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• (1535)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Hon. Marc Garneau (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Westmount, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 43 of the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

[*English*]

We are gathered today on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe nation.

Before we begin, the clerk has brought to my attention that the deadline for amendments on Bill S-219, which was originally at 5 p.m. tomorrow night, has been moved to noon tomorrow, so that we give staff enough time to prepare any amendment package for clause-by-clause consideration on December 5.

Is there consent to change the deadline? I'm not seeing any objections. I will officially say that the deadline for amendments is noon tomorrow for Bill S-219.

Secondly, the witness lists for the study on indigenous languages, which is the next study that we will be undertaking, should be provided to the clerk by next Tuesday at noon, so that witnesses can be contacted for appearances. The first one will be on Monday, December 12.

[*Translation*]

I would now like to welcome the Minister of Indigenous Services, the Honourable Patty Hajdu. She is accompanied by the following people: Ms. Gina Wilson, deputy minister; Ms. Valerie Gideon, associate deputy minister; Ms. Joanne Wilkinson, senior assistant deputy minister, Regional Operations Sector; and Ms. Kenza El Bied, director general, Sector Operations Branch, Regional Operations Sector.

[*English*]

As usual, to ensure an orderly meeting, I'd like to outline a few rules for all of us to follow.

Members or witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services in English and French, and in the second hour in Inuktitut, are available for today's meeting. Please be patient with the interpretation. You all know it takes a bit of time.

For those in the video conference, the interpretation button is at the bottom of your screen. You can listen in English, French or, in

the second hour, Inuktitut, if you so choose. If interpretation is lost, please inform me immediately, and we will ensure interpretation is properly re-established before we continue.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name, and if you're in the video conference, please click on your microphone icon to unmute yourself. Very importantly here, when you're speaking, please speak slowly and clearly for the benefit of the interpreters. I'll also remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

The minister has been invited to make an opening statement, which we will then follow up with questions from the members of the committee. The minister will be with us for the first hour, and her officials will be with us for the full two hours.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today. Your testimony will help inform our study into Arctic sovereignty, security, and the emergency preparedness of indigenous peoples.

Without further ado, Madam Minister, the floor is yours.

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

Hello, everyone.

Bonjour.

Kwe kwe.

I'm really looking forward to this conversation we're going to have about emergency management and the need to do better as a country in preparedness and adaptation.

With that, I would say that the conversation I had with the Auditor General was a very positive one. I thanked her for releasing her report on emergency management on reserve. It has indeed helped shine a light on what I think is a growing and critical issue for first nations.

I agreed with the report's recommendations, and certainly it highlights the increasing threat first nations communities face every day right now that is posed primarily by climate change. In the past six years we've seen record-breaking wildfire and flooding seasons. During my time as the Minister of Indigenous Services—and it's not that long—I've seen and met with people who have felt the full force of things like the B.C. atmospheric river event, the flooding in Manitoba and, of course, most recently, hurricane Fiona in the Atlantic.

I've become acutely aware that first nations are on the front lines of climate change, even more so as I am a northern Ontario member of Parliament and not unfamiliar with the kinds of heroic efforts that first nations communities and indeed all partners play in evacuating people and, for example, supporting people in forest fires. I receive regular updates from my team on natural hazards that are impacting indigenous communities and, indeed, on communities that on a day-to-day basis are struggling with emergency situations.

In each of all these instances, Indigenous Services Canada works alongside first nations partners to respond first to the emergency that presents such a threat to lives and infrastructure, but then, of course, in the eventual rebuilding. I would like to say that it is important to understand that it will always be the role of the federal government to be a strong and lead partner in responding to crises when they happen. First nations expect that kind of support, and I would like to thank the department for its incredible work during those crises.

The Auditor General's report also highlighted that we need to be better prepared for those extreme weather events, which I think is something that across this country we all know, and that we need to make sure as we work with first nations communities in particular that this preparedness—this planning, this investment—has to be done with the principles of equity, self-determination and, of course, honesty. First nations have the right to be equal and full partners in decisions that affect their own communities, and in emergency management planning and response.

We've been working with first nations and the provinces and territories to establish comprehensive emergency management service agreements, to increase the number of emergency management coordinators in first nations communities and to identify and invest in structural mitigation projects that can help communities become more resilient to potential hazards.

Out of these conversations, the emergency management assistance program has evolved to support first nations in emergency preparedness by providing capacity building, training and equipment. There are now 196 emergency management coordinators in first nations communities, helping to better prepare for and respond to emergency events in a culturally relevant way, and we work every day to increase those numbers.

We've also begun to do more work in structural mitigation. Since 2016, we've invested more than \$121 million to support 103 structural mitigation projects. That will benefit 107 first nations communities that serve approximately 116,000 people. We need to do more of this, and we need to do it quickly.

First nations voices have to come first, though, when determining plans for their communities. Indeed, there have been efforts many times by a colonial government to determine for first nations how to prepare and respond in crises, and they inevitably fail. We know that integrating traditional knowledge and first nations-led solutions into emergency management planning is crucial, and there is a really good example of a success story.

Kashechewan First Nation's on-the-land initiative is a community-driven solution to protect its communities from the potential of flooding. Indigenous Services Canada supported this community-led solution that reflects their culture and that in turn enabled families to stay together—a really important point—foster stronger connections to the land and the community, and ensure their health, safety and well-being.

• (1540)

We've also made progress towards multilateral service agreements with first nations organizations and provinces. For example, the Government of Canada, the Province of British Columbia and the first nations leadership council have been working together through the current bilateral agreement and memorandum of understanding to develop a new emergency management multilateral agreement. What that means is including first nations leaders and organizations in the planning between provinces and the federal government so that their voices are heard and so they have far more input in matters that affect the day-to-day lives and indeed the safety and security of the people they represent. This will solidify first nations' roles and decisions affecting their communities. It also strengthens capacity to prepare, mitigate, respond to and recover from future climate-related emergencies.

First signed in 2018 and renewed in February was the collaborative emergency management agreement between the Tsilhqot'in nation government, the Government of Canada and the Government of British Columbia. This agreement was the first of its kind in Canada, and it works to build trust and strengthen relationships in the spirit of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

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

There is a lot more to do. We know we need to act quickly on the recommendations in the Auditor General's report to sign agreements and to build structural mitigation efforts.

My job as minister is to press for service excellence and transformation as well as to seek the additional investments needed to support better emergency management services for first nations. I will continue to do that in partnership with indigenous people.

Meegwetch, thank you, merci.

• (1545)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll now proceed with the first round of questions, each being six minutes.

We'll start with Mr. Vidal.

Mr. Gary Vidal (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, everybody.

Minister, when did you first get and read the AG report?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I would have to check my calendar, Mr. Vidal, but it was some weeks ago. Then I had a conversation with the Auditor General prior to her releasing the report.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you.

I had the opportunity to speak with the Auditor General when she appeared at public accounts last week and then at INAN earlier this week, so I've had some conversations with her through committee appearances.

There was a pretty extreme level of disappointment and frustration with everybody at the table at that point. In fact, the Auditor General, in her opening comments, said, "Many of the issues we are raising today in this audit were findings in our 2013 audit of emergency management on reserves. I'm frustrated that almost a decade later, there has been little to no improvement."

I made the comment at other committees earlier that this is not an Ottawa bubble thing. In my community, this is a people on the ground thing that affects the quality of lives.

My next question is simply, what was your initial reaction when you read the report?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: My initial reaction was, first of all, to appreciate the enormous challenge that the federal government, indeed all governments, are going to have as we pivot from responding to the climate crisis to the adaptation and preparedness piece.

Really, in terms of adaptation, what we're talking about is climate-resilient infrastructure, which will require a huge investment in terms of infrastructure expenditures.

I also felt that it was important to lean into that report, quite frankly, because this is obviously first nations people on the front lines and this affects all communities across Canada. I thought of this as a way to ensure that the people most affected at this particular time have a fulsome response from the government, and that's what I hope and have been trying.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you.

When you say you wanted to lean in, I'm going to go back to a couple of quotes of yours from the last couple of weeks. In the House of Commons last week, you said that Indigenous Services Canada is doing a great job and that the Auditor General said that.

Then, in the Senate earlier this week, you said that, in fact, the Auditor General found that the department was extraordinarily responsive to helping communities in times of crisis.

I asked the Auditor General last week if those words were anywhere in the report or if you had some other information that we didn't get. She said they were not, so I guess my challenge is that we've been talking a lot this week about Bill C-29 and truth and reconciliation. If we're going to have reconciliation, we need to start with the truth. The truth needs to matter, or there is no trust.

You talked about trust in your comments as well. This is a relationship that all governments of the past have been challenged with, having trust in this relationship. We need to build trust if we're going to have true reconciliation.

Based on the comments you made in the House and in the Senate, my question is simply, how do you think the people who are affected by this report or the people on the ground who are experiencing these repeated disasters feel when they hear you publicly defending the department on these reports?

• (1550)

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much, through the chair.

First of all, I'll say that people who are listening to my comments are not choosing one particular part of an entire reflection. My reflection was on conversations with the department and, indeed, indigenous people about the responsiveness of the department to help in crisis management. I also, as I said, fully agree with the Auditor General's perspective that we need, as a federal government, to pivot towards prevention and adaptation. I have been very fulsome in my responses.

To take one part of a response and imply it is the only answer is, in fact, dishonest. I would say that, for me, it is important to acknowledge when good things are happening, in terms of all hands pitching in, in a time of crisis, but also—

Mr. Gary Vidal: Minister—

Hon. Patty Hajdu: —to acknowledge that we need to make those incredible investments in infrastructure, adaptation and preparedness, which will help prevent some of those crisis responses.

Mr. Gary Vidal: The same recommendations you're agreeing to this time were made in 2013.

With the time I have left, I want to talk specifically about the risk-based approach recommended in the report. The report found the department did not implement a risk-based approach to manage emergencies, as required under the Emergency Management Act. The Auditor General said this finding was identified in 2013 and again in internal audit reports of the department in 2013 and 2017. A risk-based approach identifies, analyzes and evaluates the risk in these communities, so the proper actions can be taken.

The challenge or frustration I have is that we need to acknowledge the concerns, or we can't fix the issues. If I misinterpreted your words, that's a fair argument, but when I hear those public comments it frustrates me, because somebody has to be accountable to make the changes we agreed to in these reports. Somebody has to own this.

With the short time we have left, can you share with the committee how you, as the minister, will hold the department—or somebody in the department—to account, in order to ensure we make the change and move to a risk-based approach from a proposal-based one?

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

The first thing we could all do is agree we need to make investments in mitigation and prevention efforts. In fact, your party—I think that includes you—voted against this in recent budget votes. It's very important that we understand that any kind of fiscal prudence must not come at the expense of investments we make for indigenous people. For too long, indigenous people have been waiting for those investments.

I would hope that given your comments, you will be an ally, and that when there are expenditures proposed for indigenous peoples, you will stand beside the government, agree to those expenditures, and push the government to spend more—which is opposite to the message I hear from the other side of the House.

This is our duty as a partner and colonial country: Right the wrongs we have inflicted on indigenous peoples since time immemorial.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vidal.

We'll now go to Mrs. Atwin for six minutes.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin (Fredericton, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you so much, Minister, for appearing today, and I thank your team as well.

I want to focus on the importance of involving indigenous voices and communities themselves in this process. The Auditor General testified last week on the importance of prioritizing and supporting first nation management plans as a key step in addressing the gaps that exist and acting with a more collaborative and preventative approach.

Can you explain to the committee why it's important to have first nations communities lead the way with their own approaches that work for them? If you've visited any communities where you might have learned some lessons about this, perhaps you could share that with us.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much, through you, Mr. Chair.

Let's begin with the displacement of indigenous people, and why indigenous people are in such risky situations to begin with. In fact, it was a process of colonization that moved indigenous people from the most viable land to places where most people would not be able to survive, oftentimes. There are extreme examples of displacement. There are many people in flood plains, areas prone to forest fires and burning, and remote locations that are all increasingly

threatened by climate change—including, by the way, in the north, as I'm sure your colleague, Ms. Idlout, could attest to. The warming of the climate in northern locations is increasingly jeopardizing communities. That's a product and result of colonization.

I will also say this: It isn't the colonizer who knows the solutions. We have to be there as a viable partner with the appropriate resources and mechanisms that might even include—that do include—the co-development of legislation. We have to be there as a listening partner in order to understand how best to support communities as they do this hard work themselves. It is a sad reality of colonization that the colonizer will never know what the answer is to decolonize. However, we have a responsibility to be there, as a partner, with enabling tools that will help communities do that work.

• (1555)

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Thank you very much, Minister.

You've spoken extensively with indigenous partners over the last year in your role. What have you learned specifically about what it's like for a community to be evacuated, and that experience of trauma? When these communities are in distress, how can the government and Canadians show compassion towards these communities that are facing such extremely difficult situations?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: This is such an important question. I've spoken to communities recently that have experienced this. I am a member of Parliament who comes from Thunder Bay—Superior North, and my colleague is also from northern Ontario. Many larger northern urban centres host people who are evacuated as a result, largely, of forest fires in our area, but sometimes flooding.

This is a very traumatic experience. People are sometimes staged in terms of the way they are removed from their community. For example, elders or moms and children might leave first, leaving capable men behind to help with the next stage. People leave their animals behind. There are often challenges with feeding animals. There are all the things you can imagine. Worrying about what's happening to the contents of your house and your day-to-day life in your own community is always very stressful.

Then, sadly—and this is extremely excruciating to listen to and watch as an ally and an advocate—people experience oftentimes extreme racism in the communities to which they are moved.

All of that results in an enormous amount of trauma. Sometimes people are out of their homes for weeks; sometimes it's for years, depending on the severity of the damage to the community.

Of course, all of that is extremely disruptive. The Indigenous Services team has trauma-informed counsellors. We also have some new programs that involve training indigenous first responders, mental health first responders, and coordinators and system navigators, which is starting to show some promise in terms of helping people. Nonetheless, even with supports it can be incredibly damaging for communities and for families and individuals.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Thank you very much. With my remaining time I'll focus on the need for capacity building in communities.

How can your department, Indigenous Services Canada, best address the issue of the need to build capacity for emergency responses in communities?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: It's an excellent question. Communities, of course, come in all different sizes and shapes and capacities. Some communities have enormous capacity to do this work on the ground. Other communities are managing many other kinds of emergencies on a daily basis.

The department works closely with communities of all different sizes and across regions to make sure they have the tools they need. It's a very real and live issue.

We have a new program that is available for first nations communities that are seeking to increase capacity. It was introduced in budget 2021 by my colleague, Minister Miller, to help support communities that are interested in increasing financial capacity, governance capacity. This is an ongoing piece of work, and it is our responsibility to do it.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: In my last 30 seconds I want to take a moment to celebrate the work that's being done in Indigenous Services Canada and how refreshing it is to hear a minister use words like "decolonizing", not take the defensive approach, and understand that this is a whole-of-government issue and that it's going to take all of us.

Thank you so much for your remarks today.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you. *Wela'lin*.

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

[*Translation*]

I now yield the floor to Mr. Ste-Marie for six minutes.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie (Joliette, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon to my colleagues.

Good afternoon, Minister. Thank you for being with us.

Ms. Atwin talked about celebrating the work of the department. Is that what you did when you saw the Auditor General's report?

• (1600)

[*English*]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: No—and thank you, Mr. Chair.

I apologize for speaking in English.

[*Translation*]

One day, I will speak in French.

[*English*]

I want to say that is not the spirit in which we received the Auditor General's report. We received it with a great deal of humility and a great deal of resolve that we would indeed accept all those recommendations and begin the hard work of implementing them, in particular those around helping first nations communities to access the kinds of financial and practical supports they need to do more fulsome preparedness and planning.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: A few months ago, as Chief of the Atikamekw community of Manawan, which is located north of my riding, Mr. Paul-Émile Ottawa came to relate what happened when a fire broke out in his community in 2011. He reminded us that he and his council had to immediately purchase the equipment to fight the fire. There was no government fire prevention plan in place. It was the community that advanced the money to buy the water pumps to draw water from the lake. Then the community had to fight with the department for several months to get a refund. This is an example of the problems that are being raised now. If money had been invested in prevention, this would not have happened.

I would just like to remind you that at the end of the summer, Chief Paul-Émile Ottawa presented his candidacy as a councillor and today, Mr. Sipi Flamand is the new chief of the Atikamekw community of Manawan, which I invite you to visit. It is a very beautiful community.

This example eloquently illustrates what the Auditor General's report shows. It says that the department, in 20 years, has never assessed the risk factors in the communities. It also says that the department accepted 112 emergency management projects submitted by communities, but did not fund them to implement them. You alluded to this. It also says that the budget for emergency response is three and a half times greater than the budget for prevention. So we have an approach that says it is better to cure than to prevent. This has to change. I'm going to ask a question in relation to that.

In the last budget, significant sums were granted to better fund Indigenous Services Canada. Will this money be sufficient to fund the 112 projects already accepted, as well as new projects to come, to better protect communities from the risks associated with emergencies? If so, how many years do you estimate it will take to catch up, that is to say, when will all 112 accepted projects be funded and completed, and when will the department be able to respond appropriately without falling behind?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: This is a very complex question. Thank you.

[*English*]

First of all, I should really note here that the provinces are important partners in emergency management and in emergency preparedness. Indeed, we encourage the provinces to work closely with first nations, as well as the federal government. We have a five-year service agreement, for example, that was signed with the Government of Quebec to provide support to first nations communities when their capacity to respond is exceeded. The Government of Quebec then invoices Indigenous Services Canada for expenses incurred by Quebec departments and agencies when a request for assistance to first nations is referred to them by Indigenous Services Canada.

This is a really important piece to realize, and it reminds me a bit of my time as Minister of Health and COVID, in that the federal government is an enabling partner. Indeed, we rely on the provinces and territories, who have expertise in emergency management, to help respond to these emergencies. By the way, the first nations in Quebec are indeed Quebec residents, and are entitled to that kind of support and care.

I will turn to the department official to speak a bit more about that particular situation, and perhaps she can answer how she thinks the ongoing maintenance of the funding requests will be managed.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Kenza El Bied (Director General, Sector Operations Branch, Regional Operations Sector, Department of Indigenous Services): Thank you, Minister.

Thank you for the question, Mr. Ste-Marie.

In fact, your question involves several sub-questions.

First of all, I want to assure you that we will meet with the chief. So, if there are any issues that have not yet been resolved, we will make sure that he receives the necessary services from us.

With respect to requests submitted as a result of emergencies, the community provides the services first, because our program...

• (1605)

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Excuse me, may I interrupt to remind you that the specific question I would like to have answered is about the 112 projects. How long will it take for them to be funded and implemented, given the last budget?

Ms. Kenza El Bied: All right.

At the time the report was being written, there were 112 projects, but now there are only 94. So there is progress.

It must be said that our current program has limited funds. We are working to get more funds to meet all these needs.

So the work is ongoing. I don't know exactly when these project applications will be processed, but we are working with the communities every day to process them and find a way to fund these projects as soon as possible.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Thank you.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Is my time up already? Time flies when you're in good company.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ste-Marie.

The Chair: You will have other opportunities to speak, Mr. Ste-Marie.

[*English*]

Ms. Idlout, you have six minutes.

Ms. Lori Idlout (Nunavut, NDP): *Qujannamiik, Iksivautaq.*

Welcome, Minister Hajdu and the team you have brought with you.

My colleague Blake Desjarlais, the MP for Edmonton Griesbach, had hoped to ask you these questions. He meant to be here. Unfortunately, he couldn't make it, so I'll be asking this question that he asked me to ask you.

Joanne Wilkinson, an official within your department, appeared at a meeting of the public accounts committee about this audit that we're talking about today. There was a discussion about the same \$12 million for the first nation infrastructure fund, which is available to fund the 94 unfunded structural mitigation projects. It was mentioned that the estimated cost of these 94 project proposals would be \$358 million.

During that committee meeting last Friday, my colleague Blake questioned the deputy minister about this very pressing issue. He asked her whether the amount of funding was sufficient, and she said that more money than that \$12 million is needed. She clearly stated that her department had requested \$300 million from you, Minister Hajdu, and that she had received a favourable response.

My question to you, Minister Hajdu, is this. Will the \$358 million that the department requested be added to the first nation infrastructure fund in the next federal budget?

Qujannamiik.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Whenever we talk about millions or hundreds of millions, I get a little anxious, because it's not my decision, as you know. This will be a decision of the finance minister and the Prime Minister for budget 2023.

Certainly, the department every year gives me a very ambitious request to ask for on behalf of the first nations we service across the country for many different aspects of first nations life. I think it's fair to say that I am an ambitious minister as well.

I look forward, as we deliberate about this and many other issues that are critically underfunded—including infrastructure, including health service delivery and including many other aspects—to having the support of the members around this table to urge and advocate for first nations people, but also to vote positively when we get a decent budget.

Ms. Lori Idlout: *Qujannamiik.*

My follow-up question to that is this. When the Auditor General was here, I asked about when these projects became eligible. Her response was that it is since about 2013.

It's been well known for a long time that these needs existed for first nations communities. Knowing that these needs have been known for all these years, have you made submissions to the cabinet and to those places requesting larger funds in addition to the \$12 million?

I understand what your department has requested. I understand what it has ended up with, but have you, in the past, requested that more be added to this fund?

• (1610)

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I believe that budget letters are considered confidential, so I can't speak about the contents, but I can tell you that I am a very aggressive minister and I look for sufficient funding for first nations people to do the work that we know needs to be done.

I will also say this. The department is very thoughtful in its budget submission. The officials also know the gap. They also know the capacity of the department to be able to work with first nations to get the money out the door. It's also important that we spend the money we get in budgets.

These are the considerations that go through my mind every year as I prepare my budget letter for the finance minister.

Ms. Lori Idlout: Knowing that this \$12 million has not been enough since 2013, when you get their responses to your submissions, what are the reasons that are given when the request is not being provided for?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: When the budget document is revealed to all of us as members of Parliament, those decisions, as you know, are made by the finance minister and the Prime Minister. It isn't so much that we receive a reason that certain amounts are funded. Sometimes we may know that, given expenditure history and that kind of thing. The difficult decision-making of government is to decide how it will spend money on the competing priorities across government. What happens right after is that the department goes through the budget with a fine-tooth comb, determines what it has for various different pieces of work, and then begins to plan the work for the year ahead, based on what the allocation is to the department.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Idlout.

We'll now start a second round, beginning with Mr. Melillo, for five minutes.

Mr. Eric Melillo (Kenora, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister and team, for being here to talk about emergency responses for first nations. Obviously, Minister, as you know, it's something that's very important for me and my riding.

One emergency that exists right now in first nations.... I've heard from many first nations in my riding about the shortage of children's medicines. Of course, that's something we're seeing right across the country. The concerns we're hearing are that Health Canada has secured additional doses of children's medicines to distribute to hospitals across the country, but there's no indication if any of these will end up in nursing stations in first nations.

Minister, can you confirm whether or not first nations will receive any of these medicines?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: The First Nations and Inuit Health Branch works very closely with the Public Health Agency of Canada and Health Canada to make sure we don't have any critical shortages of medications that are used in community nursing stations. I will turn to my official in a minute to confirm, but my understanding right now is that we do not have a shortage, and that first nations community health stations have children's medications. We are monitoring that very closely.

If you know of a particular community that is experiencing that shortage, and I would say this to all members of Parliament, please don't hesitate to give me a call or send me a note, and we will look into that situation urgently.

Mr. Eric Melillo: I appreciate that.

I'll just flag, Minister, that I have followed up with your office a number of times about this and haven't had much of a response, so I'll make sure I do that again. I appreciate that response.

To your knowledge, again to the original question, none of the medicines that have been secured by Health Canada in that first batch are destined for first nations. Is that correct?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'll turn to my official to speak about the details.

Ms. Gina Wilson (Deputy Minister, Department of Indigenous Services): What I've seen is a very detailed tracking system of all medications, or reporting of any shortages. There are none. I can confirm that, as requested by the minister.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: You have my cellphone number, so if someone doesn't call you back, let me know.

Mr. Eric Melillo: All right. I'll definitely do that. We have heard of shortages in my riding. Clearly, there's a gap in what's happening on the ground versus the information that's there. I'll definitely make sure to follow up.

With the limited time I have, I will turn back more directly to the report we have before us today. Minister, you've talked a lot about the need for more money. I recognize that funding in dollars is definitely an important aspect of this, but I'd caution as well. A PBO report that was released in May showed that the increase in funding in indigenous services has not necessarily led to equivalent results for indigenous peoples and communities on the ground.

That's somewhat reflected in the Auditor General's report as well. It shows that around 22% of the budget for emergency management is going toward preparedness rather than recovery. There's definitely more of an emphasis on responding to emergencies than there is on mitigating and preventing them. Are there plans in your department now to change those percentages and change those funding models to ensure we are putting more resources toward mitigating and preventing, rather than merely responding to these emergencies?

• (1615)

Hon. Patty Hajdu: It's a good question. First of all, we'll never stop responding. Those financial and other demands will not do anything but grow as we see climate continue to threaten first nations communities.

If there's any expectation that there will be a reduction in emergency response costs, we will see that sometime in the future. Indeed, even with mitigation, adaptation and better infrastructure, when a calamity occurs there is a need to respond. Indigenous Services Canada will always be there and will work in partnership with provinces and territories to make sure people are safe. That's our top-line job.

Having said that, this is the challenge. The pivot is, how do you do two things at once? It's not unlike other kinds of prevention conversations. We know, for example, that we should spend more on health prevention to reduce the load in hospitals, yet we have a hard time switching, as a society, from focusing on responding to the prevention.

I think we have to do both. I think we're going to have to continue to sustain our funding for emergency response while also ensuring that we become more reflective of the need to make investments that reflect the incredible pressure that infrastructure and people are facing as a result of climate change.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Melillo.

[Translation]

I now give the floor to Mr. Weiler for five minutes.

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

I am very grateful for the presence of the minister and the officials.

[English]

I would like to start with some comments you made before, Minister.

I appreciate your comments recognizing the impact that colonization has had on exacerbating the risk that indigenous communities face. I do have a particular example with the Lil'wat Nation in my riding, which has been relocated to a location where it's subject to many different natural disaster risks.

You also mentioned the trauma that's experienced by indigenous people who are displaced. We saw that in B.C. last year with the indigenous people who were displaced by the heat dome and the fire in Lytton. Only a year later, folks started returning, but many of the indigenous people who were displaced were relocated into other indigenous communities.

For the reasons you already mentioned, there is a distrust when the government wants to relocate indigenous people. With this in mind, and to avoid the trauma you spoke of earlier, how does the government support this type of culturally appropriate temporary relocation?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: That's a really great question. I will say that it's increasingly through an indigenous-led and determined approach. Not all communities want the same types of supports and not all supports work the same way in different communities and with different people.

For example—and this is not a climate-related emergency—I was in James Smith Cree Nation last week. I met with some of the family members who are dislocated from their homes as a result of damage from the horrific violence that took place in their homes.

One family—a man who has been bereaved of his wife; his surviving child, who was also a victim; and his two or three other young children—is staying in a hotel that is not in the community and in an urban setting. It is exceedingly difficult for that man as he grieves while also trying to support his children from the location of a hotel room.

In that case, of course, the family is receiving a variety of different mental health supports, but he told me that indeed it is the connection with cultural elders and some traditional healing practices that are giving the most relief from the excruciating grief, pain, fear and trauma-related disorders the entire family is facing. All the children are still out of school. It is a very challenging situation.

If you think about an entire community in that kind of space, it takes an enormous lift.

The department works extremely hard at being sensitive to the requests of the community and individual community members about what kinds of supports and services would be appropriate. We also work with partners like the Canadian Red Cross and other kinds of service delivery organizations when there's a mass evacuation, for example, to make sure that people get supports while they're dislocated. They're oftentimes staying in hotels or other larger convention centre-types of situations.

Maybe I can turn to Joanne to speak a bit about what that diversity looks like.

• (1620)

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Regional Operations Sector, Department of Indigenous Services): Absolutely.

We certainly, as the minister said, work directly with communities, because first nations need to be full and equal partners in that conversation. They need to drive what those support services look like. If that's in Manitoba, we work with the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs. They have an ambassadors program. We support those ambassadors in assisting communities.

In Ontario we'll work with tribal councils or with other organizations that are local to the evacuation site, and also work in direct partnership with indigenous leadership to ensure that people have access to services. We'll ensure that Jordan's principle services are available for families, and that education services are available where that's appropriate, if there's a longer-term evacuation. We make sure communities have what they need and are able to shape and frame what those supports look like.

Mr. Patrick Weiler: Thank you.

The audit noted that the lack of service agreements in certain provinces is increasing the risk that first nations communities are facing, and that they will not receive emergency services when they're most needed. The lack of agreements is also increasing ambiguity and confusion about roles and responsibilities.

You mentioned earlier in your statement the MOU that was concluded in B.C. I was wondering what lessons other provinces could learn from this. What is preventing more such agreements from being concluded right across the country?

The Chair: Answer fairly quickly, please.

In the Auditor General's report, it says they worry about that issue. I am wondering what is being done for those people, and what services they have been working on.

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you.

I've met with Peguis First Nation leaders now a number of times to hear about the work they were doing to restore the capacity for community members to come home after—as you pointed out—a very long time away from the community. Then, of course, they were hit with yet another catastrophic flood this spring, and even more people are now displaced.

My heart goes out to Peguis, to the people of Peguis and to the leaders who are struggling just to get their feet under them in an area that is prone to flooding with a repeat occurrence like that. It has to be demoralizing as you see progress in getting people home and then have the rug pulled out from under your feet.

We have a new memorandum of understanding with Peguis about how to move forward, including some of the prevention work that the Auditor General is speaking about, as well as a plan to rebuild. There are many difficult decisions ahead for Peguis in terms of how that will look and whether or not there is a viable future in some parts of Peguis, given the propensity to flood.

These are the horrible decisions that first nations are staring at every single day in some communities that are being increasingly threatened by unpredictable weather—in this case, flooding, a result of Peguis's being placed in a flood plain. We will do that work together.

Joanne, perhaps you can speak about where we're at.

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: Absolutely.

In fact, I had the pleasure—with my colleague, Kenza El Bied—of being in Peguis just last week and having discussions about breathing life into that memorandum of understanding, taking a risk-based approach.

We have, with Peguis, provided a number of advanced payments so that their financial situation is not impacted by their needing to have that cash outlay. Usually we reimburse, but in the case of Peguis we've done a number of advanced payments to ease that burden on the first nation.

There is certainly a lot of work to do, and we're committed to continuing to do that work in partnership.

Thank you.

• (1630)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Idlout.

For everybody's information, we started 10 minutes late because of the vote, so we'll conclude our hour with the minister with five minutes from Mr. Zimmer followed by five minutes with Mr. Badawey.

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the minister for coming today to talk about the Auditor General's report on emergency management in first nations communities.

I have many first nations communities in my own riding in northern B.C. We saw a recent example, even, of some of the struggles. We had a windstorm last year, and even throughout that particular crisis, where trees were down, etc., getting access was a challenge in order to get the power back on. We see even now, where those trees are still down, that it's posing a possible risk of forest fire and risks to our communities.

You mentioned something earlier, and a key word caught my ear, about the “disjointed” relationship. I'll maybe do a bit more of a preamble here. I've come to another minister about certain administrative issues in some of these first nations that I represent as their MP. We have tried to deal with administrative challenges, and the minister has said, look, I just can't get involved.

To me, that kind of highlights what you said about a disjointed relationship. They're asking the federal government to step in and govern, because there are no other groups to ask to do that. They're community members asking that the government step in with administrative challenges and do something, but there's a hands-off approach. They called the office number several times, whether it was one minister or the other, and got no answer to their question.

We're talking about emergency response, so I will get back to that. It does highlight, however, the disjointed nature of the relationship.

Paragraph 8.6 in the auditor's report reads as follows:

The department does not provide direct emergency response services to First Nations communities. The department negotiates emergency management service agreements with provinces or other service providers, such as the Canadian Red Cross, to provide emergency services in First Nations communities.

You know, I see that you're making a sincere effort to do what you're saying, but what measure do you have in place to really make sure it happens? For us, the way I would phrase it is that it's spending versus outcomes. How do you make sure the outcomes you're talking about here are realized in the community? Who makes sure it happens?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Like in any democracy, the people do. What you're proposing is that the federal government would interfere with an independent level of government, really. These are elected leaders who are responsible to the citizens of their community. In fact, a colonial practice prior, over many years, was to interfere in the governing of communities. The description—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Maybe I'll just clarify this a little. This might clear it up.

It's when service providers are provided with contracts and service agreements—the Canadian Red Cross or whatever the provider is. I'm not saying it's the communities themselves. I'm asking how you make sure that the service providers are providing the service.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: That's a completely different question. I'm sorry. I was confused about your accountability comments earlier on.

I will say that those are contracts. There are requirements for the service providers to live up to those contracts. In fact, by and large, service providers do that in a state of emergency. If you'll recall, the Auditor General's distress in this report is about the prevention and the infrastructure expenditures that need to happen to reduce the expensive evacuations and other kinds of urgent responses.

Maybe I could turn to officials to—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Let me just say, in answer to that comment, that paragraph 8.12 on the next page says, "Overall, Indigenous Services Canada did not provide the support First Nations communities needed to manage emergencies such as floods and wildfires, which are happening more often and with greater intensity."

This is getting to what I'm saying about outcomes.

• (1635)

Hon. Patty Hajdu: She is referring to the mitigation.

Let me turn to the officials to talk about how you hold service providers accountable.

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: Certainly, it is a conversation that we have in partnership with those who are receiving the service. It's not just about our making sure that from our perspective those conditions are being met. We do that through constant communication and follow-up, and sometimes difficult conversations. We want to ensure that those agreements are working for those who are receiving the services, so that is done in partnership with leadership and with other providers in that area.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Zimmer.

Mr. Badawey, you have five minutes.

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

I appreciate the attendance by the minister.

I guess to keep this in perspective, and to some extent in answering Mr. Ste-Marie's earlier questions, we're playing catch-up here. There have been a lot of years and a lot of parties governing, and with respect to what we're dealing with today, it goes back decades, if not generations.

That said, as Mr. Vidal alluded to, it is a process that's going to take all of us. This is not partisan. This is not politics. This is business, and it's going to take all of us to come together not only as the whole of government but as the whole of Parliament, to advocate on the issues we're discussing today.

That said, the recommendations we're expecting to come out of this committee are going to do just that. We heard about a report from the Auditor General that came back and that unfortunately didn't look at a lot of the whole-of-government strategies that were put in place already, including public safety, emergency preparedness, infrastructure and, of course, ISC, in dealing with climate change, infrastructure, asset management and emergency prepared-

ness, which are frankly part and parcel of and relevant overall to what we're discussing today with respect to emergency preparedness and management. That's not to mention the different partners beyond the federal government here in Ottawa: the provincial governments and, of course, the communities that are paramount and are affected by the decisions made by the partners, working with all government departments.

With that, my question for the minister is this. When you look at the report coming down to us from the Auditor General, one, what efforts, what directions and what strategies are being put in place, led by ISC—by you, Minister—with relevant departments that must participate, especially when we look at the different things I mentioned earlier—climate change, infrastructure, asset management, etc.—and two, what levels of government are you also working with to ensure that ultimately what we're discussing today is being dealt with?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'll start at the beginning, because you're right: We're playing catch-up. In fact, in 2011, at the end of her mandate as Auditor General of Canada, Sheila Fraser summed up her impression of the government's actions, after 10 years of audits and related recommendations on first nations issues, with the word "unacceptable".

Prevention and mitigation were never funded for first nations by the then Conservative government, but you're right: It was Liberal governments in the past as well. That has changed. In fact, our government has invested \$259 million in new funding on mitigation and prevention efforts. This is all new. This is a new space, and it's an important space.

It should be embarrassing to all of us that we haven't done a better job as a treaty partner, as a partner in many other ways, with first nations indigenous people over decades of commitments. We should all be embarrassed by that, and we can all do better.

It means that when there is proposed new spending on not just this particular file but on reducing climate change, on climate adaptation and on things like innovation and infrastructure, how will we pay for the infrastructure gap, not just in first nations, but across this country? Tough times are coming, folks, and things are changing. I think we all see that in our own lives, so there are big questions ahead of every government in the world, really, but certainly our government, and that's what we're speaking about today in terms of that pivot.

You're right. Can we continue through the public safety approach that we currently have as climate disasters get bigger and bigger? Who do we need to have at the table? What kinds of partnerships do we need to have and can we learn something from first nations people, who have far vaster experience in this land than we do?

That's the challenge, colleagues. It is to change the way we think about this from a begrudging duty to an opportunity, and I look forward to taking that opportunity with first nations partners across this country.

Thank you.

• (1640)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Badawey.

Colleagues, please don't get up from your seats. I'm not going to suspend. I am just going to thank the minister for her testimony today in this first hour, and we're going to start right in on round number three.

With that, I would invite Mr. Dreeshen to take five minutes.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen (Red Deer—Mountain View, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'm honoured to be here at this committee. I spent a number of years on such a committee. As a matter of fact, when we speak about what happened back in 2013, I was at that table. Of course, we were in the process of going through truth and reconciliation and the development of all the things that were important to our indigenous friends.

I spent some time in the territories and had a chance to meet with quite a few business leaders. That's really where I want to take my comments. I've seen what goes on. I have seen the leadership that we have in our northern communities. I have said to so many people that if you want to have a really good CEO to run your companies, you would find a lot of them in any one of our northern territories.

When the minister was mentioning concerns about our colonialist past, somehow I feel we haven't got past that. Just last week, when we were dealing with natural resources, we had Calvin Helin in. One of the books he has penned is *Dances with Dependency*. I made sure that everyone who ever came into my office read that, just to make sure that we understood what our responsibility was.

I've listened to quite a few ministers over the last couple of days, and every one of them is saying that our only focus is how we are going to mitigate climate change. How are we going to stop the concerns that exist? We seem to forget that in a lot of our indigenous communities, the strength of those communities is their knowledge and ability to manage the resources that are there. They are looking for that opportunity to manage their resources. As Mr. Helin said, we seem to be back into a position of eco-colonialism, where we have governments saying, "I think we know exactly what you need, and because of that, here's how we're going to dole out the options and the opportunities for you."

How are we ever going to get to the stage where we really give them that opportunity to bring their expertise to the table?

[Translation]

The Chair: I would like to take this opportunity to welcome Ms. Valerie Gideon, associate deputy minister.

Ms. Gideon, would you like to answer the question?

Ms. Valerie Gideon (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Indigenous Services): Yes, Mr. Chair.

[English]

Good afternoon. Thank you very much.

One of the roles we have in the department is that we have been funding communities, including northern communities, by working closely with Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs on an environmental, climate change and health adaptation program. It's like a program that funds community-based knowledge-gathering, dialogue and planning with respect to climate change and

health adaptation. That's one of the contributions we have made in the national adaptation strategy.

Some really interesting community-based research initiatives have been funded through this. I can send information to your office. It has existed for quite some time. It enables that exact thing whereby communities can then come forward and have a voice and present to governments what they need to inform their climate change and health adaptation.

• (1645)

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Perhaps I didn't make myself clear. There are aboriginal communities that want to get involved in the oil and gas industry. They want to make sure the knowledge they have gained over decades of working in that industry is being advanced. They realize, because they, too, as I mentioned, are experts in the field, that what we have in Canada is the highest quality and highest level of environmentalism in the world. They are asking, as many are, why we aren't selling that technology around the world if we really want to make a difference.

I was in England for an OSCE meeting this summer. We were talking about food security, energy security and security because of what was happening in Ukraine. We are starting to see what the problems are when people go too far with their ecological plans. If we just continue saying to the indigenous people, "Well, we know what's best, and we're going to make sure you have all the money you need, as long as you follow the plans that we have," I really think is a mistake.

That's why I wanted to make sure we understood it. When you say that you had a whole bunch of money there so they could follow this plan that you have, that's great, but that's not what they're all saying. I'm just wondering whether there is a recognition somewhere in the departments that it's the case.

Ms. Valerie Gideon: To make sure that I was clear in my previous answer, this is funding for communities to identify their own priorities and develop their own plans. This is not to respond to some federal plan.

We don't have a specific footprint in the territories in that space. However, I can tell you that in northern Ontario, for example, around the Ring of Fire, we have funded a number of projects at the federal level to support community development for communities to do their planning and identify their priorities. We've done that in a single window model through the strategic partnerships initiative that we have in our department, as well as with partners like the Federal Economic Development Agency for Northern Ontario, for example. The equivalent would be CanNor in the north.

We have an opportunity to work federally to support community development initiatives for communities that want to engage in terms of oil and gas, mining or these other larger, major projects.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dreeshen.

We'll go to Mr. Powlowski for five minutes.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): In the western part of my riding of Thunder Bay—Rainy River, we had a major problem with flooding in the spring and the summer of this year. It's the Winnipeg river system, so it includes Lake of the Woods and Rainy Lake. A number of indigenous communities were affected, including Lac La Croix, Seine River and Couchiching.

I know Indigenous Services is responsible for emergency response and preparedness in those communities, but it would seem to me that a large part of the problem is the whole river system. You do something at one level of the river system and it potentially exacerbates the problem in another part of the river system.

Is Indigenous Services working with other branches of government, such as the ministry of the environment and the ministries of infrastructure and emergency preparedness? That is probably the most important one.

Are you working with them to create a more generalized response and to look at ways of mitigating the future risk of flooding? It affects both the indigenous and the non-indigenous communities.

Ms. Valerie Gideon: I'll say that we are very integrated in the broader federal planning and strategies with Public Safety, and with all the departments you've mentioned.

In terms of flood and fire mitigation and assessments, and all of those pieces, I'll ask Joanne if she has anything specific about the Winnipeg river system.

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: Thank you very much.

This is exactly why we are seeking to work further with the Ontario government and with Ontario first nations on a multilateral agreement. Currently, we have the bilateral service agreement with Ontario. We have evolved the system of response to include first nations as full and equal partners, but getting to a multilateral agreement would enable us to have more of a governance model around some of those discussions. There are some that exist already, but having a structure around it would certainly assist.

I will say, as the associate mentioned, that we bring our federal partners to that table. Ontario also brings a wide variety of departments to the table so that we can have those discussions with leadership and, as you say, look at the systems as a whole. Floods, fires and all sorts of weather events do not stop and start at the reserve border or even at the provincial border.

We're trying to make sure we have conversations with both Ontario and Manitoba, where those systems intersect and interrelate. We try to make sure those are happening on a regular basis as well.

• (1650)

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: From my conversations with people, for example, who work in the Lake of the Woods and Rainy Lake water boards, which have federal and, I think, provincial members, it doesn't seem to me that as yet there has been an attempt to look at the system in its totality and what could be done in order to mitigate the chances of future flooding. Do you know...? Has that...?

I certainly wouldn't claim to know everything. Perhaps there has been some attempt to address the problem more globally. I don't expect you to have particular knowledge of this river system. I know you have a lot of other responsibilities.

If you don't know, could you look into it and let me know whether there has been any attempt to look at the whole system and what can be done to decrease the risk?

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: Yes, absolutely. I'm not familiar with the latest conversations, but we'll certainly look into that and get back to the committee.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: I know some people in Thunder Bay—and this is the municipal people—have said that when we get large numbers of people relocated from other communities to Thunder Bay, there are increased costs for the municipality. I'm not sure how true that is, but that has been the allegation, that it increased work for police and increased work for ambulance and emergency services. Is there any money that comes to the municipalities to pay for these excess costs?

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: Yes, absolutely. When there are costs that are a direct impact of evacuations from first nations on reserve, we work with all partners and with the Government of Ontario to make sure those costs are covered.

Ms. Valerie Gideon: I will just add, though, that there is a strong desire by many first nations to be more involved in terms of hosting other communities during emergency events, instead of relying on municipalities, for reasons the committee heard and spoke about earlier.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Powlowski.

[*Translation*]

I now give the floor to Mr. Ste-Marie for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In the minister's responses and the Liberal Party's comments, there was a lot of talk about provincial responsibility. I would like to make a small comment in relation to that.

When we meet with people from the Atikamekw community of Manawan and other first nations, the issue of referral is systematically part of the problems that are raised. When the communities make a request to Ottawa, they are told that it is Quebec's responsibility; in Quebec City, they are told that it is Ottawa's responsibility. It's as if services to first nations were a hot potato that they were systematically trying to get rid of. It's up to the community to take the steps and provide the proof, whereas there should be more coordination on the part of the different governments to ensure that services are provided.

You didn't catch all the conversation earlier today, so I'll just quickly preamble a bit with the idea of saying that we need to shift to mitigation. We need to shift to prevention and mitigation from the reactionary. That was pretty clear in the conversations we had last week at public accounts.

I want to drill into that a bit with you and just say that the department has had the report for longer than we've seen it in public, so to speak. Could you tell me of any kinds of specific actions and what's been going on inside the department that shows you understand we're making that shift, that there are some clear strategies, clear goals and clear steps in making that shift from reaction to being proactive, so to speak?

• (1700)

Ms. Valerie Gideon: We certainly have been working with our regional offices and our headquarters on the management action plan. This is what you would have. What we tabled last Friday was the first version. We are certainly looking at a more comprehensive approach. That has been a clear priority we have had.

I'll turn to Joanne to see if she has other concrete examples that she would like to give you. It's her team.

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: Absolutely.

We talked a little earlier around Peguis and the advance payments we've used there. Also, if you look at the indigenous community support fund—that was the COVID-specific fund—we had a funding model there whereby the bulk of the funding went to communities as direct allocations so that leadership could make decisions around what they needed to prevent, mitigate and deal with the COVID situation. We had some needs-based funding that we kept back. We did not require full proposals. We worked on a request basis, so there wasn't a lot of burdensome paperwork. However, it was held back for particularly acute situations where additional support was needed.

We're certainly working, as we said earlier, and looking to put first nations partners equally at the table when we're having those discussions with provinces when emergencies are upon us, but also looking at non-structural as well as structural mitigation projects. Those could be radio systems going in. The First Nations' Emergency Services Society in British Columbia, for example, has incredible mapping capability now that it didn't have prior to the last wildfire season. All of those pieces are going into place. We are not done yet. We have lots of opportunities to invest further, but certainly—

Mr. Gary Vidal: I'm sorry, but I'm going to need to stop you there. I want to get one more question in, and my time is limited.

Thank you for that. I don't mean to be rude.

There's another discussion I wanted to drill into today as we follow up on the discussions from the last few days, when we had the Auditor General both at public accounts and here at INAN. It's this idea of that change from the risk-based system to the proposal-based system.

We talk about 112 unfunded projects. That's had a great deal of discussion. We all know what we're talking about—74 of them

have been out there for more than five years, and four for a decade. There are 72 more projects out there that haven't been assessed yet.

Is there something being done in the department to concretely move to that risk-based assessment program from the proposal-based? It seems from the report that this proposal-based system is failing. It's been a challenge for many years. I'm not pointing fingers; it's been a problem for us.

I don't mean this to be rude, but who can best play the Indian Act administration game? We're working with a system that has been there for many years, and it is flawed.

Is there a way that you're working within the department to really concretely make that change? I get that it requires funding and a change in models and getting some of that upfront stuff, but is that being done? What does that look like, please?

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: There are a few things. We're certainly trying to work with our staff to make sure they are navigating and pathfinding for nations, so that they can assist in that proposal process. We are also, as I mentioned, with the ICSF funding, moving away from burdens and proposals and moving more to a request-based system.

We can talk further about the 112 proposals that were mentioned in the report. We certainly don't require that all of the time, when we're looking at emergency situations—

Mr. Gary Vidal: Sorry, but I have only a few.... You're talking about other application processes. You're making that.... Are we actually going out and doing risk assessments and evaluating the project based on priority?

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: Yes. We are absolutely evaluating projects based on priority, and with communities telling us what their priorities are.

Mr. Gary Vidal: I think that's my time.

Thank you.

The Chair: You had four seconds left. Thank you, Mr. Vidal.

We'll now go to Mr. McLeod for five minutes.

Mr. Michael McLeod (Northwest Territories, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the presenters today. It's a very interesting discussion.

In my previous life as an MLA with the Government of the Northwest Territories, I was a minister for a number of years, and one of my portfolios was emergency management. We dealt with many disasters in those days—floods and fires—and we had very little in terms of a relationship with the federal government of the day, which was the Conservative government. It was practically non-existent, so it's very exciting to see the involvement of the federal government when it comes to disasters that deal with indigenous people.

This past year we had quite a few floods in the Northwest Territories. I found it very refreshing to have the Minister of Indigenous Services, the Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations, the Minister of National Defence, the Minister of Public Safety, the regional director general for the Northwest Territories, and the Red Cross all reach out to the communities and offer their services and provide support. It was really comforting to know that everyone was there, working together.

We know there are going to be more disasters. We talk to the indigenous people in our communities. We have some reserves, but we mostly have public communities. A lot of the indigenous people say that some of the communities may have to move.

Historically, our people were nomadic and communities were built where there were flood zones. When you ask an indigenous person why they are located there, they say that this was their summer area. They never used to stay there in the winter, but the church set up there, or the government set up there, so they had to move there.

Anyway, now that there's more concern over disasters, are you listening to the indigenous people? Are you talking to them about traditional knowledge, about areas that are known by them to be flood zones? Even for forest fires, historically, indigenous people would use fires as a tool to burn fields where geese would land and burn brush where there was a threat of fire.

My question is this: Is that part of the discussion when you talk to indigenous governments, indigenous people, about disaster protection and preparedness?

• (1705)

Ms. Valerie Gideon: Yes, absolutely. This is a core component of making sure mitigation plans are developed by communities. We support that process.

I was referring to the program. We have one part of this program. Northern Affairs has another. It's the same type of program, but we fund it differently because of the differences between south of 60 and the north. Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs funds northern indigenous communities to have plans and discussions with respect to climate change and health adaptation, and to bring in traditional knowledge. It's absolutely an essential component of preventing future disasters, as well as improving the response.

We spoke about some of the innovation that happened in communities that wanted to go on the land when they were evacuated, instead of to a municipality. I remember when the former regional chief in NWT called me at the beginning of the pandemic and said, "Val, we would like to go on the land." He was part of a call. Our regional office was able to work with the territorial government in order to ensure there would be funding available for them to isolate on the land instead of in their homes for months at a time. It was definitely, from what I've heard, a much better and more rewarding experience than it was in other communities that didn't have the same opportunity.

In the context of the full continuum of emergency management, we absolutely have to ensure these are culturally based—that traditional approaches are considered.

Mr. Michael McLeod: My next question is specific to the Northwest Territories.

We have public communities and reserves, and then we have communities that are self-governing. It gets to be a bit blurry when it comes to who's responsible for what. We have 15 tables set up, all having discussions and negotiations. A lot of these are about self-governance. At some point, we're going to have quite a few nations in the Northwest Territories that are self-governing. They have land tenure and areas of responsibility that include emergency management.

How does the department stay engaged with them, or is that a responsibility dealt with by another department?

• (1710)

Ms. Valerie Gideon: I would say that for sure, our responsibilities in NWT are limited to the two on-reserve communities. I think these are Hay River and Salt River.

Mr. Michael McLeod: Yes, that's right.

Ms. Valerie Gideon: We have a bilateral service agreement with the territorial government. It expires in March 2023. That's one area we need to look at, in terms of how to have first nations engaged in that process and in public safety. There would be other federal departments engaging more broadly with the territorial government and indigenous partners in looking at how to advance. This also links to the national adaptation strategy on climate change and so forth.

Thank you for bringing it to us. We'll definitely look at that as an important relationship we need to build upon.

Mr. Michael McLeod: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McLeod.

Colleagues, I'm proposing that we start a fourth round, but a truncated one. Is that all right with everybody? Each party will get to have one person ask, then we'll call it a day. We have a couple of things to discuss.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Very good. I'm going to start with Mr. Melillo for five minutes.

Mr. Eric Melillo: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here with us today, for quite some time. Obviously, it's a very important discussion. We appreciate your time on this.

I want to go to the part of the report that states:

The department's preparedness and mitigation programs are proposal-based.

This approach allows First Nations to identify the activities that they believe are the most impactful. However, this approach does not ensure that First Nations at the highest risk of experiencing emergencies receive funding, since not all First Nations communities have the capacity to apply for funding.

That last line around not all communities having “the capacity to apply for funding” is, I think, a very important point. It's something we see in my area in Kenora. I have spoken with the minister about this privately as well. There isn't only the capacity aspect. Often-times we find there are many communities and community leaders who aren't aware of all the programs available.

I'm wondering whether you can provide information on what sorts of outreach opportunities and capacity-building exercises the department is doing to ensure communities are aware of all the programs available to them.

Ms. Valerie Gideon: As I mentioned earlier, in budget 2019 we were able to access a specific envelope for capacity enhancement, which was the first time we had the opportunity to do that. So far, we have those 196 emergency management coordinators who can act as that type of level of support in navigation, right? They can be housed in tribal councils. They can be housed in various service delivery organizations, or in communities as well.

I would say that our regional offices, as Joanne mentioned earlier, are making sure we are more proactive in terms of really going out and doing the outreach for nations where we have not seen requests come in. Also, there has been an expansion of the opportunities to do flood mapping, for example, and more monitoring and surveillance. The technology and the ability to do that have significantly improved across the country in the last couple of years. We saw it with hurricane Fiona and some of the coverage that went out on it. If we had not had that notice of even just a few days, it would have been a different scenario altogether with respect to the impacts of the hurricane.

These are things that are rapidly advancing. Our job is to advocate and to ensure that first nations will have access to those types of supports and to those types of intelligence initiatives, essentially.

Mr. Eric Melillo: I appreciate that.

You mentioned that method of outreach, especially with communities where there hasn't been a lot of action or many applications coming in. How does that notification process work? Is it a phone call? Is there something on paper? Could you maybe help to explain how communities are notified when those funding streams become available?

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: Absolutely, and I would say it's a mix. There's some proactive outreach, and we have frontline officers, funding services officers and those types of folks, who are also in regular contact with communities on the health side. Increasingly, we're making sure those conversations are integrated, so that it's all connected and we are doing the work for nations where they have challenges in terms of paperwork or in having those types of proposals come in.

We also increasingly have been holding joint gatherings across the country, so that nations leadership, technicians, provincial counterparts and federal counterparts gather in one spot. We try to use those to bring people to have some conversations that might not happen if you were sending an email, having a phone call and just having that organic discussion as well.

We're also looking to maximize the opportunities internally, right? If there is a situation that is emerging, we'll build on that and

go back post emergency to have further conversations about how we learn lessons from it and expand that to others as well.

Thanks.

● (1715)

Mr. Eric Melillo: I appreciate that. Thank you.

In a previous meeting with the Auditor General, I asked a question around the cost to first nations of these emergencies. Obviously the federal government and the provinces have a lot of support for communities, especially when it comes to evacuations and things of that nature, but there is also a cost to the first nations themselves.

I'm wondering if the department has any information or estimates around what those costs are for first nations when they are evacuating.

Ms. Valerie Gideon: We cover those costs through reimbursement of claims that are submitted to us. We are hoping that all communities have been sending us all of their bills, so that we are able to get a good sense of how the expenditures are rising.

It's important for us also for planning purposes, because part of the risk assessment is actually looking at the costs of the evacuations relating to specific first nations. That's part of the risk assessment. It definitely needs to be part of communities' emergency plans.

I don't know if you want to add anything, Kenza.

Ms. Kenza El Bied: Yes.

Something we do when there is a community that's facing an emergency situation is that we keep in contact with them and we go through all these costs. We make sure they have sufficient funding in place to respond to the situation. We help.

I'm just going to build on that. When we're talking about capacity, we have put in place a system whereby we connect with the community and with the members to respond to their needs and to see where there is a lack of capacity and how we can build it, either internally or by providing funds to increase the capacity for that moment.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Melillo.

We'll go to Ms. Atwin for five minutes.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to focus my questions around the recommendation from the report about improved reporting on progress towards United Nations sustainable development goals.

Can you speak, first of all, to why it's important to consider the United Nations sustainable development goals in the work of Indigenous Services Canada, and then to the reporting that has been done to date and perhaps the need to improve it?

Ms. Valerie Gideon: Typically, reporting of programs in government has been indicators around outputs like the number of people who have been evacuated and the number of people who have been repatriated. We contribute to the annual report of the government in terms of how Indigenous Services Canada and all of its suite of programs are advancing the UN's sustainable development goals.

I think the Auditor General's point was that within your actual, specific program, can you look at indicators that will be more reflective of those broader objectives of well-being, those broader objectives around sustainable environments? We can do that. We're going through a total renewal of our departmental results framework, which we see as a very important transformation.

Again, our department is not old. Our department was struck through a November 2017 order in council that enabled legislation a few years later. We've also faced multiple years, it feels like, of the pandemic in the midst of that. Our ability to do the full transformation that we've wanted to do has been a bit slowed down, but the departmental results framework, I think, is going to be absolutely key.

We agree with that recommendation, and it's linking things like mental health. Mental health and well-being, in the context of emergency preparedness and response, is a new concept for many. It's not something that was typically thought of in the context of planning efforts. We have looked at our whole health emergency preparedness plan in the context of the first nations mental wellness continuum framework.

I think it is just a question of making sure that the indicators of that program are more directly linked and establishing this and documenting that in the context of the program's management control framework and performance results framework.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: That's excellent. Thank you very much for that response.

I'll also focus in on the issue around communications. I've noticed in some reports around the AFN and looking at their emergency management responses that communication is an ongoing issue.

Can you speak to any innovations in communications that you have perhaps seen, or areas to be improved? I'm thinking about things like smoke alerts that are ahead of time so that communities can prepare. I'm just looking for innovations around communications issues.

● (1720)

Ms. Valerie Gideon: I'll turn to my colleagues around emergency preparedness in a broader sense, but I'll just say that during COVID-19, it was incredible to see the innovation with respect to communications.

We funded grassroots campaigns on vaccination, for example, and on protection of your elders and so forth, and then we would leverage social media for people to see what communities were doing on the ground with respect to COVID-19 versus just relying on federal spokespersons like me or something of that nature. We saw much better results with campaigns involving youth and campaigns involving indigenous celebrities and experts and moving that forward.

We're embedding that overall in terms of our communication strategies relating to reconciliation, but I'll turn it over to Joanne on the specifics.

Ms. Joanne Wilkinson: We're also certainly working in the emergency management space more broadly beyond COVID in terms of partners leading that communication, and also for our own staff, making sure that there are.... At the height of COVID, there were sometimes daily calls with leadership and with the folks in the regions to make sure that information was flowing.

In the emergency management space, we've really encouraged provinces and territories as well, when we have those trilateral discussions and daily—sometimes multiple times a day—calls with nations that are either on the cusp of evacuating or that are out of community, making sure first nations' voices are heard very clearly in that space, that they are full and equal partners at the table and that their views are listened to.

As was mentioned earlier, it's not just around planning but also around indigenous ways of knowing and doing, making sure the traditional knowledge piece is integrated into the planning and reflected in the communications more broadly.

Thank you.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: That's all for me, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: You have only about 25 seconds left, so thank you, Ms. Atwin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Ste-Marie, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Auditor General's report also mentions that the process of applying for first nations funding is complicated and that communities often do not have all the resources to submit these applications.

How did the department receive this element of the report? Since then, what steps have been taken to remove this barrier?

Ms. Valerie Gideon: I would like to add a clarification about the Indigenous Community Support Fund, which my colleague Ms. Wilkinson mentioned. This fund, which supports communities in the context of COVID-19, has really been a best practice for us. First, it was set up very quickly. Secondly, people did not have to apply for funding. A base amount was given to each community and if communities had additional needs afterwards, they had to apply. I'm talking about an application, not a proposal; it's not the same thing. It was a much simpler process. We continue to operate in this way for COVID-19 support. We are also considering this process for the Emergency Management Assistance Program.

[English]

Thanks as well to ADM Wilkinson and Director General El Bied.

Thank you for your testimonies today and for answering all our questions. We very much appreciate it. Thank you.

With that, Mr. Vidal has a point he wants to make.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to move the motion that we talked about on Monday and just make sure we deal with it today, as we had deferred it.

I move the following motion:

That the evidence received by the public accounts committee on the study of Emergency Management in First Nations Communities, Report 8 of the 2022 Reports of the Auditor General of Canada on Friday, November 25, 2022, be taken into consideration by the committee in its study of Arctic sovereignty, security and emergency preparedness of indigenous peoples.

• (1730)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vidal.

Does anybody want to comment?

Go ahead, Mr. Badawey.

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

I appreciate to some extent what Mr. Vidal is trying to do here with respect to getting more information on the table on this study, but I have to say this. I've given this a lot of thought. At first I thought it wasn't a problem, but the more I thought about it, the more I thought about how inappropriate it is.

I'm a former chair, as you know, Mr. Chairman. When I look at procedure and I look at the integrity of committee—the key word is here “integrity”—I just think it's inappropriate. It's highly inappropriate. Let me dig a bit deeper into why.

This committee, when it brings out witnesses, has the ability—any committee has the ability—to further question or expand on the dialogue, as we did today, with any one of the witnesses giving that testimony, making sure of the credibility and ensuring the accountability of the comments being made. Otherwise, if we don't have that ability as members of this committee, or of any committee for that matter, in the House of Commons, then any testimony becomes arbitrary. Therefore, really, we don't need to have members come out. We can just simply ask them for a summary: Hand it in. The

analysts would take it. Regardless of what we think in terms of trying to rebut with questions or trying to draw down and get more granular, the comments being brought forward to committee would simply be arbitrary.

Quite frankly, Mr. Chairman, that's just not right. That's not why we're here, as members of any committee. We are here to listen to testimony, to question testimony and to have dialogue with those who are providing testimony. That's the very purpose of committee. That's the very integrity of the committee and of the members who sit around this horseshoe when we bring out witnesses. Therefore, to ensure that through this dialogue, through this testimony that ultimately goes to the analysts, we therefore can participate in what we expect to come back from the minister with regard to the recommendations we bring forward.... Of course, there's the response from the department, vis-à-vis the minister, that they would bring, and then, of course, it's prepared to go to the House.

I just think it's highly inappropriate. It is a public document. It's sitting there. It can be referred to by anybody who can look at it, whether it's members of the committee or anybody else, for that matter. However, for it to be brought into this committee, once again, simply makes it arbitrary testimony.

Once again, Mr. Chairman, I feel that it is highly inappropriate.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Badawey.

We're going to have a show of hands on this, or a vote, but before that, does anybody else wish to add anything?

Mr. Gary Vidal: I'd like to call the question, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead. The question is called.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5)

The Chair: I declare the motion carried.

That brings us to the end.

Just as a reminder, colleagues, next Monday we will be looking at Bill S-219. In the first hour we'll be hearing from witnesses. In the second hour we'll be going over it clause by clause. If anybody has an amendment to make, please submit it by noon tomorrow.

With that, this meeting is adjourned.

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