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Chair: Mr. John Williamson



Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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• (1530)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I call this meeting to order.

Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to meeting number 100 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

[*English*]

Do we have a cake, Clerk? It's number 100. It's a milestone meeting.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

This is a reminder that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(g), the committee is resuming its study of 2023 Report 1 of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, entitled "Forests and Climate Change", referred to the committee on Thursday, April 20, 2023.

[*English*]

Before I begin, as you are all aware, the bells are going to ring at 5:15 for a 5:45 vote. As I've done in the past, I'm going to seek unanimous consent so that we sit until 5:30 and then vote at 5:45. Doing so will give us more time with the witnesses.

I only need a couple of minutes for some business at the back end. If I have unanimous consent, I'll move the committee business by about 10 minutes to 5:20 to give you guys more time with all our witnesses. As you can see, we have a full house today.

Do I have UC from members to run this meeting until 5:30?

Yes, Ms. Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): If it's okay with you, can you revisit that question once the bells start ringing?

The Chair: No, because as I said, that will pre-empt.... If I have it now, we will hear from the witnesses until 5:20. If I don't have it, I'm going to proceed with committee business at 5:10.

I'm looking for UC. You can deny it if you like, and I'll just proceed with committee business at 5:10.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: In that case, I'll deny it, Chair.

The Chair: Okay. Very good.

This is a meeting we've been wanting to get to, so I want to thank all the witnesses for coming in.

From the Office of the Auditor General, we have Jerry DeMarco, commissioner of the environment and sustainable development. It's good to see you again.

We also have Marie-Pierre Grondin, director, and Kimberley Leach, principal. Thank you for coming in today.

From the Department of the Environment, we have Jean-François Tremblay, deputy minister; Derek Hermanutz, director general of the economic analysis directorate; and Lindsay Pratt, director of pollutant inventories and reporting.

From the Department of Natural Resources, we have Monique Frison, director general of the trade, economics and industry branch; Michael Vandergrift, deputy minister, appearing by video conference from London; Glenn Hargrove, assistant deputy minister; and Jeff Labonté, associate deputy minister.

I believe each of the three institutions has an opening statement.

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco (Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, Office of the Auditor General): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to acknowledge that we are gathered today on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

We are happy to be appearing before your committee to discuss our report on forests and climate change, which was tabled in the House of Commons on April 20, 2023. With me today are Kimberley Leach and Marie-Pierre Grondin, who were responsible for the audit.

Our audit focused on the design and implementation of the two billion trees program and on how Canada tracks greenhouse gas emissions from forests.

The federal government launched the two billion trees program to counter climate change, enhance biodiversity, and support human well-being. Through the program, trees will be planted across Canada, including on Crown lands, indigenous lands, in municipalities and on private lands, such as farms. The majority of tree planting activities are cost-shared with partners; however, certain groups, such as indigenous partners, will also be supported with grants focused on capacity building, often with no cost-sharing required.

Although Natural Resources Canada nearly met its goal to plant 30 million trees in 2021, it fell well short of its 2022 goal of 60 million trees. Delays in signing agreements with planting partners have not only significantly challenged the department's ability to plant the number of trees it had planned for 2022, but will also affect subsequent years, which have much more ambitious goals.

• (1535)

[English]

We understand that since the end of our audit period, some progress has been made in signing additional agreements. On the other hand, the department has announced that it is now counting trees planted under another department's program that has different objectives as part of the two billion trees program. If this program is no longer focused on planting two billion incremental trees, then the benefits of the program will be reduced.

In addition, the program missed opportunities to enhance biodiversity and habitat-related benefits over the long term by not being designing with specific funding considerations for habitat restoration for all funding streams. For example, in the 2021 planting season, Natural Resources Canada funded more than 270 monoculture sites, accounting for 14.4% of the total trees planted. Monoculture plantings sequester carbon and may be appropriate in certain habitats. However, in the vast majority of circumstances, they do not support biodiversity and other benefits related to environmental and human well-being as much as more diverse plantings do.

Beyond the two billion trees program, Natural Resources Canada, working with Environment and Climate Change Canada, did not provide a clear and complete picture of the role of Canada's forests in greenhouse gas emissions. For example, emission estimates varied significantly in reports over the years because of recalculations prompted by data updates. This changed whether forests were reported as a net source of emissions rather than capturing emissions.

We found a lack of transparency about the effects of human activities and natural disturbances on forest emissions. Specifically, the department's reporting on how changes in forest management affected emissions was incomplete. Forest management activities such as clear-cutting, partial harvesting, slash burning and creating reserves for biodiversity were not clearly or separately reported on. In addition, Canada's forests are becoming a net source of emissions because of forest fires and disturbances caused by insect outbreaks. A lack of transparency and accurate reporting makes it very difficult for decision-makers to make informed decisions and for Canadians to hold government to account.

This concludes my opening remarks. We would be pleased to answer any questions the committee may have.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much. You were right on time. We appreciate that.

We'll turn now to the Department of Natural Resources.

Monique Frison, you have the floor for up to five minutes, please.

Mr. Michael Vandergrift (Deputy Minister, Department of Natural Resources): Mr. Chair, it's Michael Vandergrift here. I'll be making the opening statement, if that's okay with you.

The Chair: It certainly is. We'll go over to you.

Mr. Michael Vandergrift: Very good. Thank you so much.

[Translation]

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the committee for this invitation. I'd also like to thank the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development for this audit on forest and climate change.

[English]

The recommendations in this audit are important. As shown in our response and our action plan, the recommendations will help us implement the program. We also appreciate the conversations we've had with the commissioner on the subject.

[Translation]

Forests and other nature-based solutions are an integral part of the fight against climate change. Trees generate many long-term benefits, revitalizing fire-ravaged areas, creating green jobs and enhancing the well-being of Canadians for generations.

Planting two billion trees is a marathon, not a sprint. As we move forward, we keep our foundational principle top of mind: to plant the right trees, in the right place, for the right reasons.

We have made significant progress in implementing this program. In fact, we have agreements signed or under negotiation to plant over 393 million trees. We have allocated funding for first nation, Metis, Inuit and cross-distinction organizations and governments, while acknowledging the different needs and priorities of each distinction.

● (1540)

[English]

We have also sought ways to support urban planting that will support increased quality of life for Canadians in small and large cities.

These advancements are in line with commitments made in our action plan and in response to the recommendations in the audit. We have also, for example, developed an operational plan and have provided guidance for applicants on single-species planting to respond to the recommendations.

Having jurisdiction over 90% of Canada's forests, provinces and territories are key partners in implementing the government's objective of planting two billion trees. Working closely with them, we now have a total of nine agreements in principle and eight contribution agreements signed, which is five AIPs and four contribution agreements more than we had at the time of the audit, with more to come. Minister Wilkinson has engaged with his counterparts to reiterate his commitment to working with them. We seek to support their plans, whether to restore habitat for species at risk, to recover after a wildfire or to adapt and help manage their forests in a changing climate.

As I mentioned, this is a long-term program, and we need to be constantly looking at what adjustments we need to make. The wildfire season has caused us to reconsider how best to go about increasing Canada's forest cover. We have an opportunity ahead of us to think about how the two billion trees commitment, in light of this current and unprecedented context, will ensure that our forests are resilient to a changing climate. We are actively engaged with all partners to align agreements, partnerships and funding in order to best move ahead.

On forest carbon, we'll continue to partner with Environment and Climate Change Canada to produce world-class greenhouse gas emissions estimates, using methodology supported by more than 100 peer-reviewed research papers. We continue our efforts to stay current with the latest advancements in this field. For instance, the 2023 budget, as part of its investment in forests and forest workers, included funding to improve our forest data and reporting.

Again, this aligns with our commitments under the audit management action plan in response to the helpful recommendations on forest carbon reporting. We'll continue to work closely with Environment and Climate Change Canada to improve the transparency of reports on historical and projected forest sector emissions.

Our regular discussions with forestry experts and stakeholders mean we are aware of the best available science, data and practices, as well as where we can improve. Our modelling tools will continue to evolve thanks to scrutiny by experts and peer-review processes.

We're proud that our reporting methods align with internationally accepted practices, as the commissioner noted. This means we produce a big-picture report that collectively reflects human impacts, such as harvesting, regeneration, fire suppression and conservation. This method of reporting meets the reporting guidelines of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

To conclude, there is no solution to climate change without forests. We remain committed to delivering the goals of the two billion trees program, and we continue to adjust and adapt to realities on the ground, thereby ensuring a flexible approach.

Thank you very much. I look forward to receiving questions from the committee.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now, from the Department of the Environment, we have Mr. Tremblay, deputy minister.

You have the floor for five minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay (Deputy Minister, Department of the Environment): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging that we are gathered today on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people, whom we acknowledge as custodians of the lands and waters of this region since time immemorial.

[English]

My colleagues and I are really happy to meet with the committee to discuss the commissioner's audit recommendations in relation to "Report 1—Forests and Climate Change". This report focuses on the two billion trees program in particular.

Planting trees on a large scale is fundamental to mitigating climate change in Canada. It helps capture carbon, it helps restore wildlife habitat and it helps restore biodiversity. It makes forests and surrounding communities more resilient to risks such as floods and wildfires. Canadians saw that last summer.

Both Natural Resources Canada and Environment and Climate Change Canada welcome the findings of the report. The departments have formally agreed with the recommendations and have developed action plans to address them.

[Translation]

First, we agree on the importance of independent review in carbon reporting. Canada reports its annual emissions and removals in its national greenhouse gas inventory report, which is submitted each year under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

● (1545)

[English]

ECCC also reports its projected 2030 GHG emissions and policy impacts in the biennial reports, also under the UNFCCC.

Both reports include the emissions and removals that result from the management of Canadian forests. They both undergo an in-depth, science-based technical review by independent experts, in accordance with international guidelines. They are both published online for transparency.

International reporting documents can be quite complex and hard to follow. Canada must ensure that information is clearly communicated to the public, especially for the decision-makers. ECCC needs to demonstrate more clearly how past and future changes in land management practices affect projected emissions, for example.

[Translation]

In 2022, the department started publishing more detailed data on land use, forestry emissions and accounting projections on its open data portal.

ECCC also continued to explore other ways to provide additional open data as a supplement to the national inventory and the biennial report.

[English]

That's why engagement is so important for us.

The department is working to identify information gaps in carbon reporting and get the complementary inputs that are needed.

ECCC is engaged with experts and stakeholders through multiple fora, and we will continue to do that. We have also engaged in dialogue with environmental groups that have published reports critical of forest carbon reporting in Canada. The issues these partners raise and the improvements they suggest will be addressed in future versions of the interdepartmental "Improvement Plan for Forest and Harvested Wood Products Greenhouse Gas Estimates".

Together—NRCan and us—we are considering using more contextual information when reporting on progress towards the 2022 to 2026 federal sustainable development strategy greenhouse gas target.

The commissioner is right. There is no solution to climate change in Canada that does not include forests. Reaching the government's objective of planting two billion trees is important for reaching our target, and better reporting on ECCC science related to forest emissions is part of it. ECCC and NRCan are determined to overcome challenges.

I want to thank all members of the committee and the commissioner for their important work. I look forward to discussing this with you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will begin our first round now.

Mr. McCauley, who's joining us virtually, you have the floor for six minutes.

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

Commissioner DeMarco, thanks for your report.

Before I start, Mr. Vandergrift, congratulations on your appointment. I think this is the third department we've seen you with at committee.

Commissioner DeMarco, your comments on the failures of Natural Resources and Environment Canada seem to mirror very closely the issues brought to light in your study on green hydrogen. What is the issue with the departments? Is it a lack of communication? Is it a lack of leadership? Is it a lack of appointing one department in charge?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: We've seen a pattern of problems in our various audits relating to climate change in the last three years with respect to Environment and Climate Change Canada and Natural Resources Canada. Here we see some similarities with problems we identified in our emissions reduction fund report regarding double counting. That's an emerging issue with the two billion trees program. We see unrealistic assumptions as well.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: How do we get past the problems that seem to come from these two departments?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: We have a long list of recommendations trying to get at that very thing. We are in the midst of trying to consolidate those recommendations in our next climate report for the fall, which I hope to be back for to speak to as well.

Coordination, realistic assumptions and avoiding double counting are among the patterns we've seen. More reasonable modelling, more transparency.... There's a litany of issues that if we could see some progress on, we'd have much more credible numbers from Canada. We would also, hopefully, start to see real progress ultimately in reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

● (1550)

Mr. Kelly McCauley: With this program from the government, were they too focused on an announcement and not focused enough on the actual delivery, or was it just too impractical to begin with? We're far, far away from our goals.

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: This program was announced as a federal initiative, but as you know, most Crown land in Canada is managed by the provinces and territories. As I've termed it before in previous appearances before other committees, the federal government was essentially an obligate collaborator with other entities for this to work. It was rolled out before those agreements were in place. You could say, perhaps, the cart was ahead of the horse somewhat, because the important-sounding objective of two billion trees was announced before the ducks were in a row and we had the agreements with those who would be needed to implement it.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Yes, we call it A for announcement, D for delivery.

Am I reading this right? Paragraph 1.22 of your report indicates that this plan would be a net contributor to GHG emissions at least for close to another decade.

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: Yes. If you look at paragraph 1.22 and exhibit 1.4 together, you see that this is a long-term project. In the first 10 years, there's not going to be any help in sequestering carbon.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: That's right, but let me interrupt you. This program is going to add to our GHG emissions. You say it's a long-term project, but from looking at the numbers, we may never even come close to achieving our planting goals. Then there's a comment further on in the report about the issue of whether the trees will be reharvested right away, so will we actually get to a point where it reduces greenhouse gases?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: We should.

Having regard to the issues you're raising with respect to survival rates and permanence, we shouldn't abandon programs just because they don't show returns in the immediate future. Climate change is a long-term problem, and addressing it on the tree-planting side means the payoff is multiple decades from now, not in the first 10 years.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: How far back has achieving our goals been pushed by the inability to achieve the tree-planting goals?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: They're off to quite a slow start, and there's a dispute between our office and the departments as to what should count in terms of double counting from another program. However, looking specifically at our report, we noted they were roughly on track in year one, 2021, but fell well behind in 2022. We audited this at an early stage with the hope of helping them—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: When do we actually start seeing GHG reductions under what looks like a really delayed rollout?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: Likely around 2031 or 2032 will be where the graph dips from above zero to below zero and goes from a source to a sink.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: That's great. Thanks, Commissioner DeMarco.

Mr. Vandergrift and Mr. Tremblay, I'll very quickly ask both of you a question, with Mr. Vandergrift going first. Will you be able to achieve the goals as originally set out? If not, when will they be achieved?

Mr. Michael Vandergrift: We are committed to achieving the goals.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Committing and actually doing are different things. Will we achieve these goals?

Mr. Michael Vandergrift: We've made a lot of progress, and we're implementing the recommendations. There's a lot more work to do as well.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Can you provide in writing to the committee when you expect to achieve the goals?

I'm out of time, Mr. Tremblay. Would you do the same for us as well, please?

Thanks very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Is that okay, Mr. Tremblay?

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: On the goal with the trees, it would probably be better for NRCan to respond, to be honest.

The Chair: Okay, well—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: No, it's for Mr. Vandergrift and Mr. Tremblay. If they could provide—

The Chair: I thought you asked for both. I was going to ask Mr. Vandergrift as well.

Can that be done?

Mr. Michael Vandergrift: Yes, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I just wanted to double-check. I like to ensure that witnesses are aware of the requests coming in.

All right, we'll turn now to Ms. Bradford.

You have the floor for six minutes.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses here who are prepared to testify on this very important report we're dealing with.

We saw devastating wildfires impact families, communities and businesses across Canada this past summer, and experts are warning of a similarly damaging wildfire season this summer. In fact, it could be argued that with the low snow cover, it could be much worse.

Mr. Vandergrift, does the two billion trees program fund tree-planting in deforested areas or areas impacted by wildfires?

• (1555)

Mr. Michael Vandergrift: Yes, the program does fund tree-planting in areas affected by forest fires. In fact, tree-planting can play an important role in helping to respond to forest fires by increasing diversity of species planted, enhancing resilience in those areas. This is combined with other efforts, such as the FireSmart program, which the Government of Canada is providing support for, as well as assisting communities in trying to reduce fuel load near communities and supporting better resilience to respond to forest fires in the future.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: That leads to my next question.

Can you explain what other measures NRCan is taking to prepare for the upcoming wildfire season?

Mr. Michael Vandergrift: Perhaps I can invite Mr. Hargrove to reply to that.

Mr. Glenn Hargrove (Assistant Deputy Minister, Department of Natural Resources): Yes, certainly. Thank you, Deputy.

There are a number of activities that NRCan undertakes to support the response to wildfire seasons. One critical area is decision support. We work with the provinces and territories to provide fire behaviour predictive modelling and data to help with the on-the-ground response. There's a lot of work we're doing in that area. It's certainly a key area of focus, and planning for that is well under way. We do that in collaboration with other departments, such as Public Safety and Environment and Climate Change Canada.

There are also a number of recent investments the government has made for wildfires. It's around a billion dollars total in recent years for things like equipment and training and FireSmart efforts for communities, as the deputy mentioned. We're working on research and modernizing information systems.

There's also a mission we're working on with Environment and Climate Change Canada and the Canadian Space Agency that is called "WildFireSat". That's aiming to help with monitoring efforts in the longer term. We're also developing a centre of expertise on wildland fire, which will be launched in the near future as well. There are lots of activities going on in that area.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: The audit period undertaken by the commissioner covered only a portion of the planting period. Can you please share with this committee what progress, if any, has been made with respect to planting during the entire season?

Is that for Mr. Vandergrift? I'm not sure which one of you it's for.

Mr. Michael Vandergrift: I'll turn it over to, maybe, Mr. Labonté or Mr. Hargrove.

Ms. Monique Frison (Director General, Trade, Economics and Industry Branch, Department of Natural Resources): Thank you for the question.

As Deputy Minister Vandergrift mentioned in his opening remarks, we have signed additional agreements in principle and contribution agreements with provinces and territories. We've determined a distinctions-based approach for the funding that we'll deliver to indigenous communities, recognizing the individual needs and different priorities of first nation, Métis and Inuit communities across the country. We have also engaged in an agreement with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities so they can support planting in smaller cities that don't necessarily have in-house capacity to do large-scale planting.

We continue to sign agreements with a variety of partners: provinces, territories, NGOs, community associations and cities. Right now, we have about 200 agreements in place or being negotiating to plant about 380 million trees.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Over what period of time is that?

Ms. Monique Frison: It's from now until the end of the program, in 2031.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Are you on track for your management action plan in response to the CESD audit? What's the progress to date?

Ms. Monique Frison: We have drafted the management action plan and followed up on the two commitments we made: to finish

in December the operational plan and to provide guidance on single-species planting, which the deputy minister mentioned. We've already finished those, and we're on track to completing the other commitments in that plan as well.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: At the time of the report, Minister Wilkinson said that many of the recommendations were already being actioned. You've said that you already have agreements or tentative agreements with many of the provinces and territories. What other recommendations have you made substantial progress on?

• (1600)

Ms. Monique Frison: Several of the recommendations and some of the discussions that came out during the audit, including with the audit principal and her staff.... We have stepped up efforts to communicate with stakeholders. We hold more regular webinars. We provide more guidance. We've gone out, in particular, to more conferences to engage more people to try to understand the issues and challenges they face when putting together planting projects.

We have started to develop further guidance and a plan for monitoring in the long run so we have the assurance of making sure that the proposals we approve are good ones—to have the right tree, right place, right time. We'll also put in remote sensing so we can keep track of those trees in the long run.

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

[Translation]

Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné (Terrebonne, BQ): I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here, even though some of you are geographically remote.

Several questions were raised in this report. Are the goals too ambitious? What about greenwashing? Quite a few doubts were raised, sometimes by the same stakeholders that learned about this report and were keen to read it. A question was submitted to me by one such stakeholder, and I'd like to ask it because I believe it's particularly interesting.

A recent scientific article quoted last week in The Hill Times said that the government was underestimating emissions from logging by almost 100 megatonnes per year. That's rather significant.

You, Commissioner, also raised concerns about the lack of transparency in reporting forest-related greenhouse gas emissions. Could you please tell us more about that?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: Yes, of course.

In the second part of our report, we concluded that there was a lack of transparency in estimates of greenhouse gas emissions. The estimates vary from year to year. For example, exhibit 1.8 says that for a given year, various reports mentioned "added emissions to the atmosphere", but that another calculation reported "removed emissions from the atmosphere". This is problematic. It's neither transparent nor accurate. There's a lack of consistency with—

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: What accounts for this lack of transparency? Is it a lack of knowledge? Could it be negligence?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: I don't know their intentions. However, I don't believe that the differing results reported every time they do the calculations is deliberate.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Did you say "deliberate" or "not deliberate"?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: I said "not deliberate".

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Okay. That's an important distinction.

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: Yes. Thanks for that clarification.

Stakeholders and decision-makers can't, when looking at the data, determine what changes need to be made in forest management. It's impossible, on the basis of the data, to say whether we need much more forest restoration or conservation work. That's something that needs to be vastly improved.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Also in your report, recommendation 1.64 addresses Canada's approach for estimating and reporting greenhouse gas emissions from logging.

My next question is for the witnesses from Natural Resources Canada or Environment and Climate Change Canada.

The response from the departments mentions existing consultations, without a commitment to review the framework being used to estimate forest-related carbon. That needs to be done. The approach should be reviewed. Talking about your consultations will not provide a concrete response to this recommendation. Can you make a commitment today to review the approach being used by Canada to calculate forest sector carbon?

• (1605)

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: I'll make a start and then give the floor to my friends from Natural Resources Canada, who are handling framework review management.

To begin with, calculations pertaining to forests and their contribution in greenhouse gas emissions are complex. We acknowledge that. It's much more complicated to report on forests than on emissions from other sources.

Everything we do is reviewed. Our published report is examined internationally every year. Our methodology is internationally reviewed and respected. It's also reviewed by independent peers on an ongoing basis.

So it's not because we're not doing things properly. It's true that there is a transparency challenge with how we communicate. The commissioner mentioned the provinces, for example, and these are things we are now looking into.

As to the question about the framework, I believe people at Natural Resources Canada, together with our teams, are working with the provinces and stakeholders on a review of the framework.

[English]

I will let them answer that question.

[Translation]

Mr. Glenn Hargrove: Thank you, Mr. Tremblay.

[English]

Yes, we are reviewing the accounting approach. The consultations are part of that review.

Part of the challenge around the accounting approach is that a couple of different approaches are used internationally. The one that Canada uses is called a "reference level" approach. It really is scientifically based, and there are a lot of strong reasons for using that approach. However, it is less transparent than the simpler approach, which is called "net-net".

We're reviewing that. We're consulting with stakeholders and experts to—

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Do you have a timeline for the review, particularly for Canada's approach?

[English]

Mr. Glenn Hargrove: Yes. On the accounting approach, the consultations are under way. With the—

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: I wasn't asking about the consultations, but rather the new approach.

Mr. Glenn Hargrove: Yes, I understand.

[English]

The consultations are ongoing right now, with the idea of taking a decision on the approach going forward by the end of the calendar year.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[English]

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

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

I too want to thank the environment commissioner for this report and thank all those present here today for this important work.

I think this has to be grounded in the fact that climate change, the age of consequence, is here. We're experiencing that. We're seeing it work. My family in northern Alberta has experienced multiple wildfires in the last five years. The wildfires get worse and worse every year. Last year was the most horrific year. I watched elders run from their homes, completely surrounded by fire. In many cases, we didn't have the emergency preparedness to help them. I'm pleased to say that today many of the rebuilding efforts by the communities have been done. We lost over half the community of East Prairie Metis Settlement, one of the largest communities that occupy forests in Canada in the southern portion of the boreal forest.

The wildfires we experienced in Alberta were experienced by Canadians across the country. I've never seen before the amount of smoke and environmental effect on so many urban centres. This wasn't isolated to just the regions where the fires began. Edmonton was choking because of wildfires that could not be contained in the north. We saw that reality in Quebec. This is simultaneous with historic levels of flooding.

Canadians should know that when we speak about climate change, we're speaking about the very drastic and terrible situation we're in. This has been my frustration for many years, most particularly as a member of Parliament. I know we have programs designed to help combat climate change by way of reducing emissions, but I find it frustrating that with these programs, particularly this two billion trees program, time and time again there are many inconsistencies with the goal of trying to reduce emissions.

For example, we see in the report that there's a lifespan. Exhibit 1.4 on page 7 of the report looks at a time schedule that will eventually see the transformation of those planted trees into a carbon sink so we can begin to get hold of some of the immense emissions we have. The concern I have, though, is around whether we reach the goal of planting trees in a way that's diverse and in a way that will provide the kind of human qualities that are also important to a forest, the way we see in natural forests like the boreal forest.

Commissioner, first, with regard to the graph portrayed in your report in exhibit 1.4, what information did you review that took into account or did not take into account issues of the forest management practices of humans today? That's a portion of your report that I want you to highlight. Second, how does the demographic information here change based on the fact that they won't reach their target?

• (1610)

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: Thank you for reminding us of the human face to all of this.

We're talking about graphs and trees and so on, but it wasn't that long ago that the skies were orange here in Ottawa, as in Edmonton and elsewhere, because of the incredible fire season we had. It was felt not only here in southern Canada but also in the United States from the fires in Canada.

This is a sign of what can happen with catastrophic climate change. It's not just an academic issue. We're starting to see it in our daily lives, and it affects communities, especially those living in forested environments.

With respect to your questions, if they do succeed in planting two billion incremental trees and they act on the new agreements in principle and the new agreements, which are a good sign, then we would expect the payoff to start, as I said earlier, around 2031-32, when we would start to see the small trees that are planted today becoming large enough to become a carbon sink.

However, there's more to a forest than trees, and I think you're getting that as well. There are livelihoods of communities and there's the biodiversity associated with them. It was quite disappointing to see the partial disagreement with our recommendation to provide incentives for habitat restoration work for all project streams.

Natural Resources Canada did not accept that part of the recommendation, even though it's quite evident that from a biodiversity point of view, a community point of view and a resilience point of view, a more diverse forest has better benefits for biodiversity and for human health.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: I'll just stop you there. You mentioned the partial agreement, which is important. I want to understand, from Natural Resources Canada, why that partial agreement exists. Does Natural Resources Canada not understand the very important requirement for biodiversity?

Mr. Michael Vandergrift: Maybe I can start.

First off, we want to acknowledge the impacts of forest fires on your community, which you highlighted, and on people. Those are very important.

On biodiversity, we do provide extra incentives for the programs with the provinces and territories to support projects that increase biodiversity and deal with habitat.

These are more expensive trees to plant, and it becomes, at some point, an issue of how we best use the funds to achieve the overall objective. That is why at some point we try to increase biodiversity and habitat protection through the provincial and territorial agreements, but not through all of them. That's the view at this point.

The Chair: I'm sure Mr. Desjarlais will have a follow-up question down the road.

We'll turn now to Mr. Stewart.

You have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Jake Stewart (Miramichi—Grand Lake, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for being here today. Thank you for the audit.

As you may know, I represent an area of New Brunswick, and forestry is a huge part of our daily lives in Miramichi. New Brunswick is the most heavily forested Canadian province. The forestry sector remains New Brunswick's largest industry, contributing more than \$1.5 billion to the economy annually and making up 5% of the total provincial economy. The forestry industry supports more than 24,000 full-time jobs and many seasonal ones. My mother was a tree-planter, probably from the time I was 12 until I was maybe 17 or 18. It was a very difficult job. She used to always talk about it. My dad is a logger and my mother's father was a contractor for what was one of the largest paper mills in Canada, a former Repap location.

The province's prioritization of biodiversity and achievement of gains through the nature legacy initiative have resulted in the legal protection of 10% of the province's land and fresh water. New Brunswick is in a unique position, as half of the forest is owned by the public as Crown land and the other half is privately owned. The management system on Crown land relies on thousands of people each year from government, Crown timber licensees, first nations, contractors, truckers, many small businesses and the public.

On average, the productive Crown forest of three million hectares is estimated to grow at approximately 3.1 cubic metres each year. This means that every 10 years, almost one tractor-trailer load of wood grows on every hectare. Over 900,000 hectares of Crown forest land across New Brunswick are conserved and protected. That's equivalent to over 1.5 million football fields.

Over the last 10 years, an average of 13,000 hectares have been planted each year on Crown land. The total accumulated area of plantations on Crown land today is about 16% of the Crown forest. The annual tree-planting program is an investment for the future of the working forest in New Brunswick. The number of hectares planted each year is prescribed by the long-term forest management plan, which considers the balance of tree species in the forest, the required habitat for animals and the interest in maintaining the long-term sustainable wood supply.

Here is an important stat: 210 million seedlings are committed to be planted in New Brunswick by 2030. On forest fires, there's another interesting statistic. Incredibly, 97.6% of wildfires in 2022 in New Brunswick were caused by human beings—people and not climate change.

The reason I provided all that background on the forestry industry in New Brunswick is to show you we are a true leader in forest management, including tree planting.

You somewhat answered my question earlier in your deliberations. This question would be for Natural Resources Canada, but if there's somebody who's better suited to answer it, I'm okay with that.

I noticed it has taken you until now, in the third year of your program, to develop nine relationships in principle with the provinces and territories, eight of them signed. There's a reason this program is failing in many respects. Two billion trees is not a modest target, but I for one think, based on the fact that my own province could do a quarter of it, it's achievable. The problem and why you've failed, I believe, is that you have tried to recreate the wheel. The

provinces are already doing this the right way. That's where your relationship needed to be.

Can you explain why that relationship wasn't the first one you built and whether or not you currently have one with the Province of New Brunswick?

• (1615)

Ms. Monique Frison: We talk very often with New Brunswick and took a lot of interest in the forest strategy that the province recently put out. I think a lot of the goals that New Brunswick has align very well with what we're trying to achieve with two billion trees, including trying to adapt the species mix in the province for climate change to maintain all of the different values you mentioned.

We rely on the provinces to tell us what they want to do in a way that suits the jurisdiction, the land, the species and the things they need to achieve. Every one is different. There are different ecosystems and different requirements all across the country.

We do rely on the provinces. As the commissioner said, those relationships are very important to us—

Mr. Jake Stewart: I'm sorry, but I have to cut you off. I appreciate your answer, but I'm trying to figure out why it has taken so long and why signing those agreements right at the get-go wasn't the top priority.

Regardless of what the provinces are currently doing, New Brunswick, as an example, could easily have been very beneficial to your program. I'm asking why it has taken so long. Why has it taken three years?

Ms. Monique Frison: Agreements with the provinces and territories have been a priority for us all along. In some cases, the provinces are going to take some time because they have their own decision-making processes to go through and have planning they want to do. We are very far advanced with New Brunswick in figuring out what they want—

Mr. Jake Stewart: Then you haven't signed an agreement with New Brunswick—

The Chair: Thank you. That is the time, Mr. Stewart. I appreciate your round of questioning. It's my home province as well.

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

Mr. Shaun Chen (Scarborough North, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to begin by thanking all the witnesses here today. I also want to thank the Auditor General for this important report.

This conversation today really reminds me of my previous work as a local school trustee, during which I started an annual tree-planting in what is now Rouge National Urban Park. I recall that the children were so enthusiastic to get their hands dirty, to go there and plant the trees for the day. Not only was it a rewarding experience for them, but it was good for the environment. We were strengthening our local biodiversity and supporting an ecological corridor. It was truly a worthwhile initiative that I was able to help lead for the time that I was on the school board.

To connect that to this tremendous undertaking of Natural Resources Canada, which is leading the two billion trees program, I will say that this is incredibly ambitious. The program is happening across the country. It's one that requires working together with provinces and territories with a cross-government approach.

Acknowledging the mandate the environment minister has in supporting the planting of two billion trees, can Natural Resources Canada please speak about how other departments and programs, like Parks Canada and the low carbon economy fund, have contributed to our progress in achieving two billion trees?

• (1620)

Mr. Michael Vandergrift: I'll invite one of my colleagues in the room to jump in on that one.

Ms. Monique Frison: We have five types of partners. One type is federal departments, because federal departments, as you say, do planting, like Parks Canada and Veterans Affairs. We have partnerships with several departments under the program to plant incremental trees. Those have to be beyond business as usual. For example, the Department of National Defence does some maintenance on its land base, but that wouldn't necessarily count for us because the trees are not additional to what it would normally plant.

For the low carbon economy fund, the trees that were planted by the provinces and territories under that fund were incremental to business as usual, and the reporting that was provided by the provinces and territories enabled us to know how many trees were planted. There was therefore some clarity in the reporting that allowed us to include those trees in the numbers we're looking at to fulfill the government's commitment to plant two billion.

The plan for the two billion trees program at the beginning was to ensure that other government department programs could contribute to the commitment of two billion. Where the trees are incremental and where there's sufficient reporting to know that this activity happened, we would include it as well.

Mr. Shaun Chen: My colleagues have talked about some of the natural disasters that are happening, including forest fires caused by climate change. Outside of the two billion trees, Natural Resources Canada is also tasked with supporting the forest sector in fighting against forest-killing pests and wildfires and ensuring sustainable practices. Can you talk a bit more about what the department is doing to provide these supports?

Ms. Monique Frison: Absolutely.

I would first mention the announcement in budget 2023 for an additional \$370-some million to support forest sector programming aimed at innovation, at decarbonization, at looking at new products and new ways of doing things and at improving the data that would

go into the carbon estimates that some of our colleagues on the panel have been talking about.

We at NRCan also have programs and interventions, and have had them in the past, for pest outbreaks—whether that's the spruce budworm in the east or the mountain pine beetle in the west—as well as the investments that my colleague Mr. Hargrove mentioned on wildland fire management.

Mr. Shaun Chen: Thank you very much.

I'll turn to the commissioner.

Through this report from the AG, we've seen that no program is perfect. There are always challenges in reaching the goals that are set out.

Do you believe that this is a valuable program? Should the government continue to work to achieve this ambitious goal of two billion trees? Is this worthwhile?

• (1625)

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: It is nice to see a program that has such a long-term horizon, because sometimes in government we tend to focus too much on “short-termism”. This is a theme in lesson number 8 of our climate lessons learned report of 2021, which we were here before this committee for about two years ago.

I don't want to discourage departments from taking on long-term projects, even if it takes a while to see the fruits of their labour. That's why we put in exhibit 1.4, which says don't look just at 2030 and see that it's a carbon source; look all the way out to 2040, 2050 or 2060 to see the fruits of the labour accruing in that period.

It is worthwhile to do. It should be an incremental tree program that isn't counting trees that are going to be planted anyway, as we've just heard. There's some question as to whether that includes the low carbon economy fund trees or not. The department has chosen to include those now, as of this summer. We didn't have an indication about that when we issued the report. There will obviously be fewer benefits if it's not entirely a tree-planting program but a tree-planting and tree-counting program. We can talk about that more later.

Definitely it is worthwhile to invest in the long term by planting trees.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, it's back to you again, for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you.

I have a rather blunt question for you, Commissioner: Do you know who came up with the two billion trees number? Where does that come from? Do you know?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: It comes from the 2019 throne speech, which was following through on a political promise.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: So it was a political promise imposed upon public officials. Okay.

You are very clear in the report about the fact that if things continued at this pace, the goals would never be reached. Do you think now that this goal is achievable?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: Is what achievable?

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: I'm talking about planting two billion trees.

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: Yes, and that's why we finished this audit so early in the program. It's because we want improvements to be made and for the program to be successful. There's enough time left to catch up and achieve the 2030 target. But quite a few partnerships will have to be established and an emphasis placed not only on trees, but also forests and biodiversity.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: It's not so much a focus on quantity that we are building, but also on habitat quality. On this topic, my colleague spoke about forest fires. Many of my colleagues in the Bloc had forest fires in their ridings, including in northern Quebec. It was a horrifying sight all summer long.

As someone mentioned, in terms of resilience and biodiversity, monoculture, from various standpoints, is not an appropriate tree planting solution. Do you think the focus right now should be on meeting a numerical target rather than achieving the overall environmental objective?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: It's important to remember that it's not just a two billion tree target, but three objectives. In addition to carbon sequestration, there is biodiversity and also human welfare. If we focus on monoculture, that would achieve only one of the three.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: The current focus is mainly on—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, but your speaking time is up.

[English]

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

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

I want to return to the question I left off on in regard to barriers. One barrier of diversifying was just mentioned earlier, I believe, by Natural Resources Canada. That was the fact that it's too expensive to be making diversified forests or having diversified tree planting. This is a pretty large concern and a red flag for the program, one that has immense vulnerability considering many of the targets for a healthy forest.

Sure, you can make a big monoculture forest, but it's going to die. It's not going to have the ability to sustain itself. It's actually going to add carbon, ultimately, if it fails. I think diversity is a requirement for a successful forest that is a very good carbon sink. I think that's an important piece of the discussion.

To Natural Resources Canada, what cost is going to ensure you have the ability to do the amount of tree planting you've committed to, in addition to ensuring that it is diversified? What is the deficit number?

• (1630)

Mr. Michael Vandergrift: I think there's an important distinction between habitat protection and biodiversity, so maybe I can invite my colleagues to speak to that as well.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Just to be certain that you have the question correct, you mentioned that the barrier to diversifying the types of trees that will be planted is cost. I'm led to believe that the types of trees you're planting are the cheapest trees you can possibly get, or they're a type of tree that, in other ways, would have to be part of a different or larger project plan—maybe a provincial plan.

I want to know specifically about the comment made by Natural Resources. You said it was a financial barrier. You've obviously costed this somehow. What is the cost to ensure that the trees you plant are truly going to belong to a diversified forest?

Ms. Monique Frison: I think we need a point of clarification. When Deputy Minister Vandergrift was talking about habitat restoration, he was talking about the extra costs you have to put in to prepare space to restore habitat for species at risk.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Okay, sure. Add that to the number. What's the number?

Ms. Monique Frison: On the other hand, there are all kinds of ways we get at quality for biodiversity and for habitat generally, whether it's species at risk or not, including expert review panels, making sure they get—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Mr. DeMarco, when you were auditing this, did you review any information as to the costing the departments had done, in particular costing to programs that would result in a diversified tree-planting program.

The Chair: Give a very brief response, please.

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: The first we heard of the cost barrier was in response to the recommendation in paragraph 1.47, where they said, "Given that habitat restoration is significantly more expensive, additional incentives for habitat restoration work would reduce funding available". They looked at it—

The Chair: Thank you. I appreciate that. We can come back to this.

Mr. Nater, you have the floor, but I understand you would like to lend some of your time to Mr. Stewart.

Mr. Stewart, you have the floor.

Mr. Jake Stewart: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Mr. Nater.

I was going to get back to my questions on New Brunswick.

New Brunswick is a leader in long-term modelling of forest resources. In my opinion, we're number one. I'm not a complete expert on it, but we're very good at forestry. I think the opportunity you missed here, and one of the biggest reasons you're failing, is that every province has its own forestry plan and manages it in some form or another. I'm sure they're all very different from each other. They have first nations and indigenous communities with expertise. They have companies with expertise. They have both Crown and private lands. The opportunity is there, and the expertise and labour to plant more trees are there.

I'm going to go back to my original question, and I don't care who answers it. I just want the answer, yes or no. Do you have an agreement signed with the Province of New Brunswick?

Ms. Monique Frison: We don't yet, although we are very far along in our conversations with New Brunswick.

You are absolutely right. One of the issues is that provinces already do a significant amount of planning, and they already have expertise. They do that as business as usual. What we're seeking is two billion trees in order to achieve all the objectives of the program. It's something incremental to business as usual. They want to consider how they're going to do it, how they're going to put it in place and how to best use those resources.

Mr. Jake Stewart: I appreciate that answer. I just think that when you look at that expertise, the bureaucracy is never going to go out and plant those trees. I think it's a \$3-billion initiative, so the investment dollars were clearly there, rightly or wrongly so, in my opinion, to achieve this goal.

The reason you're behind is that the number one province for forestry management is New Brunswick, and it should have been your top priority to find out which trees New Brunswick wanted to plant and which trees they needed to plant and to make a deal right off the bat and then move on to the other provinces. I think you would have signed those deals much quicker.

The two billion trees project is clearly way behind schedule, and I don't know if it will ever be achieved, but it was achievable had you done it right. The investment dollars are clearly there, because \$3 billion can't be just for the bureaucracy. You're talking about physically and manually, with human beings and equipment, planting trees. Trees have to be planted. They're not going to be planted by people like.... I'm not going to plant them. You're not going to plant them.

You had the expertise and the money. That's my point. That's why you're failing.

Go ahead, Mr. Nater.

• (1635)

The Chair: Mr. Nater, you have two minutes left.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you, Chair. I'll try to make full use of my two minutes.

First of all, I note that the most successful tree-planting program at the municipal level in North America is actually in the County of Wellington, which is in my riding of Perth-Wellington. It's doing

exceptional work and has been doing that for two decades now. I wanted to put up a quick plug there and waste more of my time, which is now drifting away.

Deputy Minister Vandergrift, when did NRCan become aware of the government's plan to plant two billion trees? On what date did you become aware of that commitment?

Mr. Michael Vandergrift: I don't have it. I do not know of a specific date. I'll invite my colleagues, if they are able, to provide an answer to that.

Mr. John Nater: Could the department follow up and let us know on what date you became aware of it? Was it when it was announced publicly, or did you become aware in advance of that commitment?

The Chair: Mr. Vandergrift, I just want to get a head nod. Is that possible?

Mr. Glenn Hargrove: Yes.

Mr. John Nater: I appreciate that.

I want to switch to the commissioner, Mr. DeMarco.

In paragraph 1.37, you discuss the “[p]ermanence of planted trees” and how as of yet there's no commitment to keep those trees in the ground.

I'm curious about your suggestion that it would become carbon negative by about 2030, give or take. When you were doing your modelling and were looking at that, what considerations did you take into account about the permanence of the trees that have been planted thus far and that will be planted in the future and about whether they stay in the ground or don't stay in the ground?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: That concern of ours is illustrated in recommendation 1.43, where we recommended that they have “a long-term monitoring plan to assess the health and survival of the trees planted through the program” and “targets for the program's performance indicators” relating to that.

These benefits—carbon sequestration, biodiversity and human health—will accrue only if a good number of the trees survive. That was a significant weakness we identified. We've modelled based on the tree planting being successful, but it's not a given that it will be successful, especially with the increased incidence of forest fires.

The Chair: I'm afraid that is the time, Mr. Nater. Mr. Stewart is down again, so maybe he'll give you some time back.

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

Ms. Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Thanks to all of you for coming today. The environment is definitely very important.

Rather than having annual calls for proposals, in December 2022 the department changed to multi-year project proposals. Is this helping to reduce the gaps in delivery? Will the department be able to meet the planting deadlines?

That's for Mr. Vandergrift.

Mr. Michael Vandergrift: I'm going to pass it to my colleagues in the room.

Ms. Monique Frison: Yes, absolutely. We launched an ongoing call for proposals, which means that we get proposals at any time from anyone who wants to put in a proposal for planting. It allows us to be a bit more nimble and faster in responding to proponents. Having calls for proposals at defined times was creating a false cycle that didn't allow us to be as nimble as we wanted to be.

Also, it helps us to identify places where we could help connect organizations that want to plant with those who have expertise in planting, for example. We find that we are also starting to help people develop partnerships to get at part of the concern the commissioner raised around ensuring long-term survivability so that when the tree goes in the ground, it's going in the ground in a way that will help it survive. Then the survivability rates will be better.

• (1640)

Ms. Jean Yip: Would that include follow-up monitoring as well?

Ms. Monique Frison: It does include follow-up and monitoring and reporting throughout the life of the project. As I mentioned earlier, we're looking at different ways we can continue monitoring over the life of the trees, including with sensors and remote monitoring.

Mr. Jeff Labonté (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Natural Resources): If I could add to that, budget 2023 recognized that and included an extra \$53 million for the department for data monitoring and data gathering to improve our ability to measure and understand the program's results and how it would look over time. That includes new technology, but it also includes new methodologies in science to support the ability to do that.

Ms. Jean Yip: Planting trees is back-breaking work, and it's difficult to attract enough labour. Is there an adequate action plan to address this? When you look at exhibit 1.3, you go from low tree-planting targets to much higher ones.

Ms. Monique Frison: We have some funding in the two billion trees program to look at capacity building and also to conduct science and research.

One of the projects we've undertaken is to assess the survivability of seedlings that are distributed using drones, which might be a way to deal with labour shortages or with difficulties in accessing the sites where our partners would want to plant. We don't have the results from that pilot yet to know a bit more about whether the seedlings would survive in sufficient numbers to make that worthwhile. Certainly it is something we talk to our partners about.

When it comes to, for example, the provinces and territories, they would already have systems in place to have labour for their business as usual planting, which they can also rely on for this incremental planting.

Ms. Jean Yip: It's good to learn that you have drones. I still remember planting in my own garden, and even if they're seedlings, it's still a lot of work.

The department said they wanted to publish some information on the gaps and issues raised by experts and environmental groups. What are some of these gaps and issues, and how do you plan to address them?

Mr. Glenn Hargrove: I think your comment refers to the remarks by Deputy Minister Tremblay.

Mr. Derek Hermanutz (Director General, Economic Analysis Directorate, Department of the Environment): Yes. Lindsay can answer part of the question.

Mr. Lindsay Pratt (Director, Pollutant Inventories and Reporting, Department of the Environment): One of the aspects of all of this is reporting on the greenhouse gas emissions, obviously. There have been concerns raised to ensure that Canada's official reporting of greenhouse gas estimates are as transparent and accurate as possible.

Some of the actions that we've taken recently include a plan to include in the next edition of Canada's national inventory report more disaggregated data when it comes to forests by provinces and territories.

We've recently undergone a review by a team of international experts. That happened back in September. We're waiting for that report of recommendations, which we will consider very seriously and implement over time.

We're looking closely at how we can improve the text in the report so that this very complicated topic can be more clearly articulated to those who read it.

Last but not least, we're also updating the improvement plan for forestry estimates, which we hope will be made publicly available in the near future.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to begin our third and final round, which involves questioning by six members. I was going to cut the time back. I'm not going to do that, but I'm going to be very firm about the time so we can get through a full round.

Mr. McCauley, you have the floor for five minutes. The time needs to include the answers as well, so bear that in mind.

• (1645)

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Mr. DeMarco, could you explain in clearer language paragraph 1.23, your concerns about Natural Resources considering carbon offsets, it seems, and how that kind of goes against the grain of what this project is supposed to achieve?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: It's another iteration of the potential for double counting or the problem of a lack of additionality.

If offsets are not used properly, one project may be able to count twice for tree planting and some sort of carbon offset. We want to see these programs used to add value, not just double count things that are already counted in an offset program, for example.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Mr. Vandergrift, what is NRCan doing to address this concern?

Mr. Michael Vandergrift: Could I ask the team to reply, Chair?

I'm sorry, Mr. McCauley.

Mr. Glenn Hargrove: We certainly wouldn't want to see any double counting either.

In the offsets space, there are two different markets. There are compliance markets and there are voluntary markets. We would not allow any offsetting in a compliance market that—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Do you have in that program anything in writing to prevent that or is it only that you would like not to see it?

Mr. Glenn Hargrove: Yes, there are written instructions around offsets.

Go ahead, Monique.

Ms. Monique Frison: It's in the written instructions we have on the Internet, which are available for program applicants. It's in the program application guide. We can provide those to the committee if you wish.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Commissioner DeMarco, are you comfortable with what they've provided—that we're not going to have that issue?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: I would like to see the results of that, rather than just the instructions, to make sure it truly is avoiding double counting. I can't guarantee it at this point.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: How long will it take to see the results?

Ms. Monique Frison: As Mr. Hargrove mentioned, if somebody is claiming in the compliance market, Environment Canada would know.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: How long would it take to see those results?

Ms. Monique Frison: It would take a number of years because a tree won't be valuable for offsets until it's grown almost to maturity, which means in some cases 20, 40 or 60 years.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: It could end up being double counted and we'll all be long retired before we actually catch it.

Ms. Monique Frison: Not—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I'm sorry. I will move on, thanks.

Commissioner DeMarco, do we have an updated forecast on the cost of the tree-planting program? Does it adjust for the issues we've talked about around losing trees, whether it's to harvesting, fires or dying out?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: We are still considering whether to follow up on this audit because of the changes in circumstances around the double counting with the low carbon economy fund.

We have the same question. For example, in paragraph 1.5, we said they were going to spend up to \$3.2 billion on the two billion trees, and the breakdown is set out in paragraph 1.14. There was no indication there that they were going to get tens of millions of free trees from double counting from other programs, so is this \$3.2 billion to plant two billion trees or is it \$3.2 billion to plant one point something billion trees? We don't know that. We also don't know whether the sequestration review—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Who's responsible for giving us a proper estimate? This is billions of dollars of taxpayers' money on a very flawed program. Who's responsible for putting forward firm costing?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: The department should have provided that. It's this committee more than it—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Which department is it? Is it NRCan?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: Yes. For two billion trees, it's NRCan.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Mr. Vandergrift, would you be able to provide to the committee an updated price, backed up with details that address the permanence issue?

Commissioner DeMarco, how many trees would we actually have to plant with the issues around permanence, knowing we'll lose some, to achieve two billion? Is it going to be 2.5 billion? Is it three? Do we have to settle the permanence issue first?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: They committed to planting two billion. The department realizes they won't get the benefits from those two billion if most of them die.

If you wanted to have two billion survive, you'd have to factor in the survivorship rate. I don't know what it is for the first two years or whether the department can tell you that.

The commitment was to plant two billion trees.

• (1650)

The Chair: Thank you. I'll have to cut you off there. We will try to come back to that.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thanks very much.

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

[Translation]

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank you in advance for your patience, Commissioner, because I'm practising my French.

[English]

I'm going to try to ask questions in French.

[Translation]

According to an article in the Journal de Québec, the Quebec government is asking the federal government to review the provision in the program, which specifies that trees planted under the program can't be harvested in the long term. Basically, it's asking to allow the trees planted under the government's two billion trees program to be cut.

Do you think that if this proposed change were allowed, the program would be able to achieve its stated objectives, meaning an increase in forest cover and environmental restoration?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: Thank you. You're not the only one here who needs to practise French. I need to as well. I'm getting a lot of opportunities to do that now that I'm the commissioner.

I also read that newspaper article this morning. It's a new development. I don't know whether the federal government will be able to settle the matter with the Province of Quebec, and I'd like to know what the department is going to do.

[English]

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Does anybody else want to comment on that?

[Translation]

Mr. Michael Vandergrift: We just received the letter and we're still discussing the situation with the Quebec government. I believe we agree with Quebec that the two billion trees program could help with the reforestation of land damaged by the fires. However, I think we're going to continue to discuss the program's goal, which is to respond to the need to combat climate change and generate long-term benefits by planting trees.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

If you had to give your opinion on whether or not this proposed change to the program should be accepted, Commissioner, what message or guidance would you give to the federal government?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: You talked about settling this issue with Quebec. My role does not include giving advice on policy matters. That question is really for the department. It's up to the department to state whether or not it is comfortable with what the Province of Quebec has proposed. It's not my role.

[English]

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Does the department want to make a comment on this?

[Translation]

Mr. Jeff Labonté: Yes, we could add a few things.

It's really important to have strong partnerships with the provinces and territories. The discussion is ongoing. As previously mentioned, we've signed a number of agreements and are continuing discussions with other provinces and territories. Quebec is one of the provinces and we are continuing to work with them.

This letter is a new development for us. Minister Wilkinson asked his counterparts, in August I believe, to reach some agreements and speed up discussions. Quebec responded, and we received that response this week. We're going to continue discussions with the province and our counterparts to come up with a solution.

• (1655)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

I have a question for the Department of Natural Resources officials about Quebec's proposal. In view of the terrible impact of the forest fires in Quebec, how will the two billion trees program contribute to reforestation and forest fire prevention?

[English]

The Chair: I'm afraid we'll have to wait for the next round for an answer on that.

[Translation]

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

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Fantastic. My colleague opposite has just asked the very questions I was going to ask. Terrific.

In fact, I was curious about why an agreement with the Quebec government had not yet been reached. But some agreements were signed. That, of course, creates delays in the process. As I don't have a lot of time, can someone tell me very briefly where the discussions stand and when an agreement might be forthcoming?

Mr. Michael Vandergrift: As my colleague mentioned, we just received the letter from Quebec. We've been co-operating closely with Quebec and continuing the discussion to find a solution. I think we share the same objectives and that we and the Quebec government need to find a solution together.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Okay.

Has an assessment of the losses resulting from the forest fires been done, and how does the federal government intend to compensate them for the damage under its program?

[English]

Ms. Monique Frison: There are a number of ways we're talking to provinces and territories about using the two billion tree funding to recover from fire. One is to replant in areas where the fire was so hot the forest won't come back naturally. Another is to help communities build firebreaks. Another would be to consider looking at things like species mix.

Some of the points that were raised earlier about diversity also count when it comes to fire, because it may be that different species are better for—

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Excuse me for interrupting, but I don't have much time left.

As my colleague pointed out, certain species are being emphasized because of the price. In the planning, the goal was \$1.70 per tree. I don't know if the plan had been to plant a wider range of trees to make the forest more resilient, but I've noticed that there are major price disparities. In Brampton, Ontario, it's \$160 per tree, whereas it's \$1 in Greater Sudbury. Can you tell me why?

[English]

Ms. Monique Frison: The prices vary not necessarily on species but on how old the tree is, how long it has to grow in a nursery and how much the land needs to be prepared in advance. Yes, you can do a different species for that lower cost.

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Do you think the expected average price per tree of \$1.70 is still achievable or reasonable?

[English]

Ms. Monique Frison: It depends very much on the circumstances and on what will be planted and where. If it's a place where you have to do a lot of work to prepare the land to take in a tree, that will be more expensive. In terms of the \$1.70, for some of the projects our contribution is still around a dollar or two dollars per tree.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[English]

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

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

I want to turn to the double counting. It is a concern to me to know we have a situation where that is possible. I understand from reading the report that there are some issues related to methodology and frameworks not existing.

Commissioner DeMarco, how is it that you received that information? What did you find in the process of reviewing the counting of the trees and various other programs that do similar initiatives? How did you see that this mistake was possible?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: This emerged after the tabling of our report. In our report, at paragraphs 1.19 and 1.20, we noted where they were at in their tree-planting success in the first two years. That was reflected in the exhibit on the next page.

This is important, especially for this committee, the public accounts committee: Please note, on page 26 of our report, that we obtained from the entity, the department, “confirmation that all known information that has been requested, or that could affect the findings or audit conclusion, has been provided”, along with “confirmation that the audit report is factually accurate”. That's a very important step in the audit process. We were not told about these tens of millions of other trees.

Perhaps they didn't know the exact number, but it was incumbent upon the department to tell us that it was not 16.5 million that they were going to count for 2022 but tens of millions above that. It turns out that those tens of millions of additional trees were not from the two billion trees program. They were from the low carbon

economy fund and had already been planted and funded under that program.

If you double count trees from other programs in other departments, that's not incremental. That's double counting. It's obvious that the benefits for biodiversity, carbon sequestration and human health are diminished if you count the same tree twice in two different programs.

● (1700)

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Who's responsible for counting the trees?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: It's Natural Resources Canada.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Why didn't you make the commissioner aware?

That's for anyone.

Mr. Michael Vandergrift: The statistics for the counting of those trees were not available at the time of the audit period. It was only several months later that the number of trees planted was made available to us.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Why did you count the trees outside the program?

Mr. Michael Vandergrift: The program was designed to account for tree planting across government efforts as long as they were incremental and they could be sufficiently validated and counted.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Is that how you received the question?

The Chair: Thank you very much. I'm afraid that is time.

Mr. Caputo, you have the floor for four minutes.

Mr. Frank Caputo (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): If Mr. Desjarlais wants an answer to his question, he can get an answer, and then I'll go.

The Chair: Do you want to restate it, Mr. Desjarlais, just for clarity?

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: At what point did somebody ask a question, other than the commissioner, as to how many trees were planted? Is the question you were asked why you included the trees from the other program? Why did you include those trees at all?

Mr. Michael Vandergrift: The program was designed to include trees across government programs as long as they met the two conditions that Ms. Frison has spoken about. Those statistics were not available to us at the time of the audit period.

I will invite colleagues to add, if they wish.

Mr. Frank Caputo: I plan on directing my questions to Mr. DeMarco.

Thank you very much for your report. I am new to this committee; I don't normally sit here. Those who know me know I'm more of a justice person, to be candid. I'm reading this as somebody who's not on this committee, and to me it looks like the beginning of an unmitigated disaster, if I could put it that way, in that the government has pledged to plant two billion trees and we're nowhere near on track. Is that accurate?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: They weren't on track as of the date of our report. They consider themselves to be on track now that they're counting trees from another program.

Mr. Frank Caputo: If we cheat, we're on track. Is that the government's position?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: Well, as I've said before, we said in our report that they're unlikely to meet their target unless significant changes are made. I was not hoping for changes in accounting. I was hoping for changes in the number of agreements and the number of actual incremental trees planted from the date of our report forward.

I should say that even if they didn't know the exact number—and we've heard about statistics from that other program—they should have alerted us by saying they intended to count tens of millions more trees from another program. Even if they didn't know the exact number, we should have been told that these trees were sitting in this very large back pocket of theirs from another program.

Mr. Frank Caputo: Then this is an F for execution, and an F triple minus for transparency. Do I have that right?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: I'm not in the business of giving grades, but I am disappointed that we were not told about that. An important part of the audit process is for us to be told about anything that could affect our findings, including this, which would affect not only exhibit 1.3 but exhibit 1.4 and several of the paragraphs about costs as well. We don't know if they're spending \$3.2 billion on two billion trees or some lesser number of trees.

Mr. Frank Caputo: I'm utterly befuddled. This government has missed virtually every single target when it comes to climate. Now we have a chart here that talks about reaching zero net megatonnes in 2031, but it's predicated on the government reaching its targets, which they haven't yet reached and are nowhere near reaching. They want to plant, by my count, about five and a half times more trees than they could plant in 2022, and all of our numbers—when I say “our numbers”, I mean all of the government numbers—are predicated on this.

How do we sit around this table as parliamentarians and not be disappointed?

• (1705)

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: I share your disappointment about Canada's track record on climate change. There's no doubt about that.

Mr. Frank Caputo: I'm speechless.

Those are my questions. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Bradford, you have the floor for four minutes.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: This is for Mr. DeMarco.

What inconsistencies have you found in the documents and analytical frameworks used by various government stakeholders in Canada? Which were the most relevant, and which ones should Environment and Climate Change Canada use as a guide?

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: Are we talking about the second half of the report, on forest carbon accounting?

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Yes.

Mr. Jerry V. DeMarco: The inconsistencies are illustrated in exhibit 1.8, where we have three lines on the graph showing that depending on the year of the report—2019, 2020 or 2021—the calculation of forest carbon sink or forest carbon source varied for the same year for the same variable. We have significant inconsistencies there and a lack of transparency and utility for decision-makers on the role of forestry and forests in Canada's carbon accounting. Those areas need to be tidied up.

I should say that Canada is one of the big three forested countries in the world. We need to get this right. It is a very large responsibility that Canada has with this amount of forested land. We shouldn't be seeing, year by year, wild fluctuations as to whether the emissions in a given year were net negative or net positive. That needs to be clarified. It has a huge impact not only on our net emissions numbers, but on how we would manage the forests differently if we had better information.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: For the Department of the Environment, recommendation 1.76 is about inconsistent progress reporting. What action does the department intend to take to improve the domestic reporting documents for estimating the contribution of forests to Canada's 2030 greenhouse gas emissions reduction target?

Mr. Derek Hermanutz: The government is committed to annual reporting of projections and the progress toward targets. We work very closely with other departments, including NRCan, to develop the expected accounting contributions from the land sector, including forests.

As my deputy minister said, the forest sector is very complicated—more complicated than other sectors—but we work closely with NRCan on the reference level approach.

As mentioned earlier, there's a review currently going on of the accounting practices. We're looking to have that completed by the end of this calendar year.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Does the department intend to consistently include forested land in the relevant greenhouse gas indicators for frameworks, and if so, which frameworks?

Mr. Derek Hermanutz: I'm not sure which frameworks, but for our annual reporting, we do include the contribution of forestry to the LULUCF sector.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: I think this goes back to MNR. Do you know of any other countries that have a program similar to the two billion trees program? Is anyone else you're aware of taking this sort of approach internationally?

Ms. Monique Frison: We know that other countries have committed to planting incremental trees. We can provide some information on that to the committee, if you wish.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: What's the success of those particular programs?

Ms. Monique Frison: I think all countries would find it challenging, as we do. It's a complex, long-term program. I don't think any of them are finished yet. They're all very recent. There aren't very many, though.

The Chair: Thank you. I'm afraid that is all the time we have for questioning. I want to thank all the witnesses for coming today.

Mr. Vandergrift, I want to thank you for joining us from overseas. I'm not a great fan of Zoom and being virtual, but I do appreciate you making time to join us in this circumstance. I always encourage those who are in the national capital region to come in. You could not be in.

I know it's late where you are, so I hope you have time for dinner tonight before calling it in. There are many fine restaurants in London, as I'm sure you'll discover.

I will excuse the witnesses now.

I'm going to suspend for about 30 seconds so you can clear out, and then I'll come right back to the committee work. We're suspended.

• (1705) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1710)

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

Mr. Nater, you have the floor.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will be very brief.

Obviously, what we saw this week from the Auditor General was an appalling display of incompetence and potential corruption. What we've seen is an appalling lack of documentation and a lack of forthcomingness. I think we have to address this.

I would note that today in question period, Minister Dominic LeBlanc said something to the effect that we need to make sure "that every document is available". To that end, I would like to move a production motion. It will be circulated to the committee in both official languages.

I move:

That, given that the Auditor General was unable to properly audit subcontractors used by GC Strategies and other contractors in ArriveCan and the Procurement Ombudsman found that 76% of subcontractors used in ArriveCan did no actual work, the Committee:

a. order the Canada Border Services Agency, the Public Health Agency of Canada, Public Services and Procurement Canada and all other government departments and agencies involved in ArriveCan to provide a complete list of subcontractors that received work on ArriveCan, the service provided, and the total

amount of money paid under the subcontracts within seven days of this motion being adopted;

b. order the main ArriveCan contractors, including GC Strategies, Dalian Enterprises Incorporated, Amazon Web Services, Inc., Microsoft Canada Inc., TEKsystems, Inc., Donna Cona Inc., BDO Canada LLP, MGIS Inc., 49 Solutions, Makwa Resourcing Inc./TPG Technology Consulting Limited, and Advanced Chippewa Technologies Inc. to provide a complete list of subcontractors that received work on ArriveCan, the service provided and the total amount of money paid under the subcontracts within seven days of this motion being adopted;

c. order the Auditor General to provide a complete list of the 21 "Other" contractors, that received a combined \$6 million, identified in Exhibit 1.1 of the ArriveCan app, the service provided and the total amount of money paid under the contracts within seven days of this motion being adopted;

d. order GC Strategies and all relevant government departments, agencies and Crown corporations to produce a complete list of subcontractors used, the service provided and the total amount of money paid in relation to all contracts GC Strategies has received since 2015, within seven days of this motion being adopted; and

e. report this motion to the House for its information.

I think it's pretty clear that this is information we as a committee need and that the Canadian public deserves answers to.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I have a list. I have Mr. Brock, Ms. Khalid and Mr. Genuis.

Mr. Brock, you have the floor.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I'm pretty sure I had my hand raised first. I am more than happy to entertain Mr. Nater, but I'm not understanding the order list or—

The Chair: You're next, Ms. Khalid. We'll get to you right away.

Mr. Brock, you have the floor.

Mr. Larry Brock (Brantford—Brant, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

A member who has been part of this particular scandal for the better part of two months.... The need for transparency and accountability is increasingly urgent.

It was disturbing to hear the Auditor General, who has decades' worth of audit experience, proclaim to Canadians and to parliamentarians that this particular scandal was one of the worst examples of poor record-keeping and management-keeping. A number of ministries were involved in the creation of this disastrous app, and the runaway costs are disturbing on so many levels but particularly to taxpayers.

We have no idea as to the exact figure. We know that it's well in excess of \$60 million now. The exact figure is completely unknown because of missing documentation—documentation that should have been available to the Auditor General. There should have been a budget; there wasn't.

The whole concept of ministerial oversight, particularly in relation to the minister responsible for public safety, the minister responsible for public health, the minister responsible for procurement and the President of the Treasury Board.... They need to accept responsibility because under their collective watch, this app has been an absolute disaster.

I wholeheartedly endorse my colleague Mr. Nater's production motion because a lot of people need to account for what they did.

• (1715)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brock.

The bells are ringing. Is there UC to continue to the bottom of the hour?

Some hon. members: No.

The Chair: Before I adjourn the meeting, I'll let you know that we will be meeting as a committee on Tuesday at 10 a.m. and Wednesday at 10 a.m. I'm telling you this as a courtesy so you can prepare your travel plans. You're welcome to join us by Zoom or to come back to the national capital. You'll have the official notices tomorrow.

The meeting is adjourned.

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