario.

[Translation]

HFR represents a major investment.

[English]

The HFR is the biggest investment in passenger rail in Canada in a generation. VIA Rail and its employees will continue to be key partners in this project, and are essential to its success and advancement.

We are also seeking funds in this year's supplementary estimates to improve rail transportation for remote indigenous communities in northern Manitoba. The objective is to maintain safe, reliable, viable and sustainable transportation that meets the specific needs of communities between The Pas and Pukatawagan, supporting social and economic development. Many of these communities are only accessible by rail. They need this service to access economic opportunities and essential goods and services, including health care.

There's also a request in supplementary estimates (B) to support the extension of the oceans protection plan, as outlined in budget 2022.

[Translation]

The Oceans Protection Plan is the largest investment Canada has ever made to protect our oceans and coasts.

[English]

The new funding requested would further protect our coastlines and waterways in four critical areas: continuing efforts to deliver a world-leading marine safety system, including improving how Canada responds to marine emergencies; increasing protection for marine species and ecosystems; creating stronger partnerships with indigenous and coastal communities; and strengthening marine research and science.

This work would continue to help safeguard our oceans and coastlines, while enabling supply chain resilience and supporting economic growth. By renewing and expanding the plan, we are committing to build on the progress we have made since its launch in 2016.

Finally, I also want to mention our plan to accelerate the development of light, medium, and heavy-duty zero-emission vehicles, as detailed in budget 2022. This will be implemented through existing grant programming.

Canadians have made it clear. They want clear air, good jobs, and lower costs. By making zero-emission vehicles more affordable, we are helping to reduce pollution, create more well-paying jobs, and build a cleaner world for generations to come.

• (1540)

[Translation]

I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

[English]

Thank you.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you for your opening remarks, Minister.

[English]

We will begin our line of questioning today with Mr. Strahl, for six minutes.

Mr. Mark Strahl (Chilliwack—Hope, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister, for being here today.

In your opening remarks you spoke about the need to keep people moving. Obviously, this summer we saw chaos at our airports, which was, I would say, made worse by COVID-19. As has been described to us here at the committee, we were the first to impose COVID-19 restrictions and the last to relieve them. The airlines certainly saw that with their employees. That uncertainty caused many folks to seek other lines of work.

We saw \$54 million spent on the ArriveCAN app, which just caused more delays in our customs halls. The sum of \$411 million was spent on COVID-19 airport testing in the last year, while other countries had removed that requirement. Not only was it inefficient, it was also expensive, layering on costs to Canadian taxpayers to create airport chaos. We've seen Pearson airport in Toronto ranked as the fifth worst airport in the world in terms of customer experience.

I note that you have brought together the industries, airports and airlines, etc., to talk about it. At those meetings, did you talk about how you are going to improve the things that are under the control of the federal government, like security lineups and customs hall lineups?

Every airport that was evaluated under this review dealt with those same things. Why did our airports fare so poorly, and what are you doing, without blaming it on the airlines or global factors, to ensure that the things that are under the control of the Government of Canada are not a fiasco again this winter as they were in the summer? I want to hear about CATSA and CBSA.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

There are so many questions in that question, but I do appreciate the overall theme of your question.

The fact of the matter is that COVID-19 has been an extraordinary period when governments around the world, provincial governments, municipal governments, including our federal government, did whatever we could to protect the health and safety of Canadians. That included some extraordinary measures that had to be put in place to protect the health and safety of Canadians. Indeed, the air sector has suffered significantly because of the pandemic.

The good news is that we're seeing the air sector recover and recover faster than any of us expected, which is great news. Of course, that brought some challenges and optimism.

As you mentioned last week, I hosted a summit that included 50 industry leaders, including CEOs of airports and airlines and heads of CATSA, Nav Canada, CBSA, provincial governments and other governmental agencies, including the Canadian Transportation Agency.

We all agreed that there are some lessons learned from that period. We need to focus on areas of collaboration, including how we can modernize security screening and how we can support the air sector.

Let me close, Mr. Chair, by saying that during that period of COVID, we provided a total package of \$11 billion to the sector to help it recover. Now, there are some lessons learned. We are committed, together, to collaborate and work around them, including governmental agencies, so that we can make sure that the unfortunate and unacceptable frustrations that took place last summer never happen again.

• (1545)

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you, Minister.

I'd like to go now to supply chain reliability and predictability, which you talked about. I think they're critical here. We'll have time to discuss whether Bill C-33 actually addresses those things. We'll save that for your next meeting here.

I do want to talk about the global context, and the national supply chain task force addressed this. Any time that the reliability and predictability of our supply chain is threatened, it impacts the Canadian economy; it impacts, for months, the reliability and efficiency of our system. By my count, you have 18 collective agreements expiring on December 31 that are in the transport-federal sphere. Many of them relate to the rail sector.

I haven't seen anything that indicates that the government is taking this seriously. Certainly, in the U.S., we've seen very aggressive actions taken by President Biden and Congress. What are we doing to ensure that our system is reliable as we see all of these labour agreements coming to an end in just a few weeks' time?

The Chair: Give a 30-second response, please, Minister.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Oh, oh!

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to my colleague for that question.

Look, the supply chain is extremely important. That's why we established a task force. That's why my colleagues and I are working

on a comprehensive strategy to build on all the work that has been done so far.

To address exactly your question, we believe strongly that the best way to maintain the resilience of the supply chain is to let the collective bargaining agreement take its course. That is the best way to ensure that both union workers and employers are on the same page, that there's contentment with the outcome.

So far, we've had success. CP found a way to resolve its issues. UPS found a way to resolve its issues. VIA Rail found a way to resolve its issues. We believe that the best way to maintain a reliable supply chain is to enable and support the collective bargaining agreement.

We keep monitoring the situation. We support both sides as they are at the negotiating table by offering mediators, by offering encouragement. Again, ultimately, the collective bargaining agreement is the best way to preserve the resilience of our supply chains.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Next we have Mr. Rogers.

Mr. Rogers, the floor is yours. You have six minutes.

Mr. Churence Rogers (Bonavista—Burin—Trinity, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Minister, and to the officials here with you today.

When I reviewed your supplementary estimates, of course, the first thing I saw was about Marine Atlantic. Of course, being from Newfoundland and Labrador, I have no choice but to start with that question.

I know some good things are happening with the Marine Atlantic ferry service. For example, in 2024, we have a new ferry that's supposed to arrive. We have a new administration building planned for Port aux Basques. Some good things are happening.

I want you to comment on the proposed new funding for Marine Atlantic. How many capital projects will this support, and how will they help Marine Atlantic deliver on its mandate? Maybe you can give me some examples of that.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to my colleague, Mr. Rogers, for his question and his advocacy.

He and many of his Newfoundland colleagues keep reminding me—not that I need to be reminded—of the importance of Marine Atlantic. Our government is committed to continuing to work with Marine Atlantic on delivering the service that Canadians and Newfoundlanders expect of it.

Through the supplementary estimates, Marine Atlantic Inc. is seeking access to \$4.7 million. It's sourced from funding that lapsed last year and has been brought forward to 2022-23 through a re-profile request. This funding could not be spent last year, due to a variety of projects being delayed by supply chain and scheduling issues.

You asked me about a specific example of what these projects include. They include \$1.9 million allocated to shore-based projects, such as the replacement of the Port aux Basques terminal roof, the re-cladding of one of the fuel tanks, repairs to the loading ramp and some security enhancement. There is \$1.7 million associated with the required vessel maintenance. There is \$1.1 million allocated to the purchase of electric vehicles that were ordered in 2021-22, but will not be delivered until the end of 2022-23.

The funding is required to meet legal obligations of signed contracts and the maintenance required to keep Marine Atlantic's physical infrastructure in working condition. This funding will allow Marine Atlantic to continue to meet its mandate of providing Canadians with the essential service they deserve.

• (1550)

Mr. Churence Rogers: Thank you, Minister.

It's great to see you paying so much attention to that service. It's vitally important for our province and for the province of Nova Scotia, of course, as there are connections there.

Minister, can you elaborate on how the new funding for the oceans protection plan will help create partnerships with indigenous groups and coastal communities?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thanks to my colleague.

The oceans protection plan has been a huge success since its introduction in 2016. The Government of Canada is committed to continuing to work meaningfully with first nations, Inuit, Métis and coastal communities in delivering the oceans protection plan and respecting the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act.

The funding will advance this work and offer new opportunities for indigenous peoples and coastal communities to have a more meaningful role in emergency response in waterway management; partner in decision-making; and train in marine safety, search and rescue missions, environmental monitoring, and emergency spill response.

Recently, I announced an investment of \$50 million to directly support indigenous partnership in the OPP. This will provide much-needed capacity funding to support meaningful participation of indigenous communities and organizations in the oceans protection plan initiative.

Mr. Churence Rogers: Thank you, Minister.

I remember being in B.C. about three years ago. We were talking to some of the groups there. They were talking about the importance of that funding for the training program. It's great to see it happening.

Minister, can you provide more details on how the funding in the supplementary estimates will improve how Canada responds to marine emergencies, like you just referenced? Will this be targeted for the west coast specifically or will it help other coastlines and waterways as well?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Chair, the oceans protection plan funding will improve how Canada responds to marine emergencies by amending the Canada Shipping Act to enable the proactive management of marine emergencies and to cover more types of pollution, as committed in the budget of 2022. It will help with developing a coordinated national pollution response system, regardless of location or type of goods spilled. It will move forward with a sustainable hazardous and noxious substance preparedness and response framework to address marine pollution in Canada, while ensuring the health and safety of response for personnel and the public. It will also help with augmenting the national aerial surveillance program.

Funding to partners and departments for the OPP also supports marine emergency response through the purchase of new pollution response vessels, communication tools and equipment, especially for the Arctic; the development of a national network of trained emergency response that includes multiple levels of government, indigenous peoples and coastal communities; scientific enhancement to protect the environment during the cleanup and recovery of a spill; and the growth of the Canadian Coast Guard Auxiliary.

Again, I'll assure you it is from coast to coast to coast.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Rogers.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval (Pierre-Boucher—Les Patriotes—Verchères, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being with us today, Minister. We appreciate your taking the time to appear before the committee to answer our questions.

Of course, you know that in the committee, we do studies and produce reports. We have produced a report on railway safety, one of the recommendations being that the government establish a fund to support feasibility studies on developing and relocating rail lines from urban areas. I wondered whether you were planning to implement that recommendation.

• (1555)

[English]

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to my colleague for your question.

I am grateful for the work the committee has done on rail safety. I received the report with great interest and I think we even submitted a response to it. There were a lot of good ideas. We agree with the objectives that you set out, and we are looking at how some if not all of those recommendations can be implemented, or how we can partner with other departments and other governments to ensure that we advance the recommendations the committee had come up with.

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you for your answer.

In my riding, there are rail lines running through the towns of Boucherville, Verchères, Varennes and Contrecoeur from one end to the other. I am going to speak to you about Boucherville, more specifically, which has done a pre-feasibility study of the potential relocation of the rail line. However, they would like to move forward and do a complete feasibility study. Implementing the recommendation made by the committee is very important to them, because they are looking for funding to carry out the study.

First, I would like to know whether you have heard about this project. Second, what kind of support could the federal government provide for moving forward with this?

[English]

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Chair, our government has invested a historic number of dollars in building rail infrastructure around the country, in partnering with provincial governments and municipal governments, and in building public transit including rail. We are always interested in partnering with provincial governments. As you may know, inner city public transit is the jurisdiction of the province.

If the province has an interest in partnering with the federal government, we would be more than willing to look at the application and figure out how we can partner to advance it, but rest assured that we're always looking for projects that will advance public transit, including, certainly, rail transit.

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: In this case, we are really talking about relocating a rail line that is currently managed under the jurisdiction of the federal government.

In fact, the report doesn't talk just about funding studies on the relocation of rail lines; it also talks about funding relocation projects themselves, as the government has committed to doing in connection with the Lac-Mégantic project. In the recommendation, it talked about the possibility of relocating rail lines in other places, after the Lac-Mégantic project is completed, and we are also wondering how eager your government is in connection with that recommendation.

[English]

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Thank you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval, for pointing out examples of how our federal government is working collaboratively with the Province of Quebec on building rail infrastructure.

You're asking me to pre-emptively give you an answer about a proposal that has not been submitted yet. If there is anything I can do to help with where this application should be going or who should be reviewing it, I would be happy to help. I'm unable to give you pre-emptively the government's decision, but we are more than willing to partner with the Province of Quebec as we have illustrated with Lac-Mégantic and with public transit in Montreal or in other regions of Quebec to do so.

I would be more than willing to sit down with you and to look at the proposal you're referring to.

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Fair enough.

I would now like to talk about the Air Passenger Protection Regulations.

The consumer associations we have heard from at the committee all said, one after another, that the current system was too complex. When consumers feel they have been treated unfairly and they submit their complaints, the burden of proof lies entirely with them. In addition, they are dependent on the information provided to them by the airline companies, and that makes the situation particularly difficult for them.

Consumer associations are asking that the burden of proof be reversed, so that it would be up to the airline companies be transparent, rather than it being up to consumers to provide all the evidence and do all the work.

Do you think this would be a good approach to adopt for modernizing the Air Passenger Protection Regulations?

• (1600)

[English]

The Chair: A short response, please, Minister.

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Chair, let me say, first of all, that I'm proud we are the first government in Canada's history to put together a set of rules to protect passengers' rights.

I agree that the period of the last two years has stressed the system and caused a lot of destruction. There were a lot of lessons learned. I am more than willing—and we are currently are—to re-examine the regulations and figure out how we can strengthen them and make them more efficient and transparent.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

Next, we have Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Bachrach, the floor is yours. You have six minutes.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank you, Minister, and your officials for being with us today.

I want to start with Bill C-33.

I appreciate that you're grateful for the committee's work. However, our report included 20 recommendations on rail safety. My read of Bill C-33 is that it doesn't address a single one of those recommendations.

Why is that?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Thank you, Mr. Chair, to my colleague for that question.

As you can imagine, the committee issued a report merely a few weeks before the bill was tabled. We are currently reviewing many of those recommendations and are committed to taking action. Many of the recommendations offer a lot of wisdom and ideas that, as I said earlier, we're committed to reviewing one by one. We will take action if necessary, but, as I said, the bill was drafted before the recommendations came out. That doesn't mean we couldn't do more work. The committee is always able to review the bill and offer recommendations. I know the committee offered many recommendations, including reviewing the rail police.

Mr. Bachrach, you've highlighted this to me, personally, and in committee on many occasions. We are committed to doing the review. Once the review is completed, whatever recommendations or actions are necessary will be taken.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: The issue of private corporate rail police in Canada has been one you've known about for a long time. I think it was an issue that became evident to a lot of Canadians after the 2019 rail disaster in British Columbia, near Field.

I'm curious about why, given all the concerns we've heard over the years, there is nothing in this legislation to address this existing egregious conflict of interest in section 44 and subsection 44(1) of the Railway Safety Act.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Bachrach, I take rail safety—all modes of transportation safety—extremely seriously. That's precisely why we need to do our review properly. I think rushing into...while....

Let's acknowledge this issue needs to be reviewed. In order for us to finalize, or come up with, a concrete set of actions, we need to do a full review that includes rail companies, unions, stakeholders and parliamentarians. We want to do it right. As I said, Transport Canada is committed to completing this review properly and fully.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Pam Fraser, who lost her son in that disaster, recently appeared at a press conference. This is what she said:

Their bodies lay frozen—Dylan in the engine, Daniel in the water and Andrew outside the engine on the ground, freezing all that night. The people who came the next day to gather these bodies were CP Rail personnel.

Why, in Canada, are we allowing multi-billion dollar rail corporations to police themselves? How is the government not dealing with this? There's a review, but this has been an issue for 50 or 100 years. How is it possible that we accept such an archaic practice in this country?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Bachrach, my heart goes out to the family—to Pam and all the loved ones of those who were lost.

As I said, Transport Canada is committed to fully reviewing this practice. We are currently consulting, collecting evidence and examining the rules on what can be done to build upon...improving rail safety.

You, Pam and her family have my personal commitment, but this is work that is ongoing. We want to make sure we do it right—that it's done in consultation with the sector, but also with parliamentarians.

• (1605)

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: When will the review be complete, Minister?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: It is something that we're taking extremely seriously. Transport Canada is committed to finalizing the review by next year.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Okay.

The U.K. has a publicly accountable independent rail police that reports to an independent commission. Why can't Canada have a similarly strong system of oversight for our rail sector? Why is it that other countries seem to have figured this out and don't allow their rail companies to police themselves? Why is Canada different?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Bachrach, Canada has one of the safest rail networks in the world. That does not mean that we don't have challenges. This is an ongoing work. We always need to push ourselves better. One loss of life is too many. We are going to continue to look at what we can do to improve safety, and that's precisely what we're doing, including examining other models around the world.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Is there another transportation sector in our country that has its own police force?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: I don't want to answer this question and give you the wrong answer.

Mr. Bachrach, we are taking this matter extremely seriously. I'm grateful for your work, your personal work and the work of the members of the committee here, and the advocacy of community members and community organizations. This is a matter that we're committed to reviewing fully and we are acting on it.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

Next we have Mr. Muys.

Mr. Muys, the floor is yours. You have five minutes.

Mr. Dan Muys (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here once again to answer questions. We appreciate that.

The last time you were with us here at committee, we were talking about the state of Canada's airports after a spring and summer of turmoil. I know that my colleague Mr. Strahl asked about that and pointed to some statistics in terms of where we stood in the world. At that time, you were quite emphatic that more needs to be done. You pointed to some improvements, but you were quite emphatic that more needs to be done.

When you answered Mr. Strahl's question, you spoke about some generalities, but maybe you can be more specific. Between August 19 and today, three and a half months later, what has been done to improve the state of Canada's airports in terms of the long lines, the baggage mayhem, the delays and the cancellations we've seen?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and to Mr. Muys for that question.

There have been short-term measures that have taken place, and there are medium- and long-term plans that are ongoing as we speak.

A short-term measure was certainly accelerating the hiring—again, I'll focus on the government side—of CATSA employees. More than 2,100 CATSA employees have been hired in a very short period of time, while ensuring they are trained and up to speed.

There has been a standing working group that brings the air sector together—airports, airlines, Nav Canada, CATSA and CBSA—to address operational issues immediately.

We have worked with airports and airlines on expediting the security clearance of new employees and automatically renewing the security clearance of existing employees.

We've ensured that Nav Canada has a plan to respond to the labour shortage they dealt with and the training of future employees.

In the long term, we are currently working on modernizing the security screening process.

We are looking at strengthening the air passenger rights regulations.

I'll stop here, but there's more too.

Mr. Dan Muys: Sure, so let me ask—that's a number of things—are you satisfied with the pace of this improvement?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: It's an ongoing process, Mr. Muys.

I can tell you this. I was not satisfied with what I saw happen last spring and last summer. It was completely unacceptable. I can try to explain or understand what happened, but it was still unacceptable. If you were a passenger who had to wait at an airport for so many hours, or had to sleep on the floor or lost your luggage, that was unacceptable.

Mr. Dan Muys: Specifically, in August, you made reference to that as well: Canadians sleeping on the floor in our airports, which is egregious in a G7 country. You said, as you did today, that was unacceptable. Can you assure Canadians as we get into the winter and the Christmas peak holiday travel season that it's going to be

different? Are there still going to be Canadians sleeping on the floor? Can we assure Canadians that's not going to happen?

• (1610)

Hon. Omar Alhabra: First of all, Mr. Muys, it's really important to point out to Canadians that our sector is quite interlinked and complicated.

The government has a direct line of responsibility for CATSA as a Crown corporation.

Airports and airlines are organizations independent of government. However, Transport Canada is the regulator, and we do have an ability to influence their operations and how they're conducting themselves. That's why we have a first set of rules that protect passengers' rights and ensure airlines deliver on the commitment they make to their customers.

We have been directly communicating with airports to ensure that what we saw last summer doesn't happen. We are—and I am personally—ensuring the voice of Canadians is being heard in the sector.

Mr. Dan Muys: Can I ask, because on May 30, we were talking about these same issues when you were at committee, and you talked about a working group with the airlines, CATSA and CBSA. It's obviously within your bailiwick to deal with these bottlenecks. You referenced earlier in this committee the meeting of a group last week.

What has happened in the interim six months? Has that working group been operating since the end of May? What were the findings? How have they been implemented to make those improvements?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Chair, I'll repeat what I said earlier. I've itemized a few operational changes that took place, from hiring staff to improving operational bottlenecks—including security clearance for employees and new employees—working with airlines to address pilot shortages and working with airports to ensure that they have the financial support.

We've invested close to \$2 billion in airports alone, between the airport critical infrastructure program, the airports capital assistance program and regional airport development. There has been significant investment.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Thank you very much, Mr. Muys.

Next we have Mr. Badawey. The floor is yours. You have five minutes.

Mr. Vance Badawey (Niagara Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you to all the witnesses for coming out today.

I will be splitting my time with Mr. Chahal. Hopefully, we'll have two and a half minutes each, so I'll be brief.

Mr. Minister, again, welcome.

Mr. Minister, with respect to Bill C-33.... As you know, because you were a great help with some of the initiatives that we were beginning to work on in the Niagara region, with your help, we facilitated a partnership between the cities of Port Colborne, Welland, Thorold and the Hamilton-Oshawa Port Authority to establish the Niagara Ports multimodal trade corridor.

Minister, again as you know, with your help, the strategy was created and established, and it strengthens Niagara's overall economy, including our supply chain. It is creating over 10,000 jobs over the next decade. These are new jobs over and above what we have right now throughout the region. I'll report that this growth has already begun to occur within the jurisdictions of all the partners, across the Niagara region and, quite frankly, predominantly across southwestern Ontario.

Minister, with Bill C-33, how do you see this legislation strengthening the future of this trade corridor?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Badawey, let me first applaud your vision and hard work over the last many years in recognizing the opportunity that is before you and the region to enhance the role of the Great Lakes for the region from an economic development perspective and from a job creation perspective. I'll continue to be delighted to work with you on advancing that vision.

Some of the supply chain challenges have included many port challenges, port congestion and old ways of doing things. I will point out one thing that I know will be helpful to the Great Lakes and the Port of Hamilton, as well, which is creating the ability of ports to have inland ports, creating the ability of ports to co-operate and collaborate, and creating a much more stable investment framework for ports to attract investment.

I think this will be extremely helpful to the plans that the region has for developing its Great Lakes trade corridor, for utilizing the port terminals and for supporting economic development in the region.

• (1615)

Mr. Vance Badawey: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

I'll pass on the rest of my time to Mr. Chahal.

Mr. George Chahal (Calgary Skyview, Lib.): Thank you, Minister, for joining us today.

Minister, I represent a very diverse riding and the home of the Calgary International Airport. You recently announced an expanded air transport agreement between Canada and India. This is great news for Canadians wanting to travel to India. However, some media outlets initially reported that this would allow for unlimited flights between the two countries, creating an impression that everything was now permissible, including direct flights from cities like Calgary to New Delhi, Chandigarh or Amritsar.

However, that is not the case. Is that correct?

If I could follow up, could you comment on what the expanded air transport agreement means and how it is different from the agreement that was reached when the Conservatives were in power in 2011?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: I know you and several of our colleagues have been flagging this issue with me for a while. Canadians, those who have a need or desire to travel to India, have been asking for so long to increase travel options, including direct flights to Amritsar. I certainly supported that objective.

Last spring, I met with the Indian minister of civil aviation here in Ottawa. I directly asked him about this and expressed our desire to expand the air transport agreement with India to enable flight operators to land anywhere and everywhere, to have an open sky agreement, including direct flights to Amritsar.

The Indian government was not ready for that step, so we agreed on an interim basis to expand what we have and lift the cap on the number of flights from 35 flights a week to an unlimited number of flights a week, however—to the same airports that have already been agreed upon.

I will still do whatever I can to advance that objective. I would like to see direct flights to Amritsar. We need the Indian government's approval for that, and we will continue to work with them on seeing that dream realized.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Chahal.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to come back to the question of the Air Passenger Protection Regulations.

Representatives of the Canadian Transportation Agency testified before the committee and told us that the backlog was currently over 30,000 complaints that had not been processed. That situation has gone on for several years. The CTA has been unable to resolve it, it receives so many complaints. It will take years for someone's complaint to be processed. At this point, the average wait time is a year and a half to two years, and that is completely unacceptable. We get the feeling that the CTA will never resolve this situation.

On top of that, we have an air passenger protection system that mean that the burden of proof lies with consumers, although they do not have all the information and they cannot do an investigation to find out what part was defective. They do not have the competencies to evaluate the condition of an airplane and they do not know the full extent of what happens in an airport. They are therefore at a complete disadvantage when it comes to exercising their rights.

Should the rules not be simplified so we simply make sure that when passengers' flights are cancelled, they always have the option of getting a refund? Obviously, that is not always the option they prefer. On the other hand, we have to understand that the decision that was made under the mandate you gave the CTA, that it require that a reservation be provided for a new flight within 48 hours, also does not suit everyone. There are many people who can't wait 48 hours, or they would miss the wedding, the convention or the business meeting that was the reason they were flying. It is not always a viable solution. We have to consider the individual's situation. A refund should quite simply be offered automatically, if the arrangement does not suit the consumer.

Don't you agree with me about that?

[*English*]

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Again, the last couple of years have been extraordinary, and we saw an extraordinary number of disruptions that certainly caused an unpredictable number of complaints that were not forecasted.

I know that the Canadian Transportation Agency is doing their best to deal with this unprecedented volume. We are committed to working with them. When I say "we", I mean the Government of Canada, Transport Canada, and me personally. We work to provide them the resources they need, but we also work with them on figuring out how we can improve the efficiency of the system.

This period has stress-tested the system and has exposed some areas of vulnerabilities, and, as I said to you and to the committee just now, I am committed to currently reviewing the lessons learned from this period, and whatever recommendations are found to improve and strengthen the air passenger bill of rights, we will take action on them.

• (1620)

[*Translation*]

Le président: Thank you, Minister.

[*English*]

Next we have Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Bachrach, the floor is yours. You have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, it has been a year and a half since Greyhound pulled out of Canada. It has been over four years since they pulled out of western Canada. Right now Canadians, especially low-income Canadians, have fewer passenger transportation options than they have had in decades and decades.

You have said in the past that if the provinces step up with proposals, the federal government is willing to provide resources; but what we have heard at the transport committee from witnesses for our current study on bus transport is that federal leadership is lacking.

My question is, what happens when the provinces don't step up, when they don't come forward with proposals to fill the holes left by Greyhound? At one point, Greyhound provided an interconnect-

ed interprovincial system of bus transport all across the country. Now we have a fragment of that, a shadow of that former network.

What happens when the provinces don't come forward because, frankly, they are not interested in building a national passenger bus network? What leadership are you willing to show as our Transport Minister to ensure that Canadians have access to the kind of bus transportation that a lot of other countries take for granted?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Thank you, Mr. Chair and Mr. Bachrach.

I know this is yet another issue that you've demonstrated leadership on for a while. You and I have spoken about this, and you've raised this question, understandably so.

I agree with you on the principle that there are communities that are underserved today. There are many Canadians who depend on intercity bus services that, unfortunately, are not as available as they used to be before. That concerns me.

To answer your question on what leadership the federal government has taken in this, I have personally written to all of my provincial ministers. Let me step back. I know it's not always great to hear this, but as you know intercity bus transportation is a provincial matter. However, I've written and expressed the willingness of the federal government to work collaboratively with provinces on any initiative or projects they may have to address this gap. The Province of British Columbia had a project. We partnered with them. We provided support to address this gap.

I will repeat, while it is constitutionally the responsibility of the provinces, we are more than willing to partner and collaborate with provinces on addressing this gap. I've not heard back from any provincial minister about any ideas they may have.

I'll continue to work with you. I know you're reaching out to your provincial counterparts. Across the country I think Canadians should write to their MPP or MLA or MNA to express their needs.

I repeat that the federal government is willing to collaborate and partner with provinces in addressing this gap.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister, and Mr. Bachrach.

Next we have Mr. Strahl.

Mr Strahl, the floor is yours. You have five minutes.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Minister, in the final report of the national supply chain task force, it was recommended that the government work to reopen FAST, the free and secure trade program offices here in Canada. There is a backlog of 11,000 applications. This program allows low-risk shipments and drivers travelling between Canada, the U.S. and Mexico expedited travel across the border.

I note that NEXUS is also affected. There are hundreds of thousands of applications waiting there. Many Canadians who travel frequently to do business in the United States rely on this. We heard about the need to reopen these enrolment centres in Canada.

Can you give this committee an update on when that will happen?

• (1625)

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Strahl, I share your concern about the disruptions that we've seen to either FAST or NEXUS. I know many Canadians, including many truck drivers, rely on that service to be able to cross the border efficiently. We have been in active discussions with our friends in the U.S. on opening these offices. My understanding is that we've made progress on FAST. We made some progress on NEXUS to automatically renew some of the expired applications. But there's still work being done; we need the U.S. to advance this objective. I know we are in active discussions. I'm looking forward to seeing results as quickly possible.

Mr. Mark Strahl: I'll go back to the airline passenger protection regulations.

I noted—I don't imagine it was in your mandate letter, but your predecessor's—that there was a desire to implement service standards for federally regulated organizations like CATSA, CBSA, etc. How are we doing on that?

Do you agree with the airlines that presented here on the APPR believing that if organizations like Nav Canada, CATSA, CBSA, and the airports themselves fail to meet that standard and it affects passengers on their journeys, that they should be, I guess, part of the compensation package for affected passengers? Or do you think it should still fall entirely on the airlines to manage the compensation for affected passengers?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Chair and Mr. Strahl, let me just say that organizations like CATSA already have a service standard. That doesn't mean this shouldn't be improved or reviewed. That's what we're doing right now. As I stated earlier, we are currently reviewing—this was part of the discussion we had at the summit last week—operating standards and service quality standards for all agencies, including government agencies.

I just want to point out, though, that it is the airline that has the purchase agreement with the customer. They are the ones who are paid by the customer. Having said that, I will acknowledge that other agencies have an impact. The sector is so linked and interdependent, they would, or could, have an impact on the airline's ability to deliver their service.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Okay.

I'll try to get one more question in here. You spoke about electric vehicles. We've heard about mandates for that. I was interested to note that there is some reporting that to replace an ONroute gas station would require the amount of electricity that's currently required to power the city of Belleville, for instance. We've seen in California and now Switzerland that their power grid has not been able to handle it. They've been telling people to please not charge their electric vehicles.

What has the government done to ensure that they're not just announcing at the consumer end where you plug in your electric vehicle? What have they done to look at the baseload power that's required as we transfer to electric vehicles going forward? Are we going to see, like California and like Switzerland, people being told not to plug in their cars so that we can keep powering our homes?

The Chair: You have 20 seconds for a response, please, Minister.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Look, first of all, this is an exciting period for the auto sector as we are moving into a transformational period to reduce emissions. In addition to providing incentives for consumers, the government is investing half a billion dollars to build recharging stations in partnership with communities.

As well, the budget contained \$250 million to work with provinces on modernizing and improving their grid. I know that a lot of smart people in local utilities and provincial operating systems are working on this. The federal government has set aside \$250 million to provide support for any initiative that may advance that goal.

• (1630)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Strahl.

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Angelo Iacono (Alfred-Pellan, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the minister and the officials with him for being here today.

Minister, can you tell us a bit more about how the new subsidiary of VIA Rail will contribute to moving the high-frequency rail project forward?

Why is the new subsidiary necessary? What are the specific tasks it will be assigned with this new funding?

[*English*]

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Thank you, Mr. Iacono, for that question.

High-frequency rail, which I referred to in my opening remarks, is a transformational project. It will not only be the largest infrastructure project in Canada's history. It will also transform that corridor by creating safe, reliable, fast and frequent service to Canadians who live along the busiest rail corridor in Canada.

As I said, this project is large. It's complicated. We wanted to make sure we had a rigorous oversight process to ensure that the execution of the project happens on time, on budget and according to high standards of accountability and transparency. The model we landed on was the creation of a subsidiary of VIA Rail, called VIA HFR, which will report directly to Parliament through the Minister of Transport, with a board of directors that ensures that the project is administered and implemented responsibly and prudently.

[Translation]

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you, Minister.

What are the next major milestones to watch for as the high-frequency rail project moves forward?

[English]

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Chair, we've taken significant steps to date, and we're now also at a historic moment for this project.

Earlier this year, we sought an expression of interest from partners in the private sector. More than 50 organizations participated by offering questions and expressing interest.

Six weeks ago, we released the summary of what we heard from potential partners in the private sector. The next step would be to issue a request for qualification to seek interest among companies or a consortium of companies in partnering with us.

Transport Canada, with the help of VIA HFR and experts, will assess those proposals and, based on the request for qualification, we would then enter into a request for proposals.

[Translation]

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Can you remind us of how high-frequency rail will improve connectivity in Canada along the main passenger rail corridor?

• (1635)

[English]

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Chair, I know Canadians have been talking about this service for decades. Particularly those who live in the corridor that connects Québec City all the way to Toronto and Windsor and those in the communities in between have been aspiring to see fast, efficient and reliable rail service.

For as long as VIA has been around, there has not been a dedicated track for VIA that enables it to provide dedicated service. This project will create a dedicated track that will be green, electric and fast. It will connect communities, and it will open up not only convenience for passengers but also economic development. I would emphasize that it's a great nation-building exercise that will bring our communities closer together.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Iacono; thank you, Minister.

[English]

Minister, it's always a pleasure welcoming you here to committee. On behalf of all the members, I want to thank you for giving us your time and for responding to all of our questions and concerns.

With that, I will suspend the meeting for two minutes as we allow the minister to leave and we welcome two additional witnesses from Transport.

This meeting is suspended.

• (1635)

(Pause)

• (1635)

The Chair: I call this meeting back to order.

We will begin our round of questioning for the second panel with Mr. Muys.

Mr. Muys, the floor is yours. You have six minutes.

Mr. Dan Muys: Thank you to all the departmental officials for being here today again. I know that some of you are returning.

I'm not sure who to direct this question to. Maybe we'll start with the deputy minister, or you can deflect it to someone else if they're the subject matter expert.

In August when we had the meeting on the chaos at airports, the minister cited the figures regarding flight delays and cancellations from that particular week and the week previous, and showed that there had been an incremental improvement week over week.

Do we know where we sit today in Canada's airports, in terms of flight delays and cancellations, and how those compare with numbers from other jurisdictions?

Mr. Michael Keenan (Deputy Minister, Department of Transport): Thank you for the question.

I appreciate the invitation to refer to colleagues when necessary.

Mr. Chair, the member is exactly right. There has been some significant progress. Starting around the third week of July the numbers began to turn. There were very high rates of cancellations and delays at that time. We've seen some significant improvements.

I'll give you an example. Toronto Pearson is down to 2% cancellations in the last week. Vancouver is down to 1.5%. Montreal-Trudeau is 2.7% and Calgary is 0.6%.

That's slightly higher but running in the neighbourhood of the rate of cancellations we saw before COVID. The cancelled flight rates, which were at one point well over 10%, have come way down to about normal rates, or slightly above.

In terms of on-time performance, there have been significant improvements across the system from the summer. The rate of delays has come down significantly. It is still staying a little bit higher than before 2019. It's part of the system continuing to come into balance.

There was a point in the summer when Canadian airports were in a tough position relative to other airports. Their relative performance has improved as we've come into the fall. The system is generally getting to a better passenger experience, where you're much more likely to get to the destination and much less likely to be delayed in the process therein.

• (1640)

Mr. Dan Muys: How does that compare to other jurisdictions, like in the United States, for example, or in Europe?

Mr. Michael Keenan: If you take cancellations, you'll see that New York is at 0.5%, Newark is at 0.5% and Chicago is at 0.5%. Those American airports are still slightly ahead of the Canadian airports. Frankfurt, Beijing and places like that will typically be a little bit higher.

Mr. Dan Muys: You're citing some figures from 2019, from this past summer and maybe the past week or month, in comparison to other jurisdictions.

I wonder if you would be willing to table those with the committee as well, just so we have them in front of us as a reference for the future.

Mr. Michael Keenan: We'd be happy to send them along.

Mr. Dan Muys: Another thing we've studied as a committee—and I know that all federal departments are seized with this—is the labour shortages that are impacting this sector.

We've heard at committee here about being 30,000 truckers short in the trucking industry, 50,000 short in the marine industry, and another 50,000 short in the air sector going forward or forecasted. These are large numbers.

Are you concerned about that? What are we doing to accelerate the pace of filling those gaps?

The Chair: Please give a very quick response.

Mr. Michael Keenan: Very quickly, this is an area of key concern for the minister, for Transport Canada and for all of our provincial colleagues in the transportation sector.

There is work between transportation sector officials and counterparts in immigration and employment, training and skills to get people into the training programs to have those qualifications needed for the future growth of the industry in all of the sectors mentioned by the member.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Keenan.

Thank you, Mr. Muys.

Next we have Mr. Chahal.

The floor is yours. You have six minutes.

Mr. George Chahal: Thank you, Chair.

I'll also be sharing my time with Mr. Badawey.

Thank you for joining us today.

Following up on my questions for the minister, can transport officials clarify what needs to happen before direct flights can be offered between Calgary and New Delhi or Amritsar? Is Canada prepared to agree to this?

If the holdup is on the Indian side, what are the reasons for their reluctance, in your view?

Mr. Michael Keenan: Thank you for the question.

This is all with respect to the air transport agreement between Canada and India. It has been a shared interest of both Canada and India to increase direct flight connections. Both countries have been pleased to see an increase in direct flight connections between our two countries so that people with connections can get back and forth much more easily. That's very positive.

A very significant step was taken recently when Mr. Alghabra signed the new air transport agreement with his Indian counterpart. That took off a quantitative limit on the number of flights. That allows Air India, Air Canada, WestJet or whoever is flying to plan, to increase frequency as much as they see fit in the market.

Despite that significant advance, there are restrictions in the air transport agreement about what airports they can fly out of. Canada is prepared and has made it clear to our Indian colleagues and partners that we would be pleased to further amend the air transport agreement to remove or lessen those restrictions.

We will continue to engage our good partners, and we're optimistic that at some point we'll reach an agreement and the Indians will be prepared to work with us on a further amendment of the ATA to strengthen our air transport relationship to allow more city pairs, including the ones you've mentioned.

• (1645)

Mr. George Chahal: Thank you for that answer.

I'll turn this over to Mr. Badawey.

Mr. Vance Badawey: Thank you, Mr. Chahal.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

Earlier, the minister mentioned the investments that are being made within indigenous communities and that I assume would be transportation related. That said, one of the things we're trying to work on right now is that a lot of the capital investments that are needed within many of these communities need to be brought more toward a whole-of-government approach. It's not just one department over another department: it's actually all departments that would be relevant and therefore a whole-of-government approach.

Mr. Keenan, I would ask that you speak on that, on moving forward more progressively with a whole-of-government approach for all capital investments, regardless of what jurisdiction they may enter into throughout this country. Secondly, can you be more specific about some of those indigenous communities and the capital transportation investments that in fact may be planned for those communities?

Mr. Michael Keenan: I'd be happy to, Chair.

The member raises a very important question. It has been a top priority of the minister and Transport Canada to strengthen partnerships with indigenous peoples. There are many nations that are in a place where they are really important partners in the transportation system, and we have been working to find solutions to include them as partners in the management of the systems: for example, bringing indigenous partners into the emergency spill response system in the marine response and building out the transportation system.

We've seen that with the FNTI, the First Nations Technical Institute flight training school, which I think is around Belleville. We've seen that with the partnerships with the Arctic Gateway Group, the indigenous-led partnership running the railway in northern Manitoba.

We do run into the exact problem you've identified, so we've been trying to work it through on I wouldn't say a case-by-case basis but a project-by-project basis and bringing together the federal partners, because we can be a little complicated for counterparties. I think we've done that with PrairiesCan, where Indigenous Services Canada and Transport have come together in northern Manitoba.

We do need to find a better way. I think the member is right. We'll keep searching for that to create that single window where an indigenous partner can come to us and we can find the right terms to build the transportation system together.

Mr. Vance Badawey: That said, and what I think is equally as important, with the alignment of the initial capital investment, how important does the department feel it is—again, with a whole-of-government approach—to follow that up with a proper asset management plan? That's so the life cycle of those assets and repair and maintenance over time are being looked after sustainably, and then, when that asset finally has to be replaced 10, 20 or 30 years down the road, depending on the asset, the funding will actually be in place to actually replace the asset.

Mr. Michael Keenan: Again, I think you raise a very good point, and it's one where, in our funding programs and our partnership programs, we don't always allow for or fully consider those life-cycle dynamics. We're certainly trying to push more towards being partners with indigenous groups on sustainable business plans, because often we're there for the expansion of the capital but not the maintenance of the capital or the operating. We're trying to find a better balance. There is more work to do in that respect.

● (1650)

Mr. Vance Badawey: Thank you, Mr. Keenan.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Keenan.

Thank you, Mr. Badawey.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Earlier, in his opening remarks, Mr. Alghabra spoke about the importance to him of this much talked about high-speed rail project and the fact that he was firmly committed to it. It is obviously an initiative that we on this side also support.

However, I have had an opportunity to meet with a number of people who said they were concerned that so far they had not seen any indication or intention on the part of the government to have part of it built in Canada. In fact, I have had the opportunity to meet with representatives of companies who said they were afraid that some Chinese giant would get the contract, given that there is an extremely large train building company working in China, in particular. We really are talking about essential infrastructure here. There are jobs where we live that depend on manufacturing these control systems and local companies that could do the work.

How does the government see this project working? What is the government planning for the future?

Mr. Michael Keenan: We are moving ahead with the project, one step at a time. We are starting by communicating with the industry. We have a good response rate. As the minister said, about 50 organizations responded to the invitation.

To ensure the success of the project, we need to rely on global experience, but also on the right Canadian skills. We believe the procurement process will enable us to get both.

Mr. Robitaille, could you provide more details about these questions?

Mr. Vincent Robitaille (Assistant Deputy Minister, High Frequency Rail, Department of Transport): Yes, thank you.

The nature of the project requires that there be a partnership between Canadian expertise and international expertise. However, I want to reassure you on the question of security. The foreign investors will be subject to security standards and the necessary reviews. They will be audited. Security clearances and bilateral security agreements will be required. Given this, suppliers from certain countries may not necessarily be eligible.

In the case of this project, we are talking about an infrastructure that extends for 1,000 kilometres, to be built in Canada by Canadian workers, that will then be operated and managed by Canadian workers. There will be substantial economic benefits at all levels, both from the construction of the project and the operation of the train and from the use of the service by Canadians over the coming years.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you. I think that is important. If billions of dollars are being invested in a project, we want there to be benefits here at home, particularly when it comes to job creation. We must not forget that we have expertise right here, so we have to continue to build that expertise rather than exporting it and ultimately losing it, if we allow other countries that have different and very aggressive business practices to undermine our capacity to carry out other projects of this nature in future.

I don't know whether you have heard of the streetcar project in Gatineau. We have met with people, including representatives of the "S'allier pour le tramway" coalition, who advocate having a streetcar that would leave from Gatineau and go to downtown Ottawa. Unfortunately, there seems to be a problem relating to the existing federal programs. They say there seems to be a lack of flexibility or of the will to find solutions.

I thought that maybe you had the will to have this project succeed. A structuring project like that, which would connect Quebec to Ottawa, would be beneficial for Parliament and Canada's capital. Public servants would be able to use public transit rather than their cars. Unfortunately, because it is an interprovincial project, there has to be participation on the other side of the bridge, and not just on the Quebec side.

Are there people studying this possibility, or are you going to just say that it's a Quebec project and therefore it is up to Quebec to fund the entire project? Since a portion of the project is not in Quebec, investment that was in proportion to the benefits each side would get from it would be expected.

• (1655)

Mr. Michael Keenan: I am aware of the project. I can tell you that in general, the Department of Transport supports and encourages public transit projects. However, this issue is handled by our colleagues at Infrastructure Canada. I apologize, but I don't know all the details of it. I will be happy to ask my colleague to send you a detailed answer.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: I would appreciate it, thank you.

I would also like to discuss the question of airport noise with you.

People call my office and my colleagues' offices about this. They see helicopters flying at low altitude, landing in fields, and flying over houses. If it happened once a month or once a week, nobody would be tearing their hair out. However, when the planes that fly over their homes on a daily basis prevent them from spending time outside barbecuing, for example, or wake them up in the middle of the night, that is especially frustrating for them. People get the feeling that they have no recourse to solve the problem. They call the airport but they get voicemail. As MPs, we try to talk to you about it, but it is difficult to get any tangible results.

Can solutions be found to this problem, or can there at least be a record of complaints and the minimum altitudes be raised? At the moment, helicopters are asked to fly at 1,000 feet, but people hear them clearly in their backyards. So the...

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval. You will have to wait for the next round of questions to get answers.

[English]

Next we have Mr. Bachrach.

The floor is yours. You have six minutes.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the officials for being here.

I'd like to pick up on an issue that I raised several months ago when you were last here, Mr. Keenan, and this relates to the use of tugboats under 15 tonnes on the B.C. coast.

Obviously, following the 2021 sinking of the *Ingenika* near Kitimat, which took the lives of two men, a lot of attention has turned to the lack of regulations in this industry, particularly for these smaller vessels.

I do know there is a regulatory review process under way; however, I'm still unclear on why certain rules haven't been put in place. Starting with the issue of commercial vessel certification, I just read on Transport Canada's website that all small marine commercial vessels between 15 and 150 gross tonnage must be certified by Transport Canada. Any smaller vessel that carries more than 12 passengers must also be inspected and certified; yet we have these commercial vessels under 15 tonnes that are operating in all kinds of weather towing giant loads and they don't have to be certified as commercial vessels.

Isn't there a simple change that Transport Canada could require of companies that operate these small tugboats to have them inspected and certified?

Mr. Michael Keenan: Mr. Chair, first of all I'd like to recognize the unfailing commitment and time spent by the member on transportation safety, rail safety and tug safety in particular, and I do recall the very exacting question with respect to the towing capacity of tugs.

The member raises a fair point in the context of the marine safety system. The level of regulations and regulatory oversight is less for smaller vessels below 15 tonnes. The entire Canada Shipping Act and the international marine safety system has a line where there is much more oversight of larger vessels. The member has raised issues about certification of these, because they do operate commercial vessels, and the west coast of B.C. has a large number of tugs that are just under 15 tonnes.

One thing we have done in response to this and other incidents is to do a lot of outreach to the industry. We've pulled together a comprehensive package to explain what they're required to do, and we've taken our oversight resources and targeted more of them on that sector of the industry so they have a sense that they're being inspected, and we're seeing some progress there.

In terms of the exact question you've asked, I'm unsure, but I'm going to turn it over to my colleague Nick Robinson from safety and security.

Nick, do you know the exact answer to the member's question?

• (1700)

Mr. Nicholas Robinson (Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Safety and Security, Department of Transport): There are certification standards related to those vessels under 15 gross tonnes. We have hull certification requirements for those sorts of tugs, and we could provide those regulations as well as the guidelines and the document with the numbers—a document that provides guidelines around the construction, certification and inspection of those tugs under the 15-gross tonne limit.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Okay.

Mr. Michael Keenan: If I could jump in, I think you raise a good point. There is a perception in the industry that there are no regulatory requirements. What Nick was describing is the work that we've done recently to make it clear to the industry that there are regulatory standards they're expected to maintain. The level of inspection is not as comprehensive as on the larger vessels, but we have shifted some resources into that sector because of some of the safety risks that we've seen, which the member has done a great job of bringing to light.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Deputy Minister, you mentioned there are a great number of these vessels just under 15 tonnes operating on the B.C. coast, and it seems to me that the government has set a threshold for commercial certification and inspection that costs the industry money. Let's be fair about that. As a result, there are a lot of vessels that fall just under that certification threshold. We have a lot of incidents on the B.C. coast reported by the media, and by the union that represents tugboat workers. There are a lot of safety incidents. I also hear stories about companies modifying the vessels so that they're able to get under that 15-tonne threshold.

It seems to me like we should err on the side of caution, on the side of worker safety, and should simply require these vessels to be held to the same commercial inspection and certification standard that a whale-watching vessel that holds 12 tourists is held to. Does that not seem to be a fair? When we're talking about worker safety and situations where men have died on our coast, it just seems like a simple fix: change the threshold.

Why hasn't Transport Canada done that?

Mr. Michael Keenan: On the fact that there is a safety issue with small tugs we agree, and we've been taking a series of steps and actions to address that through outreach, oversight and enforcement.

Wiping away the distinction between larger and smaller vessels is not... We've certainly raised the bar for the tugs under 15 tonnes, and we're always looking at what else we can do in that respect. But going in and rewriting the Canada Shipping Act to eliminate the distinction between smaller vessels and larger vessels would be inconsistent with the international marine safety system.

We're continuing to look at that. I would agree with the member that we see a higher incident rate, risk rate, for smaller vessels, whether it's a passenger vessel—these passenger vessels under 12 passengers do not have the same requirements as the larger ferries and the larger cruise ships—and we see it on the commercial side. On both sides we're actually trying to strengthen that because that is where the risk is, and so the question is well put.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Keenan, and Mr. Bachrach. I know you had another question, Mr. Bachrach. It looks like we will be able to get back to you to follow up.

Next we have Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Strahl, the floor is yours. You have five minutes.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Keenan, I'm hoping you can tell me what percentage of Transport Canada employees have returned to work in the office?

Mr. Michael Keenan: I can tell you that, first of all, the return to work in the office is not a great way of.... We are measuring this. I'll give you a number in a second when Ryan reminds me, but going back to the work, we've been very careful because many Transport Canada employees never work in an office. We have thousands of people whose job is—

• (1705)

Mr. Mark Strahl: Right. Without getting into that, I wanted to know how close we are to prepandemic normal, if we can say it that way.

Mr. Michael Keenan: We've been tracking that, and taking into account what I just said, we're running currently at about 40% of the pattern we saw before the pandemic in terms of people coming into the office.

Mr. Mark Strahl: We heard in testimony on labour shortages, etc., and some of the studies we've done, about the increase in delays in getting.... Obviously there was a pilot medical issue, which I understand there's been some resolution to, but in terms of restricted access passes, and all of the things that Transport Canada has to provide approvals for for security reasons, they are being delayed.

How close are you to getting back to your prepandemic service standard on authorizations, if I can put it that way?

Mr. Michael Keenan: There are three parts to that.

I've heard the same suggestion, that because we've had folks remotely at home, we are less productive. I can tell you, without question, that the opposite is true. In the last two years, Transport Canada—I've been the deputy for seven years—has done much more than it's ever done before. For most of that period, we had most of our employees working from home. If you look at any measure in terms of the regulatory work, the policy work, we got more done with the same number of people. They're kind of tired right now because a lot of them have been working a lot of overtime, but we've been more productive as an organization.

As part of our hybrid policy, we're still encouraging people to come in to the work site to spend time together. It's not for productivity; it's for other reasons.

With respect to the service standard, on things like ATIP, for example, we maintained all our ATIP services right through. We didn't skip a beat on stuff like that.

With respect to transportation security clearances, we maintained a service standard. We got a little behind in the spring when we had an avalanche of new applications. One of the challenges in the air sector was the 280% increase in traffic. The airports and the airlines hired a ton of people and sent us a tidal wave of applications. We brought that back down to pretty close to prepandemic levels.

We had a similar problem with aviation medicals. For 70% of the applications, we dramatically reduced the time required because we went to instant approvals. We were able to do that because we had a digital system, which we put in place because we actually had everybody working at home.

So, we've been able to be more productive, and we've been able to get back. Where we have a problem, I have to concede—and we're still working on it—is with complex medical cases. There's a backlog there that is not where we want it to be, and we're continuing to work on that.

Mr. Mark Strahl: A final question that has come up repeatedly in media reports, as well as stakeholder meetings, is about the inability to load grain in Vancouver in the rain. As a west coaster, I can tell you that's a lot of days. Obviously, industry recognizes that there are legitimate safety concerns, but the proposals are so onerous. Setting up a railing system that takes four or five hours just makes it uneconomical. However, it's also noted that we're the only jurisdiction that has this issue on the west coast.

What can you tell us about the department's efforts to work with industry and labour to come up with a solution that will address this problem?

Mr. Michael Keenan: It's a really important issue. You can, more or less, count the days where it doesn't rain in Vancouver in the winter as opposed to the days it does rain.

We are currently working, in the context of the supply chain challenges, with the industry on any place where we see there's an opportunity to make progress. There has been a safety arbitration ruling that goes back to 2017 or 2018, I think, and some regulations that came in with it that have restricted, as the member said, the rules around the loading of the grain. That is having an impact on a number of days in Vancouver.

We've just done some work reaching out, talking to the grain industry, talking to union leadership, talking to the terminal operators in Vancouver. We're trying to facilitate a discussion to try to find a solution to that. We're optimistic that, with creative thinking and with the importance of feeding a hungry world, there may be an opportunity to find a solution where on more of those rainy days there is a safe way to load the grain ships. That discussion is under way.

• (1710)

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Keenan. Unfortunately, there's no time left for a response.

[*Translation*]

We will continue with Mr. El-Khoury for five minutes.

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for being here to share their views and answer questions from committee members.

Big infrastructure projects like these are notoriously difficult when it comes to staying on budget. What precautions is Transport Canada taking in that regard?

Mr. Michael Keenan: I'm sorry, but I didn't understand the question. What precautions are you talking about?

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: I'll repeat my question.

In the case of big infrastructure projects like these, it is difficult to stay on budget. What precautions is Transport Canada taking in that regard?

Mr. Michael Keenan: I understand.

You are entirely correct to say that it is very difficult to stay on budget and on time in the case of big projects.

[*English*]

Transport Canada is focused on one very large project, which is the high-frequency rail project. As my colleague, Mr. Robitaille, indicated, we're working very systemically with the experts in the industry whom we need in building relationships and partnerships.

We're building an internal capacity through the incorporation of VIA's high-frequency rail to bring the best project management expertise into the employ of the Government of Canada in order to manage the project going forward, and bring as much transparency as we can.

When a problem is encountered, we want to make sure it is in the open and the partners on the project are working to find a solution. The key strategy is to avoid allowing any of the problems to be buried and hidden, where they grow and grow and then explode into terrible cost overruns or terrible delays.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Why was a decision made to invest in improving railway service in northern Manitoba at this time?

Mr. Michael Keenan: If I may, I am going to ask my colleague Stephanie Hébert to answer, because she is the one who manages that project.

Ms. Stephanie Hébert (Assistant Deputy Minister, Programs, Department of Transport): Transport Canada has worked closely with PrairiesCan and Indigenous Services Canada. We have done a number of studies, from which we understand that without some level of funding from the Government of Canada, it would not be possible to maintain rail access to Churchill.

[English]

Funding was announced in the budget. That funding has recently been announced as well by PrairiesCan, in collaboration with the Province of Manitoba, to undertake an investment to support capital repairs and critical infrastructure. This will help maintain the rail service to northern Manitoba and to the 14 communities that really rely upon this service for transportation connectivity and food security. This will help keep the cost down related to travel and to the transportation of essential goods and services.

• (1715)

[Translation]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Was there some urgent situation that called for the action you have taken?

Ms. Stephanie Hébert: It was more that the studies done told us that without government intervention, the service might be interrupted. We wanted to avoid that kind of interruption, because we recognize the importance of the railway for those communities.

That is why the Canadian government, together with the Manitoba government, announced that it was going to make investments in order to maintain that service.

In the meantime, Transport Canada is examining various options to ensure that the service continues in the long term.

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Are you satisfied with all the measures taken by Transport Canada concerning air, ground and marine transportation and with the recommendations that have been made? If not, do you have other recommendations to make for improving the system?

Mr. Michael Keenan: It is always possible to improve the system, and that is what we do every day.

Regarding recommendations, we are always open to this committee's suggestions for moving priority issues forward.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. El-Khoury.

[English]

Thank you very much, Mr. Keenan.

[Translation]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Keenan, as the Chair suggested I do, I am going to let you answer the question I asked before, regarding people who are fed up with the noise of the planes and helicopters and are making complaints.

How can these people get a bit of peace and quiet in their everyday lives? What can we do so they get justice, or at least so they are heard?

Mr. Michael Keenan: That's a good question. In fact, it is one that is often asked and it applies to nearly all airports.

First, we have policies that require airports to have a good system for responding to concerns from the public, particularly people in nearby neighbourhoods.

Mr. Robinson can give you more details.

Mr. Nicholas Robinson: Yes, thank you.

[English]

There are a couple of ways that we like to encourage individuals to engage in those sorts of concerns with regard to, particularly, smaller airports.

The first one is that we ensure that the airports in small communities have and are encouraged to have strong relationships with the communities around them. Airports have to exist with the support of the communities around them, so in our regulations, when they're looking at expansion of services or a major expansion of the infrastructure within an airport, there are opportunities and requirements for those airports to engage with their communities to hear their concerns and to provide the studies around how the noise may increase in the community and what other impacts in and around the wildlife of the community might be present so that the communities can input and feed into the decisions and how these projects may be undertaken.

With regard to a particular complaint though, there's absolutely a mechanism whereby individuals can contact Transport Canada. We receive complaints quite frequently, as the deputy minister mentioned. Where we see that there are contraventions of rules or contravention of flight hours, or if there are flights at dangerous altitudes, we will not hesitate to review the situation and make sure that the airport and the air operators within the airport are in compliance and that they're following the rules we've laid out.

• (1720)

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[English]

Thank you very much, Mr. Robinson.

We have Mr. Bachrach next.

Mr. Bachrach, the floor is yours. You have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have so many questions and so little time.

I'm tempted to continue my questions about tugboat safety, but I want to clarify that what I was suggesting in my last round of questions wasn't to require certification of all small commercial vessels but just of those that are involved in commercial towing, which, I believe you'll agree, has unique risks, similar to the unique risks involved in carrying more than 12 passengers.

I want to talk a little bit about one of the other concerns I've heard from people in the tugboat industry, which is with the lack of regulations around the size of load that a tugboat of a certain size can pull.

Jason Woods, the president of ILWU Local 400, was quoted as saying, "Right now, you have a culture of lax standards....You can tow a barge full of logging equipment on a bungee cord if you want to."

My question is this: Is there any regulatory limit on the size of load that can be towed commercially by a barge under 15 tonnes?

Mr. Michael Keenan: Mr. Chair, the member—

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Oh, sorry. I mean by a tugboat under 15 tonnes. You're not going to tow anything with a barge.

Mr. Michael Keenan: I wasn't going to trifle that out.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: It would be a good way to use up the two and a half minutes.

Mr. Michael Keenan: It's a very good question.

I believe there are limits in terms of the load. I do not know the details.

Nick, do you know the details?

Mr. Nicholas Robinson: Part of the carriage, what they can load, is embedded into the safety management systems of particular companies.

A particular company will have a safety management system in place and they will have to comply with that safety management system, but there are not—

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Those are the company's own rules, though. If you have a tug that's under 15 tonnes, does the government have any rules about the size of load you can tow with that?

Mr. Nicholas Robinson: I'll have to verify that and come back.

Mr. Michael Keenan: Can I commit that we will get back to you on that?

I believe there is a framework that applies in terms of towing limits for tugs. I would concede and recognize that this is an area where we're continuing to do work.

That's a very good question. We'll come back with an answer on that.

We continue to be open to looking at ways of strengthening the safety performance in key areas where we see room for improvement and this is one of them. We'll come back on that.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Bachrach.

Finally for today, we have Mr. Muys.

You have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Dan Muys: Thank you.

I want to pick up on a question that my colleague, Mr. Chahal, had for the minister at the end. Of course, the time ran out.

It was about the increase in electrification of vehicles. Obviously, we're seeing that uptick. In fact, in my home province of Ontario, there was an announcement today by the provincial government with regard to that.

The question was asked about whether the grid could sustain that. While I realize it's a matter of provincial jurisdiction, the minister referred to some federal contribution towards helping the provinces do that. Certainly, as Transport Canada and the federal government are looking to increase the use and the production of electric vehicles across Canada, they have an interest in whether there will be sufficient capacity in the grid to sustain that.

I just want to know what your thoughts would be on that.

Mr. Michael Keenan: It's a very good question. The minister indicated that there are sort of two parts to it. There's actually having the gas-up or the recharge facilities, which he answered. There's a lot of work in making sure those are in place. That part of the en route question is covered.

The shift towards electric vehicles and their charging requirements either at home, at work or on the road is part of a changing dynamic around the electricity grid and the growing use of renewables and generation as well. There are a lot of change dynamics on the grid.

Transport Canada works very closely with Natural Resources Canada on these issues of grid readiness for the evolution of not just zero-emission vehicle on the road, but at marine ports, etc. A lot of work is happening between Natural Resources Canada and its provincial energy counterparts on grid readiness for really the broader shift in net zero 2050.

Cars are part of it, but there are also the renewables. It's a big issue. A lot of work is being done and it needs to land well.

• (1725)

Mr. Dan Muys: Is enough being done? Frankly, \$250 million is a drop in the bucket. I hear you with regard to not just the cars, but the marine sector and others.

Is enough being done? What is being done to accelerate that?

Mr. Michael Keenan: A lot of work is being done and there are a lot of projects, like the Atlantic loop out east and the northwest grid.... There are a lot of projects to evolve the grid and the connections. Most of these are under provincial jurisdiction, but there is a lot of federal-provincial discussion and investment partnerships to ensure we are on a pathway of readiness. It's an area that is going to require constant work in the years to come.

Are we on a path to solve it? My sense, in talking to my colleagues at Natural Resources Canada and in the provinces, is that the discussions and the work are there, but it has to continue.

Mr. Dan Muys: Switching to the high-frequency rail, I have a question.

Just help me understand the thinking behind a subsidiary of VIA Rail rather than....

Did we not have the expertise within VIA Rail to do this? Why was that structure put forward? Is that efficient and does it give the high-frequency rail the opportunity to succeed?

Mr. Michael Keenan: First and foremost, Via is a first-class operator of a rail system. It has expertise that is essential to the success of the project, but there is a lot of expertise, skill and capacity that we need to build and develop in order to properly manage this complex project. It's not currently in Via and it's not currently in the Government of Canada, so we're building a dedicated corporation as a project office to assemble that skill and have that entity focused on one thing, which is the development and delivery of that project.

The project will be done in partnership with Via, but we think we need a very purposeful development of that project capacity.

Part of what drives us is that we have been looking systemically at the hard lessons of other projects. You can see them now in Ot-

tawa's LRT and the report that has come out. We're studying that with great interest and ensuring that we're establishing a pathway that avoids the pretty terrible potholes that some others have found themselves in.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Muys.

Thank you, Mr. Keenan.

On behalf of all committee members, I want to thank our witnesses from the department for joining us today.

With that, this meeting is adjourned.

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