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# Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development

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Chair: Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia





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• (1630)

[English]

**Mr. Gerald Soroka (Yellowhead, CPC):** I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair (Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.)):** Okay.

**Mr. Gerald Soroka:** I would like to know if we have confirmation as to when Minister Boissonnault will be coming to our committee.

**The Chair:** We do not.

**Mr. Gerald Soroka:** I think we need to have that as soon as possible, because many people in Jasper have many questions that need to be answered.

**The Chair:** We're working on it and trying to get a confirmation as soon as possible.

Good afternoon, colleagues and witnesses.

We are continuing our study of the factors leading to the recent fires in Jasper National Park.

For the first panel, we have Brock Mulligan, senior vice-president, Alberta Forest Products Association. He's here in person. From the Legislative Assembly of Alberta, we have Heather Sweet, MLA, Edmonton-Manning, who is joining us via video conference. From the Bighorn Stoney First Nation, we have Barry Wesley, consultation officer and traditional knowledge-keeper. From the Lac Ste. Anne Métis Community Association, also by video conference, we have Dr. Tracy Friedel, president.

We'll start with Mr. Mulligan for five minutes.

**Mr. Brock Mulligan (Senior Vice-President, Alberta Forest Products Association):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will give you a bit of context for the Alberta Forest Products Association, or AFPA.

We represent 29 forestry companies in Alberta, and our members range all the way from publicly listed companies to family-run businesses that have been passed down from generation to generation. Our members sustainably harvest timber, mostly on public land, and make high-quality products that are in demand here in Canada and around the world. We also play a significant role in managing, sustaining and caring for Alberta's forests.

Sustainability is the key to our business. While companies that are 80 to 100 years old are the exception to the rule in other industries, they're the norm in forestry. It's only possible because compa-

nies plant decades in advance, plant more trees than they harvest and take care of the land. In Alberta, forestry companies plant over 100 million seedlings annually and grow roughly three trees for every one that's harvested.

For many years, we've been deeply concerned about the situation in Jasper. While our members don't typically operate in the park, they operate on adjacent lands, caring for and managing those forests. Unhealthy forests in the park affect neighbouring forests and increase the risk of fires and pine beetle infestations that know no borders or boundaries.

The other day, I dug up a newspaper article that we wrote in 2017 predicting that the next major fire would be in Hinton or Jasper. Sadly, we were right. We had expressed concern about the combination of pine beetle, increasingly warm, dry summers and unmanaged forests within the park. We had talked about how fires are a natural part of the forest cycle in this area of the world, but they're dangerous around communities and people, even more so when we have hot, dry summers and increasingly volatile fires.

The majority of forests across Canada have evolved through disturbance. It's certainly prudent to extinguish fires from a community safety perspective, but this has resulted in unnaturally old forests and volatile conditions. We believe that harvesting and replanting forests is a safer alternative to fires. Old, uniform forests are much more at risk of fires than forests with a more natural mix of age composition. We can create that mix through active forest management.

We also believe there's a fundamental flaw in the Government of Canada's approach to forest management. This flaw is the belief that overmature forests should not be managed, even if they are aging and at risk of catastrophic fires. This was exactly the situation in Jasper, and sadly that risk was realized. Not only does the belief that forests should be preserved in an unnatural state seem to be entrenched in national parks policy, but it has extended to provincial lands through legislation like the Species at Risk Act.

Right now, in Alberta, companies are prevented from managing and operating in large tracts of older, overmature forests because of caribou. The reality is that, just like in Jasper, these forests are at risk of catastrophic fires. When those fires happen, it will be bad for communities, caribou and the sustainability of industries operating on the land base.

For us, this exercise isn't about looking back. It's about forging a collaborative path forward, one that protects the communities we live in and love, the land we cherish and the forests that sustain us. We believe unequivocally that this path involves more active management of our forests—looking at which areas are at risk of becoming the next Jasper and taking steps such as harvesting and replanting with younger trees, which are much less at risk of fire.

We believe it involves taking a hard look at any policies or legislation preventing this work. Policies for national parks and the Species at Risk Act are in urgent need of reform. We believe this path involves a co-operative approach and open communication. Conversations on the management of our forests need to happen among all levels of government, indigenous communities, industry and other users of the land. They need to leverage the expertise of foresters and people who live on the land, as well as the perspectives of local communities. They need to happen urgently.

Let's not waste this opportunity to begin those conversations.

Thank you.

• (1635)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Mulligan.

We'll now go to Ms. Sweet for five minutes.

**Ms. Heather Sweet (Member of the Legislative Assembly for Edmonton-Manning, Legislative Assembly of Alberta):** Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and members of the committee. It is a pleasure to be with you here today. Thank you for inviting me.

I am joining you from Edmonton, Alberta, on Treaty No. 6 territory and the home of the Métis people, who share a deep connection to this land.

I was saddened by the tragic Jasper fire, the loss of wildland firefighter Morgan Kitchen, the loss of homes and businesses, and the emotional toll on the people of Jasper.

I would like to focus on two aspects of the Jasper fire and on ways that we, as legislators, can move forward in a non-partisan, collaborative way: the first being the enhancement of FireSmart, and the second being the development of an economic recovery program that will ensure the financial success of the residents and local businesses still operating in Jasper.

Alberta has a program that focuses on wildfire resilience based in science, and it works. The FireSmart program must see a significant increase in financial and policy-level support from all levels of government. There needs to be a strong focus on supporting homeowner-level improvements in the home ignition zone, which focuses on the home itself and everything within 30 metres of the home. Research has shown that up to 90% of structures are lost to ember ignitions during wildland-urban interface events. In Jasper, fire within the community was started by ember ignitions. This quickly led

to structure-to-structure ignition, overwhelming the capability of firefighter resources within the community.

The Government of Canada has offered green energy grants to homeowners in the past, and a similar grant program needs to be established to support homeowners in adapting their homes to be more resilient not only to the impact of wildfire but also to the broader impacts of a changing climate.

The National Research Council published its “National Guide for Wildland-Urban Interface Fires” in 2020. These measures have not yet been adopted in the national or provincial building codes, and this needs to change. The Government of Canada needs to expedite the implementation and incorporation of these construction measures into the national building code. We need to build for our changing climate and ensure that new buildings in at-risk areas are adapted to withstand the impacts of wildfire. As we rebuild Jasper, these codes should be followed, with funding from all levels of government to bridge the loss that will happen with insurance companies.

There is a defined need for better access to wildland firefighting training for municipal, structural firefighters. The Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs passed a resolution in late September on this very issue. We need to leverage the training capacity and capabilities of our structural fire services with well-established and capable training programs to ensure that all firefighters across Canada are trained to a national standard.

The management of fuel—vegetation—needs to be encouraged on a much larger scale. There should be fuel reduction in buffer zones around communities on both public and private lands.

The Alberta staffing model and structure for wildland firefighting are not sustainable. With short employment contracts of four to six months, low wages and extremely limited long-term career opportunities within wildfire management agencies, it is becoming increasingly difficult to adequately recruit and retain wildland firefighters. Wildland firefighter crews are less experienced and being asked to respond to more challenging wildfires for extended periods of time, without adequate time for rest and recovery. This is putting our firefighters at much greater risk of injury and line-of-duty fatalities.

On a broader level, the overall Canadian model is also facing challenges. In 2023, all provinces across Canada had extreme wild-fire activity. Resources were not available to share across provincial borders, and many fires were under-resourced. Between May 1 and August 31, the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre listed 113 days at level five. All available wildland firefighter resources were committed, and no resources were available to support provinces. Many international partners came to our aid. However, reliance on international support comes at great financial expense to the provinces and Ottawa. We need to do more to build capacity within our own wildland firefighting industry.

In relation to the economic recovery of Jasper, it is important that all levels of government work together to develop an economic response program. Jasper is an isolated community with a heavy reliance on tourism. Businesses make most of their revenue in the high season during the summer months, when tourists flood in from across the country and the world. Starting on July 22, most of that revenue was lost. That's three months of high-season revenue gone just like that, putting a serious strain on local businesses. In other jurisdictions, when fire has impacted a community, we have seen how they often find economic stability through these resources.

I appreciate the call for housing, but I would also stress that, without employment opportunities in Jasper, Jasperites will not be able to pay their rent. Therefore, we need an economic strategy.

• (1640)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

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

**Mr. Barry Wesley (Consultation Officer, Traditional Knowledge Keeper, Bighorn Stoney First Nation):** *Aba wathtech, everyone.*

First of all, I want to thank the first responders. During the time of the fire, they did a great job.

Jasper National Park lies in the Stoney people's traditional territory. This is where my ancestors lived. During that time, as history shows, there was never a forest fire that big, because we, as Stoney indigenous people, stewarded the land. That was our job. The Creator has given us a responsibility and a role to play in this ecosystem. With the mountains being their home, my people did that until 1907, when Jasper National Park was created. Right after that, we were no longer able to maintain and steward the land, because we were outlawed.

Since that period of time, all of these things have escalated. There is an overgrowth of forestry, and we also have invasive species coming in. Before that, there was no evidence of invaders. Also, the forest was being maintained. Through our duties as Stoney people, we did pipe ceremonies. That helps maintain. That's the way of maintaining the earth, and it's very important.

From what I've seen, traditional science has not been recognized in the parks or across Canada, but I'm not here to complain or anything. I just came here wanting to help. I think the traditional knowledge of the Stoney people should be recognized and used as a tool, so we don't have any more disasters. This is why I'm here.

Also, as Îlethka Stoney people, we value kinship. That's very important. Kinship is sharing our knowledge with our visitors and our generation. As Stoney people, we have a role, and our responsibility is to live a good life. Not just Jasper but also the mountains are a destination for tourism. We need to be heard, because that's where we live. My ancestors lived there. Today, we still exist, and we need to be recognized.

If we can help in any way, that would be good. We did a ceremony for the firefighters back in August. After the ceremony, within a week, the fire rested. Everything you see, hear and feel is a living being. That's our belief. If we work together with it, through us, this beautiful landscape will continue to be beautiful.

Thank you.

• (1645)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Last but not least, we'll go to Dr. Friedel, who's joining us by video conference.

Please go ahead. You have five minutes.

**Dr. Tracy L. Friedel (President, Lac Ste. Anne Métis Community Association):** Thank you.

Good afternoon.

*[Witness spoke in Cree and provided the following translation:]*

Thank you for allowing me to be here today. My name is Tracy Friedel. I'm a Nehiyaw-Métis woman from the Métis people of Lac Ste. Anne, Alberta.

*[English]*

I am currently the president of the representative governing body for the Lac Ste. Anne Métis. We are descendants of Cree Métis families who have occupied the landscape of west central Alberta since the late 1700s to the early 1800s, including in what today is known as Jasper National Park.

The history of establishing national parks in Canada is complex and controversial, particularly as it concerns the displacement of indigenous peoples, as was described by Barry. These protected areas are praised for their natural beauty and their commitment to conservation, but their creation inevitably came at the expense of indigenous peoples, some of whom lived on these lands since time immemorial.

In overseeing Jasper National Park, the federal government implemented policies that resulted in the forcible removal or displacement of indigenous families and communities from these lands, disrupting traditional ways of life and connection to important places. Forcible removal without compensation and the barring of indigenous peoples from practising their cultural activities within the park's boundaries disrupted communities and livelihoods. It also adversely impacted their cultural practices. The legacies of this displacement are profound and enduring.

In the case of Jasper National Park, since about 2005 there's been increasing recognition of those injustices that are facing the indigenous peoples who were forcibly displaced. The Jasper Indigenous Forum brings park staff, managers and representatives of indigenous groups together with others to work towards returning indigenous presence and culture to the landscape. Under this initiative, the park involves historically connected first nation and Métis communities in park management matters, including recently in fire management initiatives where there has been an expanding effort to undertake prescribed burns. Unfortunately, though, there is a lot to catch up on regarding a century of fire suppression, the impacts of climate change and the wish to meet the expectations of Jasper residents and Canadian and international visitors who desire a certain conception of nature.

We know from our elders that fire was a way to promote ecological diversity and reduce the risk of wildfires. This type of cultural burning links to the idea of fire as medicine and was key to proper management of local ecosystems, something that indigenous peoples were not given due credit for. With indigenous peoples removed from the park, fire suppression became a priority.

The Jasper wildfires demonstrate the compounding of mismanaged landscapes and climate change impacts and reveal the tensions that exist between a focus on recreation, tourism and conservation on the one hand and indigenous reconciliation on the other hand. From here, it's important for Parks Canada to enhance its collaboration with indigenous peoples, including a goal of reintroducing cultural burns as an aspect of park management. In addition to leading to enhanced biodiversity, which is important to such other objectives as caribou recovery, this activity can also be understood as an aspect of addressing the economic effects that forest displacement had on the removal of indigenous peoples from these lands.

In studying these factors, as this committee is doing, Lac Ste. Anne Métis call on Parks Canada to commit to deepening the relationship building that is already under way by ensuring that management arrangements more closely align with indigenous perspectives and aspirations regarding conservation. These efforts are crucial for advancing reconciliation.

*Kinana'skomitina'wa'w. Hay hay.*

Thank you.

• (1650)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We'll start the questioning with Mr. Lloyd.

You have six minutes.

**Mr. Dane Lloyd (Sturgeon River—Parkland, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank all the witnesses for being here today.

I want to particularly thank you, Dr. Friedel and Mr. Wesley, for your testimony. I agree that we need to integrate more traditional indigenous knowledge at parks in forest management. Your comments today are much appreciated.

I start my questioning with you, Mr. Mulligan. You spoke about Parks Canada and the government having a flawed approach to forest management. Could you tell us a bit about what that flawed approach looks like?

**Mr. Brock Mulligan:** Yes, thank you, MP Lloyd.

I think one of the major flaws in the approach is that it assumes that industrial forest disturbance is automatically negative and that the forests ought to be left to their natural devices, even if they are very much at risk of fire. Sadly, we saw that it was exactly what happened in Jasper. Yes, forests that are in a completely natural state have many benefits, but when you have that type of forest around communities, it's inherently dangerous. Many folks, I think, have spoken about that risk for years on end, and unfortunately it was realized.

**Mr. Dane Lloyd:** We had witnesses in the past and had ministers of the government talk about ecological integrity being their number one priority. With you being experts in sustainability and forest management, is it a natural part of the ecology of forests that they be maintained as old-growth forests and that they have fire suppressed for decades and decades?

**Mr. Brock Mulligan:** Boreal forests are forests that are fire-driven, and we know that. Fire is certainly a beneficial thing on the landscape, but when you have these large, naturally intense fires in forests that are simply left, it's quite dangerous.

We think that sustainable harvesting and management is a much safer alternative to these large fires. It's not a panacea. It's one tool in the tool kit, but given the direness of the situation we're facing, it's important not to exclude that tool.

**Mr. Dane Lloyd:** Thank you.

In 2017, when your organization wrote that article talking about the risk of the pine beetle and the risk of fire to Hinton and Jasper, you estimated that it would cost about \$85 million to put in an action plan that would protect those communities and protect the park from this major fire.

What would be the number that you would place on that if the government had done that, let's say, in the last two years? How much would that have cost?

**Mr. Brock Mulligan:** I'm not sure about that from a number perspective. There was \$75 million allocated to pine beetle mitigation funding. That money has been very successful in mitigating the spread of pine beetle in areas outside of the park, and that was part of the point of that article. Unfortunately, within the park, the pine beetle has spread like crazy, and we've seen the unfortunate consequences of that.

**Mr. Dane Lloyd:** The pine beetle being allowed to spread, largely unfettered, in our national park has had a devastating impact on the areas around the park. Is that what you're saying?

**Mr. Brock Mulligan:** It certainly had a devastating impact on forests within the park, and it has necessitated mitigative actions outside of the park to prevent it from spreading further. Companies have looked at the situation within the park and said, "Oh my goodness. That's what's coming at us". Of the pine stands immediately adjacent to the park that are at risk of the pine beetle spreading through, many of those stands have been harvested, and that strategy has been very successful at stopping the further eastward spread.

**Mr. Dane Lloyd:** I haven't heard the argument made, but some people might accuse your organization of maybe having a financial motive for wanting to go into the parks. However, I was speaking to some forestry experts in my riding, which is a major lumber-processing area, and there really isn't a lot of value after several years when these pine beetle-infested trees are allowed to sit, year after year. It's mostly cut up and taken for wood chips and pellets, and then it's sold.

Is there a major economic value to the wood in the parks that has been used by pine beetles?

**Mr. Brock Mulligan:** The main value that our industry has in this conversation is the health of our forests throughout the province, because that's the right thing to do from an ecological standpoint and that's the lifeblood of our industry.

• (1655)

**Mr. Dane Lloyd:** We know from previous witnesses from other forest organizations that Parks Canada, in the past, has actually brought in forestry companies to do some selective logging in the national park. In those cases, Parks Canada was actually paid some money for those things.

How much would it cost the taxpayer if the Liberal government had actually undertaken a proactive approach to selectively harvest the dead pine beetle-infested trees and to replant them with more fire-resistant trees around the town of Jasper to protect it from future risk?

**Mr. Brock Mulligan:** There was a small amount of harvesting done in Jasper, and there's also harvesting done in Banff National Park. We think that there is real value in that, from the standpoint of protecting our forests and maintaining health. It's very difficult to put a number on these things, but we know that forest management is a tool to promote the health of our forests, and we think that it ought to be considered.

**Mr. Dane Lloyd:** We've talked a lot about carbon emissions. We know that reducing emissions is critically important. However, when these forests are allowed to overgrow and when they are eaten out by these pine beetles, don't our famous Canadian carbon

sinks become net carbon emitters when they're left to rot, especially when these fires happen?

What are the emissions that are created by leaving these forests unmanaged?

**Mr. Brock Mulligan:** There's no question that the emissions are huge when we have these types of catastrophic fires. I read somewhere that the emissions from our 2023 fire season, which was a terrible fire season, were greater than anything else. They were greater than the rest of Canada combined, just the emissions of our forests.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Ali now for six minutes.

**Mr. Shafqat Ali (Brampton Centre, Lib.):** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here today and for your interest and willingness to share your experience and knowledge to help us make recommendations on forests and forest fire policies.

Mr. Wesley, in a recent article, John Desjarlais made some suggestions to "unlock the potential of Indigenous-led and forest-based solutions to wildfire impacts". Could you tell us how greater indigenous involvement in fire management could help protect Jasper and the surrounding communities?

**Mr. Barry Wesley:** Thank you for the question.

As indigenous people, as I said in my earlier presentation, we believe everything is a living being—so is the fire. In this case, my ancestors did this before too. They did prescribed burning. That was just for hunting purposes. Also, through our ceremonies, we did a lot of that in previous times. If we can include that piece in the plan, I think it's going to work out.

We can communicate with the fire as well. We believe it's a living being. If we can have a better understanding of what it can do.... We've already seen physically what it can do, but if we can communicate with it, we'll have a different perspective. Also, there is a respect that goes with it.

**Mr. Shafqat Ali:** My next question is for Dr. Tracy Friedel.

Dr. Friedel, could you provide more information about how your community and indigenous knowledge have been and should be taken into consideration with regard to fire management?

**Dr. Tracy L. Friedel:** Yes. Thank you for the question.

Following on from what Barry offered, I think part of the issue we're seeing outside of the park, in other jurisdictions with wildfires—there have been a number of catastrophic fires in Alberta over the past 20 years—is that forestry practices also need to evolve somewhat. Planting monoculture forests is not conducive to mitigating against wildfires either, so there is something to be further considered there.

One of the issues in Jasper National Park, of course, is that around the townsite, there wasn't an appropriate fireguard put in place. As I said, there are a number of competing interests at play in terms of the residents, who obviously want to be safe but live in Jasper for a reason. They love the nature it provides. With regard to visitors, the idea of creating large fireguards is quite unpopular with international and even Canadian visitors.

I think it's possible, though, to remediate, restore and create fireguards and have more diverse species of trees planted in their place so that when there is remediation happening, even in places where cultural burning is happening, you're going to see that biodiverse landscape return. Those landscapes are more conducive to mitigating against future wildfires. A lot of those species, whether they're trees, shrubs or forbs, also have cultural meaning to indigenous peoples.

For many years, there was no harvesting in the park. A lot of the species that have returned to the park—traditional ecological knowledge species or native species—can actually also contribute to a return to cultural harvesting in the park in a way that isn't possible now, because many of those species have been impacted as well.

I think it is possible, certainly, with cultural burns and a focus on TEK species for restoration and remediation to really make some headway in the park.

• (1700)

**Mr. Shafqat Ali:** Thank you.

How much time do I have?

**The Chair:** You have 30 seconds.

**Mr. Shafqat Ali:** I think I will pass it on.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Mr. Trudel, you have the floor.

**Mr. Denis Trudel (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, BQ):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Sweet, here in the federal Parliament, most of us are aware of how our colleagues from Alberta see things when it comes to fighting climate change. However, as a provincial elected official in Alberta, I'd like to know what you feel the federal government could do to better manage extreme weather events like the wildfires in Jasper.

I'd actually like to ask you about the connection between climate change and forest fires. We know that these fires are a natural occurrence that can actually contribute to the health and renewal of many forest ecosystems. However, we're now seeing more of them, and they are more intense and harder to control, so they're becoming destructive.

Based on a study by World Weather Attribution, climate change has more than doubled the likelihood of extreme conditions conducive to wildfires in eastern Canada. Scientists tell us that, as a result of the planet overheating, summers in Canada are getting windier and warmer, as we can see, which leads to more erratic rainfall, including fewer summer rain showers in certain regions.

According to Natural Resources Canada, wildfire season in Canada is starting earlier and lasting longer, and fires are getting harder to control. In short, science indicates that, to ensure public safety, governments must act both defensively and offensively to protect people and ecosystems while also accelerating the transition away from fossil fuels to limit global warming.

In your opinion, are Alberta's elected officials and decision makers in general—including local authorities and community leaders, but also businesses—sufficiently familiar with the scientific literature on the causes and effects of extreme phenomena like forest fires on nature and people? Do you think the public, the decision makers in Alberta, are very aware of what I've just told you?

[*English*]

**Ms. Heather Sweet:** I thank the member for the question. I think it's an important question. It's a conversation we've been having in Alberta for quite a long time. As you know, we had the Slave Lake fire. We had the Fort McMurray fire, and we've now had the Jasper fire. We've had substantial weather events, and we've also seen that in our agriculture industry, where we've had severe drought and it impacted our agriculture producers. It is a real live conversation that climate change is real. We are having severe climate events, and as policy-makers, we need to do better at how we're preparing and responding.

In Jasper specifically, we did need to prepare better in regard to ensuring that we had more wildland firefighters hired, trained and prepared for this year's season. We had asked for that, I would say, at least six months prior to the season starting. Even when the season was ending, we were asking that we be ready for the next year's season. We need to create a joint training program between the federal government and the provincial governments to ensure that all wildland and structural firefighters are trained to the same level, that they're able to respond and that they're able to prepare.

We also need to be looking at our forest health and what is going on within our forested area. That would include looking at sustainable forestry practices and how we look at the boreal forest, which we know is known to burn because that's how it rejuvenates itself. We have to look at forestry practices. We have to look at working at government perspectives and levels of being able to ensure that we're doing things like building fireguards, that we are fire-smarting homes, that we're ensuring that people are aware and able to have the financial means to fire-smart, but we're also working with industry to help protect those areas.

• (1705)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Denis Trudel:** Today, an ad truck drove through the streets of Ottawa displaying two messages:



[English]

“Scrap the cap” and “Your family budget will suffer”.

[Translation]

It was paid for by the Government of Alberta.

You're not a member of the governing party, but you are an MLA from Alberta. What do you think of this advertising, which Albertan taxpayers are paying for? Do you agree with the campaign? What do you think about the Alberta government spending money to run ads on the streets of Ottawa, ultimately to block efforts to fight climate change?

[English]

**Ms. Heather Sweet:** I would like to say that it's just in Ottawa. We have the same advertisement happening in the province as well.

I believe that we have a responsibility as policy-makers to address the issues that Albertans care about. Right now, we know that Albertans are concerned with inflation. They're also concerned with our productivity in the country and what that means to them being able to access jobs, pay their mortgages and put food on their tables.

Talking about other issues I think deflects from the fact that Albertans are, as much as we are a wealthy province, struggling with being able to meet our basic needs.

I would believe that all federal and provincial governments should be focusing on what Canadians and Albertans need, which is finding a way to make sure we have good-paying jobs, that we are driving our economy forward, that we're building export markets and that we're building good economies so people have good, sustainable jobs.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll have to stop there and go to Ms. McPherson for six minutes, please.

**Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here and sharing your expertise with us.

I'd like to follow up with my colleague from Alberta, Heather Sweet, just to ask a few questions.

You were just answering my colleague Mr. Trudel's questions about what Albertans care about. I would just put out there that I think probably Albertans care very little about chemtrails and Uber-style health care, but that is another thing that this provincial government seems to be obsessed with.

Ms. Sweet, I'm curious as to your thoughts as the forestry critic. In your testimony, you talked about the economic strategy and that we need to help those in Jasper recover, so I am wondering if you could talk a little bit more about that.

One thing that we know is a reality is that there are so many members in Jasper who work in the tourism industry, as you indicated. We know that many of them weren't eligible for EI. It's a very difficult thing because, of course, they would have had jobs

and they would have been able to continue to make a living, but that opportunity was taken away from them by the fire.

We've reached out to the government to have them change the EI rules. We have not heard yet whether or not they would be willing to do that. We've not heard back from the minister on that issue.

Could you talk about what an economic strategy would look like from your perspective? What more would you like to see the federal government do for the people of Jasper?

**Ms. Heather Sweet:** Thank you, member, for the question.

I think we have to look at Jasper as a very unique experience in the sense that their full economy is focused on tourism. We had CN in there as well, but CN is now leaving, so their whole economy is a tourist economy.

In other jurisdictions where we've seen these fires, there's always been another, supplementary economy. Fort McMurray had oil and gas. Slave Lake had forestry. Jasper does not. What we've heard from the people of Jasper is that they lost their biggest earning potential during the time the fire was happening and then after the fire. Because of that, it's almost similar to COVID. All of a sudden, they lost every potential they had to generate any type of wealth to carry them through the off-season.

What I would like to see is the province and the federal government have a conversation about what an economic recovery model would look like, similar to how we treated COVID. These businesses need to thrive. If they fail, it won't matter if we get tourists to go back to Jasper because there will be no businesses that can operate.

We need to find a way to help them move through this gap and this period of time and make sure that they are able to have some kind of financial security, so they're viable over the next 18 months.

● (1710)

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** I know you are also very well informed with regard to the firefighting services that we have. I know that, as the forestry critic, you have been paying a lot of attention to this.

Could you talk a little bit about the conditions, the compensation and the benefits that the contracted wildfire fighters were given and about any concerns that you might have with regard to that?

**Ms. Heather Sweet:** I think the biggest struggle we've had provincially is that we only contract our wildland firefighters for four to six months. The problem with that is that we are competing with other jurisdictions across the country that do year-round firefighting. B.C. is a prime example.

We also pay the least in the country. If you look at Parks Canada versus Alberta, Parks Canada pays about \$10 an hour higher in Alberta than the province does. That creates an issue around people moving through their career because they're competing with two different jurisdictions that pay very different salaries.

The other piece of that is, because it's so short term, they don't receive benefits and they don't receive high wages. The one thing I want to make sure that all members of the committee understand is that—and this is a non-partisan issue—presumptive coverage for cancer needs to be covered for all firefighters. No matter if you're a structural, industrial or wildland firefighter, cancer coverage has to exist.

We know these individuals are exposed to toxic environments that cause cancer. Every single member of the committee, I would encourage you to please look at OH and S presumptive coverage and support our firefighters.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Thank you.

That's an excellent point, and I think we should definitely have that as one of the recommendations for this report.

I just want to be clear. Did you say that the Government of Alberta pays forest wildfire firefighters the least in the country?

**Ms. Heather Sweet:** The wildland firefighters in Alberta are paid the least out of any other jurisdiction in the country.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** That's appalling.

The other thing that you talked about in your testimony was how we need to rebuild to ensure that we are being fire smart, that we are not building in a way that puts us back in the same situation we were in.

Could you talk a little bit more about what you would like to see in terms of the rebuilding of buildings to ensure that they are fire smart?

**Ms. Heather Sweet:** First off, I want to recognize that I know there are insurance programs for homeowners or businesses that are going to rebuild. I think what people need to understand is that the insurance companies will only rebuild to the level of when the building burned down—whatever the building code was at that time. What I am saying is that, if we're going to be smart and we're going to rebuild, we have to build fire smart.

Jasper Park Lodge is a prime example. A fire went through that area 50 years ago, and it caused serious damage to JPL, Jasper Park Lodge. Because they fire-smarted their area is why JPL stands today.

Every resident who wants to rebuild and live in Jasper should have the opportunity to fire-smart, but the province and the federal government have to step up with the financial adjustment between what insurance will pay for and what it will cost them to fire-smart. However, we also need to make sure we change the building code so that every community and every building is fire-smarted.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We'll now go to a second round. Since there are only 15 minutes left in this first hour of the meeting, we're going to reduce the speaking time to three minutes for the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party, and to one and a half minutes for the Bloc Québécois and the NDP.

Mr. Deltell, you have the floor.

**Mr. Gérard Deltell (Louis-Saint-Laurent, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Mulligan, in your testimony earlier you mentioned that your association had identified problems as early as 2017 and predicted what happened last year.

What led you to those conclusions and to that prediction, which unfortunately came to be? What did the government do or not do to deal with what you predicted?

• (1715)

[*English*]

**Mr. Brock Mulligan:** Thank you for the question, Mr. Deltell.

We made those predictions when speaking with a number of experts in our industry, as well as folks living in the community who were looking at the condition of the forest in Jasper, seeing effectively a hillside of red and dead trees and predicting that it was very likely to burn.

That's how that prediction came about, and we're very sad that it was realized. Jasper's a place where folks in our industry go to recreate. Our association has had our annual general meeting there for the last 50 years, and we're just so sad to see what's happened there. Unfortunately, it was something that we could see coming.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Gérard Deltell:** Thank you very much, Mr. Mulligan. It's obviously very disappointing to see that, for six or seven years, those who had the power to act had everything they needed to take action, but they didn't.

Mr. Chair, I'll give the rest of my time to Mr. Soroka.

[*English*]

**Mr. Gerald Soroka:** My question is for MLA Sweet.

Do you believe it was hypocritical for the federal NDP leader to question the energy sector about the fire in Jasper, while he was in a coalition with the Liberal government that enabled the mismanagement of the fire in Jasper and the failed forest management policies?

**Ms. Heather Sweet:** Thank you for the question.

What I will say is that the people of Jasper are focused on rebuilding their community, on getting a strong economy, on housing and on getting Jasper ready for tourism. I don't think turning this into a partisan conversation is helpful for the people of Alberta and for the people of Jasper.

**Mr. Gerald Soroka:** Okay. However, it works very well for the NDP leader to turn it partisan—that's fine.

My next question, then, will be for Brock Mulligan.

With your organization, you have talked about how the fire was eventually going to happen if there wasn't proper mitigation. What are some of the issues that you or your organization could have dealt with to make sure that the fire in Jasper did not burn the town?

**Mr. Brock Mulligan:** I think we advocated for a more comprehensive forest management strategy within the park that would have looked at a variety of different tools—prescriptive burning, incorporation of knowledge from indigenous communities and perhaps more harvesting. Those were the kinds of things that we looked at.

The second point is that we see other areas in Alberta, particularly within some of those caribou zones, where we now have these older forests that are posing similar risks to what we saw in Jasper. Some action needs to be taken to address those, or we're going to relive this scenario over and over again.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Ms. Taylor Roy, you have the floor.

[English]

**Ms. Leah Taylor Roy (Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, Lib.):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here. I wanted to start with one question for Ms. Sweet.

You mentioned—as I think did my colleague, Ms. McPherson—the low pay for wildland firefighters in Alberta. Why do you think Alberta, which has such a high risk for forest fires, has the lowest-paid firefighters, with fewer benefits and less training?

I find it perplexing, and I'm just wondering if you have any theories as to why they are underpaid. It seems to me that they are a little bit undervalued, without having any coverage for cancer either.

**Ms. Heather Sweet:** I think a culture shift needs to happen in the province. Right now, a lot of the individuals who have been hired are part-time students and summer students, so the position of wildland firefighter has been treated as such. They hire at a university. They hire them for the summer, and then the students go back to university. The government treats it almost like a summer job for students, and it's not a summer job for students. It is a very serious profession that requires a lot of serious training. We need supports, and we need to ensure that's happening.

For us to respect the profession, we need to pay better, and we need to be doing year-round training. I've been calling for a year-round wildfire fighting force, no different from what B.C. has, because our ecosystems in B.C. and Alberta are very similar. We should be treating them in exactly the same way.

**Ms. Leah Taylor Roy:** Thank you. I noticed that the firefighting budget in Alberta had gone down consistently until 2023 when you had those series of fires, and then it was increased. Now it is probably still, when you're looking at real dollars, less than it was back in 2018.

Does that play into this kind of summer job perspective on firefighters, rather than seeing it as a profession, which should be year-

round and have benefits? Do you think it's driven by financial considerations?

• (1720)

**Ms. Heather Sweet:** I believe that the budget, for sure, is part of the discussion, as I believe it would be for every government. I think it is just a lack of understanding or a lack of willingness to really shift the culture around the profession. To be fair, these climate events that we are having are becoming more and more frequent. Definitely, there needs to be a policy shift. There needs to be a financial shift. There needs to be a commitment from the government, and there needs to be year-round wildland firefighting with good training and support, including presumptive coverage for firefighters.

**Ms. Leah Taylor Roy:** I'd like to turn to Mr. Wesley—

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, Ms. Taylor Roy. We're having a three-minute round. I had to reduce it so that we can finish on time.

[Translation]

Mr. Trudel, you have a minute and a half. So you have time for one question.

**Mr. Denis Trudel:** Okay.

Ms. Sweet, I'd like to come back to you about the illustrious truck we were discussing earlier. The “Scrap the cap” message on that truck was propaganda against the oil and gas emissions cap regulations. However, that's odd, because those regulations haven't even been implemented by the Liberal government yet. They don't exist yet. The Prime Minister's claim to the contrary at the United Nations in New York was simply not true.

The Bloc Québécois believes that carbon pollution can be reduced by gradually reducing the production of fossil fuels that cause climate change. We're therefore in favour of an emissions cap in the oil and gas sector. What's more, we're concerned that the Minister of the Environment has yet to implement regulations on the cap.

We were very surprised and quite disappointed to learn that the Government of Alberta was participating in what appears to be a campaign of fear and disinformation about the effects of climate policy. What do you think about this?

[English]

**Ms. Heather Sweet:** What I can say is that, when we were in government, we created a climate leadership plan that specifically worked with industry on reducing their emissions. The oil and gas industry in Alberta, our forestry companies, all in our resource sector are very aware of how they can reduce their emissions, and they are working towards those goals. When we were in government, we worked in collaboration to support industry in doing that, and they were happy to do it.

If the provincial government wants to continue to fight with the feds and not engage in what is actually good economic policy and what actually supports environmental directives, that is the prerogative of our premier. What I would say is that we believe in climate change, and we believe we need to do our best to ensure that industry is successful.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll now go to Ms. McPherson for a minute and a half.

[*English*]

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Sweet, you talked about the different levels of government having to work well together.

I think this is something a lot of Albertans were very concerned about during the wildfires. There was a lot of finger pointing and blaming happening, and not a lot of focus on getting help to the people of Jasper and ensuring the right things were happening. You just responded to my colleague and talked a bit about getting into fights with the federal government. It is one of the favourite pastimes, as we've seen, of some provincial leaders.

I wonder if you could spend the next few seconds talking about what you saw regarding the way the federal government and the provincial government worked together on this particular crisis.

**Ms. Heather Sweet:** What I will say is that, in my experience hearing from people, those in Jasper understand it was an event that had a lot of decision points happening within it. In fact, they recognize that the work done to save the townsite was the best that could happen. It was a high-risk situation. There was a lot of decision-making happening in that moment.

I've heard from people living in Jasper that they're disappointed to now hear criticisms being made about not allowing first responders to come in, save the townsite and do different things like that. That is not the case. I will say that we need to be respectful of our individual first responders, who were working with both Parks Canada and the province. They were doing the best they could in the situation they were in. Many of them were trapped.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Soroka, go ahead for three minutes.

**Mr. Gerald Soroka:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My first question will go to Ms. Friedel.

You mentioned there wasn't a proper fireguard put around the Jasper townsite itself. Through traditional knowledge and its use, what would your organization have recommended doing to protect the town of Jasper?

• (1725)

**Dr. Tracy L. Friedel:** Thank you, Mr. Soroka, for the question.

I think indigenous peoples, as part of the forum, recognized that prescribed burning wasn't happening quickly enough. As I said, there were tensions between doing what needed to be done and disappointing visitors to the park. Even today, if you look at the west

side of Jasper, which didn't burn.... There is still a high-risk situation there, and something will need to be done.

I want to take this chance, if I could, to.... Regarding the legislation that was passed to designate the municipality's land use, there was no consultation with indigenous peoples, which was somewhat disappointing. I think the opportunity to rebuild is an opportunity to fulfill the commitments made to reconciliation in terms of economic reconciliation and development of businesses around indigenous interpretation. As we heard, tourism is a very big opportunity and mainstay in the park. Hopefully, there will be more of that.

In my experience with the forum, most of the communities recognize that more needed to be done regarding the fireguard situation. Hopefully, going forward, that will be the case.

**Mr. Gerald Soroka:** Ms. Friedel, are you saying that the government pays lip service to proper indigenous consultation, as opposed to actually following through and doing a proper job?

**Dr. Tracy L. Friedel:** What I would say, Mr. Soroka, is that the Jasper wildfire has been devastating. It's tragic. It has great impacts and so forth. I also see it as an opportunity to fulfill commitments, as I said, that have already been made to reconciliation.

I think that's what we're all hoping to see.

**Mr. Gerald Soroka:** Some of the things we definitely need to look forward to are.... How can we rebuild?

I'll go back to Mr. Mulligan.

One of the things Ms. Friedel just brought up is that the west side of Jasper, potentially, still can burn.

What kinds of options do we have to do proper forest management there in order to make sure Jasper does not see another forest fire coming from the northwest?

**Mr. Brock Mulligan:** I think all of the stakeholders need to be brought together immediately to have a conversation. It's good that we're having these types of conversations about how we can develop a very progressive forest management plan and look at all the tools in the tool box to manage it.

If we assume that leaving things as they are is a viable approach going forward, we risk reliving exactly what we've seen.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. van Koeverden, you have the floor.

**Mr. Adam van Koeverden (Milton, Lib.):** My question will be for MLA Sweet, if that's okay.

You mentioned the problematic rate of pay and the seasonality of the workforce with respect to wildland firefighters in Alberta. I'm curious how that rather austere approach impacts the retention of Alberta wildland firefighters and if retraining is required season after season, if that's the case.

**Ms. Heather Sweet:** That's a great question. Our retention is quite low. We increased one fire crew this year, which had almost all brand new staff on it. Most people, like I said, for obvious reasons, go to other jurisdictions, whether they go to Parks Canada or whether they go to B.C., because they're not compensated for being here. Unless you're going back to school, you need a year-round employment opportunity. Retention is very low and, yes, we have to do retraining every year.

**Mr. Adam van Koeverden:** Thank you for your insight. I think we all agree that paying first responders appropriately to ensure that they don't need new people every year is really important.

Mr. Mulligan, I have a question, and I thank you for your work and for the contributions that you make to the economy. Obviously, forestry, wood products and lumber are very important for various reasons. In 2017, we heard, not just from your organization but others who said, "Hey, look, the fire likelihood is higher than it has been in the past. The pine beetle has definitely had a significant and deleterious impact on the life of the forest, and fires are more likely." Following that, our government invested heavily in clearing, in a sprinkler system and in an incremental number of burns.

Are you aware of those additional investments and what the investments were like prior? I know you're not a government official and you work in the sector, but are you aware of the response that the government made during those times?

• (1730)

**Mr. Brock Mulligan:** I'm not well aware of the response to fire mitigation within the park. I'm more aware of the investments that were made in pine beetle mitigation. It was \$75 million that was put into that. It built on work that was already undergoing in Alberta, and I think, frankly, that it worked quite well. In terms of the protection of the town with some of the other measures that you mentioned, I'm not as up to speed on those.

**Mr. Adam van Koeverden:** Thank you very much. I've been poring over the numbers too. In hindsight, when you look at a disaster, the response can always be that we should have done more. There's no question that more could always be done, but I'll also say that the amount invested in removal, in preventative fire burning and in the sprinkler system was unprecedented for the area.

I thank you for bringing it to the attention of the minister of the day, and I can reassure you that actions were taken.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. I want to thank the witnesses both here and online for contributing to this very important discussion.

We're going to take a short break and go on to the second panel. Thank you again. Thank you for being here and for being online.

• (1730)

(Pause)

• (1735)

**The Chair:** I call the meeting back to order.

Members, we are about to start the second panel.

We have with us for this second panel Mr. Jim Eglinski, who is a retired member of Parliament.

Mr. Eglinski, welcome back to the House of Commons.

**Mr. Jim Eglinski (Retired Member of Parliament, As an Individual):** Thank you.

**The Chair:** We also have Dane de Souza, senior policy adviser on emergency management. Both Mr. Eglinski and Mr. de Souza are appearing as individuals. From the Indigenous Leadership Initiative, we have Amy Cardinal Christianson, policy analyst. From the Outdoor Council of Canada, we have Lindsey Gartner, project director.

We'll start with you, Mr. Eglinski. I think you know how it works. You have five minutes.

**Mr. Jim Eglinski:** Thank you, Chair.

Good afternoon, committee members.

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you about the Jasper National Park fire this past summer. I never thought I would be sitting as a speaker on a committee. I'm more comfortable on your side, asking questions, but what took place this summer in Jasper Park and the townsites needs to be studied and examined, and I want to thank the committee for conducting this study.

As the past sitting member of Parliament for the Yellowhead riding, I spoke numerous times in the House of Commons regarding the pine beetle situation in Jasper Park and the Yellowhead region. I spoke in May 2016 in the House of Commons, asking the Liberals for their plan to combat the pine beetle infestation in Jasper National Park. I told them at that time that nothing was being done.

I again brought up the issue in June 2017 to then-environment minister Catherine McKenna. I explained my concerns about the tremendous fuel load of dead trees that were the result of the pine beetle. I stressed that the residents were concerned for the safety of the visitors and for their own homes. I told the Liberals there was a high risk of a devastating fire in Jasper if they did not act.

In October 2017, during question period, I asked the Liberals what they were going to do to assist the forestry industry in my region due to the pine beetle infestation. I received no reassurance. On October 26, 2017, I spoke of the pine beetle and my experience with it in B.C. I tried to explain in detail the movement of the pine beetle and that Jasper had turned brown from one end to the other.

I told the Liberals that the people of Jasper at that time, just a few months later, feared for their safety and the safety of their community because of the dead pine trees, and that there was a risk of a fire that, if started, people would not be able to escape. I asked the Liberals for an adaptation plan for the pine beetle, but never received one and never witnessed adequate action being taken by the government inside the park.

On November 9, 2017, I rose again in the House to ask about the government's plan for the pine beetle infestation. I advised that the infestation had increased tenfold in the last year and that it had moved from Jasper into central Alberta. I asked directly what the Liberals were doing to stop this infestation. I once again received no answer.

My point is that, after raising these concerns, I continued to visit Jasper National Park and did not see adequate responses. The Liberal government knew that a fire in Jasper was inevitable—we all did—but it failed to take this seriously to prevent the devastation of the Jasper wildfire. By July 2024, there was so much deadwood laying around that Jasper was a tinderbox. Those of us who live in this area knew there would be a major, destructive fire. We just didn't know when, but we do now.

Jasper National Park and the town of Jasper were almost totally destroyed by the fire. Thankfully, not all was lost.

The impact on the residents of Jasper and business owners and the tourism losses will be felt for years to come. I hope your study of this tragedy will make our park safer and protect the environmental beauty of the landscape and the communities within it.

In closing my address, I want the committee to know that two weeks ago, I drove toward Jasper Park, starting from Lake Louise in the south. I was shocked to see the degree of burn in the park leading up to the Jasper townsite. It had to be a horrendously hot fire. The destruction in the community was devastating. It's hard to put it into words. I feel deeply for the people of Jasper. It's going to be a tough road ahead for them.

● (1740)

For the last 50 years, I have loved to travel through our beautiful Jasper park to enjoy the mountains, the wildlife and the incredible scenery. Never in any of those trips—and there were hundreds—was I not lucky enough to see abundant wildlife.

Ladies and gentlemen, I want to stress this: On this last trip through Jasper National Park, I did not see one animal.

What went wrong? The people of Jasper deserve answers.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** We'll go now to Mr. de Souza for five minutes, please.

**Mr. Dane de Souza (Senior Policy Adviser, Emergency Management, As an Individual):** Thank you.

Good evening. My name is Dane de Souza. I'm a citizen of the Métis Nation of Alberta. My Métis family names are Sutherland and Sinclair from the Selkirk area of the Red River valley.

I'm a wildland firefighter. I worked six years as a helitack wild-fire fighter out of the Rocky Mountain House district in Alberta. I'm a wildfire researcher and expert on indigenous fire stewardship.

I thank you for this opportunity to address you tonight.

I'm going to get right to it. The cause of Jasper, Lytton, Fort McMurray and Slave Lake is not climate change. The intensity and prevalence of fires like these are exacerbated by climate change;

however, their cause is directly tied to the colonial suppression of indigenous fire stewardship and fire on the land in general.

To illustrate, indigenous fire stewardship in what is currently Canada is a landscape-based science developed over more than 20,000 years to manage the landscape-based phenomenon of wild-fires. Fourteen thousand years ago, the Laurentide glacier spread from the Rocky Mountains to Hudson Bay. As it receded inch by inch, my ancestors were there applying fire to the land. We can track human migration across the planet by tracking the impacts we have had on the natural environment, like the extinction of megafauna.

Applying fire to the land has been and is a key component of how we, as human beings, have influenced our natural environment. As species of trees have grown to repopulate the landscapes formed by glacial recession, my ancestors were there every single inch of the way, applying fire to the landscape to engineer the ecological conditions necessary to sustain themselves.

Within the genetics of every blade of grass, every tree and every animal on this continent is the memory of these fires. There are countless reasons for which the land would be burned, ranging from influencing the migration of animals, to reinvigorating the growth of plants to provide medicines and sustenance, to influencing the makeup of the landscape to provide materials and mobility throughout the forest.

In my research, I have interviewed the last of the traditional fire stewards left in the wake of Canada's cultural genocide. Each of them speaks of a turning point in the 1980s, in which Canada could effectively enforce the suppression of indigenous fire stewardship, which was passed into law in the 1900s.

If you were to look at the graphs of fire intensity, frequency and prevalence in the boreal forest, they all follow a similar pattern. In the 1990s, there's a steady increase. In the 2000s, it steepens. Now, it's virtually vertical, in comparison. This is not a coincidence. Indigenous fire has set the rhythm of forest cycles throughout the boreal, having created landscapes that can tolerate fire and increase resilience. By removing indigenous fire from the land, we have created the conditions that result in the exact scenarios we're here to discuss today.

I've had the pleasure of working with the Mountain Legacy Project, which compares photos of modern-day national parks like Banff and Jasper with glass slides taken over 100 years ago. There's a striking difference between these landscapes in the composition of the forest. One hundred years ago, Jasper was speckled with small fields, prairies, glens and forests at different stages of the growth cycle—a landscape mosaic. More recently, these forests are dense, conifer-rich oceans of trees.

Picture the boreal forest as an ocean and fire as a wave that passes through that ocean, gaining force and energy until it becomes a force that is absolutely unstoppable. There's no house, no infrastructure and no response that can withstand this amount of energy, which is beyond that of an atomic bomb.

Now, picture that exact same ocean. Over here is an island that was burnt five years ago to reinvigorate traditional medicines. Then over here is an archipelago of underbrush that was cleared six years ago to create mobility through portages. Over here is a nice little island for ungulates that was burnt five years ago. As that wave comes through that ocean of trees, it crashes upon the shores of those pockets and loses its energy, so by the time it reaches communities, it can be dealt with.

The solution at hand is at the intersection of climate action and truth and reconciliation. By employing wildfire practitioners year-round to carry out landscape-level burns with decentralized decision-making, we can return good fire to land. These benefits are not only that we can prevent another conversation like this and save lives, but we can increase biodiversity and optimize carbon cycling, ecological health and resilience in the face of climate change.

Last year, wildfires in Canada put more carbon into the atmosphere than the entire global airline industry. These wildfires are unnatural and their impact on the ability of the forest to sequester and store carbon has detriments that threaten the existence of humanity.

By following models similar to those championed by the Banff wildfire management program, we can action these solutions. This model requires that wildfire management is carried out by landscape-level decision-makers and practitioners who are highly experienced and committed to fire stewardship in collaboration with local communities and indigenous knowledge-keepers.

- (1745)

To be quite frank, I find it sickening that we're here talking about Jasper, not Lytton and not Paddle Prairie. We're admonishing those who responded to these fires while gutting wildfire programs every year and bleeding vital years of experience. We're not here talking about the wildland firefighters who lost their lives in the past years.

Here are your solutions: Invest in indigenous fire stewardship, work with communities at a landscape level to put good fire on the land to meet needs beyond resiliency and honour the lives of those firefighters who have lost their lives by treating this as an occupation as opposed to a cost variable on a forestry budget that is to be slashed for political gain.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. de Souza.

We'll go now to Amy Cardinal Christianson for five minutes.

**Ms. Amy Cardinal Christianson (Policy Analyst, Indigenous Leadership Initiative):** Thank you.

My name is Amy Cardinal Christianson. I live in Treaty 6, Rocky Mountain House, Alberta. I'm a member of the Métis Nation from the Cardinal and Laboucane families of Treaty 6 and Treaty 8.

My family's band, Pécayis Band, was disenfranchised by the Canadian government.

My family used to travel and trade through Jasper, but I do not have indigenous rights or territory in the area and fully support the indigenous rights holders there.

I come to this testimony from a national perspective through my past role as a research scientist with the Canadian forest service for 15 years, my two years spent as an indigenous fire specialist with Parks Canada and my current role with Indigenous Leadership Initiative.

I first want to send my thoughts of compassion and solidarity to my colleagues with Parks Canada, who not only had to endure the fire event that happened there and the recovery they are currently undertaking but also hearings like this, where people take incredibly complex situations that are generations in the making and try to finger-point. I know how hard you were all working leading up to the fire. I know what you endured during the fires, and I fully support your moving forward.

As the previous indigenous witnesses stated, the fire problem in Jasper National Park started in 1907, when the national park was established and indigenous people were forcibly removed. These people had distinct kinship ties to the cultural landscapes there, including fire stewardship practices like frequently burning valley bottoms to achieve diversity on the landscape in coordination with our important teacher, lightning. Now when people travel to national parks like Jasper, they observe a carpet of dark green trees as far as the eye can see and think it is beautiful and natural; it is not. It is an unhealthy landscape that is suffering. It is not adaptive to human-caused climate change, which is further increasing the fire problem.

Our elders refer to this as a "hungry forest", because you have to go so far to encounter any forms of diversity. These homogenous forests, where the trees are all around the same age and same species type, become prone to disturbances like insects and out-of-control fires, as many witnesses have stated, but I want to make it clear that fire is not a disturbance on the landscape although we treat it as such. Rather, it has been the removal of fire from fire-dependent forests in Canada that has been the larger disturbance and has caused what we're seeing today.

When I woke up the day after Jasper burned, I had multiple messages from indigenous people who are rights holders in that area saying that this would never have happened if they had been allowed to continue their relationship with fire in the lands and valleys of Jasper.

I also want to point out that what happened in Jasper is not unique. Indigenous communities all across Canada are repeatedly disproportionately impacted by wildfire. In the last two years, 149 indigenous communities have experienced wildfire evacuations. I'll repeat that. One hundred forty-nine indigenous communities were evacuated from wildfire in the last two years, yet indigenous nations and people are continually excluded from decision-making around fire management.

Wildfire evacuations are expensive. We estimated that, in the last 42 years, wildfire evacuations have cost the Canadian economy \$4.6 billion. This doesn't even include the cost of fighting the fires, just of moving people. We've spent hundreds of millions of dollars over the years in Canada on bringing in international firefighters who don't know our landscape. We're spending hundreds of millions on firefighting planes that need to be upgraded or replaced.

People are starting to push for a federal firefighting force, but more bureaucracy with people further removed from local knowledge is not the answer.

We already have a movement that could function as a net nationwide firefighting force in Canada that's just waiting to be activated, indigenous guardians. More than 200 first nation, year-round guardian programs already help manage lands and waters across the country. Some are helping respond to fires. When fire threatened Fort Good Hope, Northwest Territories, this June, the guardians were prepared. They helped evacuate community members, and thanks to training from Yukon First Nations Wildfire, they joined the fire line and helped save the town.

By expanding existing guardian programs and investing in new fire guardian programs, we can create a fleet of locally knowledgeable professionals ready to respond to fire and reduce risk. Indigenous fire guardians will work year-round on fire. They will be able to put fire on the land in spring and fall, a technique proven to reduce fire risk during hot, dry summers. They will work on emergency management, planning, education, preparedness and fire prevention and on response and on recovery after fires happen.

Vegetation also grows back, and they will be there to make sure that fire mitigation work is maintained. They will work to build healthy landscapes that will also protect our vital watersheds. Not only does this increase the ability to navigate this new area of fire, but it also creates jobs. Engaging more guardians in fighting wildfire is an investment that pays off.

I've just returned from Australia where their indigenous fire rangers are making huge positive impacts. It will enable indigenous nations in Canada to meet the challenge of supercharged fire with greater capacity and indigenous and local knowledge.

• (1750)

We will always have fire, but we can change our relationship with it. Indigenous leadership is the future of fire.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Cardinal Christianson.

We will go now to Lindsey Gartner for five minutes, please.

**Ms. Lindsey Gartner (Project Director, Outdoor Council of Canada):** Hello, everyone.

I would just like to start by thanking you, Amy and Dane, for the immense knowledge that you brought here today. I stand in solidarity with your messages.

I am Lindsey. I am a Jasper community member who has called Jasper home for close to seven years. I wish that I could be with you today in person so that we could look each other in the eyes and so that you could see in me the future, because I am the future, like your children and your grandchildren.

So far in this committee, various politicians have asked what we will do to protect other communities and how we will protect Canadians. I am here today to tell you one way that we can protect our future. The first step is putting aside the divisive politics and working together.

As our community grapples with the aftermath of this fire, there is a troubling narrative, one that points fingers at individuals, political leaders and governmental agencies. First and foremost, these divisive politics are harmful to Jasperites. As a resident myself and as someone with deep connections to those who actively fought the fire and are working tirelessly on recovery efforts now, my message is that Jasper needs support, not division. Please put the politics aside and allow Jasperites to recover. Listen to the on-the-ground expertise. Support those who are on the ground. That is the role of good leadership.

Second, beneath these surface-level discussions lies a much larger, more insidious truth. The wildfire that swept through our community is not an isolated event. It is the consequence of climate change, of colonial land-use practices and of a global system built on extraction and corporate gain at the cost of a livable planet.

The same competitive and cutthroat attitude with which we have treated the earth is present in our Parliament today. Why are we amplifying a culture of division, destruction and competition? We desperately need collaboration. The conversation around this fire has been misdirected. It has been convenient to focus on surface-level debates, like which party didn't allocate enough resources or what management plan could have been different. However, the root issue is not about one individual's mistake or a single policy misstep. Climate change is the outcome of a system that prioritizes short-term economic profit over long-term human and ecological health.



Wildfires, floods and droughts are all symptoms of a system that no longer serves life but only serves profit. My question is not what one governmental agency or one party is to do in a nearsighted time frame. My question is about what we are going to do to ensure that there's a future for young people. We don't want to live on a burning planet, but we are. I do not want to see my leadership point fingers and perpetuate divisive and polarizing arguments when I need you to work together to find solutions to climate change.

Here is my single recommendation. I implore you to acknowledge the severity of the climate crisis and to take an active role in being leaders to drive us to solutions. I believe you can do this. There is an overwhelming consensus through the largest peer-reviewed scientific process, the IPCC, which outlines why we must meet our international targets to limit global warming to 1.5°C. Please listen to the science.

This is to every person in Parliament, every political leader and every Canadian: Canada can be the leader of a system that prioritizes human well-being. We have the resources, the land, the culture and the people. With regard to climate change, we can adapt and show the world what an abundant system looks like. This is an exciting moment. I believe it is an inflection point in history, but business-as-usual will not work. You have an opportunity to be a leader, to be a leader of this change and to protect other communities like Jasper. However, that will require collaboration, and it will require a dedication to choose people's well-being over division. That needs to start right here in our Parliament.

Thank you very much.

• (1755)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Gartner.

We'll go now to the rounds of questions.

Mr. Mazier, you have six minutes, please.

**Mr. Dan Mazier (Dauphin—Swan River—Neepawa, CPC):** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses today. There's been some great testimony here.

Mr. Eglinski, since the Jasper wildfire investigation began, we've learned that Parks Canada officials were discussing cancelling prescribed burns. A senior official at Parks Canada wrote in an email, months before the Jasper wildfires, "At what point do we make the organizational decision to cancel...prescribed burns in Western Canada?"

Did Parks Canada complete all the prescribed burns in Jasper that they said they would?

• (1800)

**Mr. Jim Eglinski:** To my knowledge, no. We had many discussions with staff from the parks. They would tell us that they were going to do a burn in the fall and that they were going to do a burn in the spring. Those never happened. In our pine beetle task force that we set up with Parks Canada, the industry of the area, the Town of Hinton, the Town of Edson and Yellowhead County, there was always "going to do", but nothing happened.

**Mr. Dan Mazier:** Thank you.

Mr. Eglinski, I've obtained some very damning allegations from you. In 2016 you stated, "government employees have been told they cannot talk to the local officials about [the mountain pine beetle] issue". You then stated that the Liberal government was "muzzling scientists" at Parks Canada.

Are you aware of any Parks Canada employees who have been reprimanded or placed under a gag order for voicing their concerns with the Liberal government's mismanagement of Jasper National Park?

**Mr. Jim Eglinski:** Yes. I am aware of one individual, one of the scientists working in the park, being terminated for comments he made against management or management levels. I did not speak to that gentleman personally—he did not want to speak to me—but messages were relayed to me by fellow workers of his to take some action. I thought it was deemed necessary to bring it up in the House.

**Mr. Dan Mazier:** Was he terminated?

**Mr. Jim Eglinski:** To my understanding, he was terminated.

**Mr. Dan Mazier:** Oh, wow. Do you believe people are afraid to speak out against Parks Canada because they may be punished?

**Mr. Jim Eglinski:** It's always been a problem. I won't even say it's Parks Canada. I was an RCMP officer for 35 years, working in a federal government environment. You don't speak out against management, even though you may disagree. That was there in the parks.

I had a good working relationship with the wardens and the people working in the park, as I did with the federal jail in our area. I think they trusted me because of my background, but there was a disconnection. There were two sides to the park, an ecological side and a practical side. There were controversies within the organization. People were afraid to talk.

I did have conversations, but those were private conversations. I have to protect individuals.

**Mr. Dan Mazier:** Thank you.

Mr. Eglinski, Minister Guilbeault and his Parks Canada officials told the Jasper wildfire investigation that everything that could have been done to protect Jasper was done. Is this statement true?

**Mr. Jim Eglinski:** I do not believe so. There was a lot more that could have been done. Part of it came out in evidence today—proper culling of trees around the community, further fire barriers and I think a heavier aspect on sprinkling in the area.

Let's face it. If you look at the news releases that came out, the fire started on July 22. Firefighting resources were in place on the July 27. I've always found Parks Canada to be more reactive when it comes to their firefighting versus the forestry sector of Alberta. The forestry sector, if it's an extreme weather area, will bring their resources. They'll pay the resources to sit there and stand by so that when that fire starts, or that lightning strikes, those people are there—now. That is the difference between the two different forms of government.

I do not believe they did an adequate job.

**Mr. Dan Mazier:** It must be pretty frustrating. You were working at this even when you were a sitting MP, trying to get the attention of this government to do something and to act. You observed that they weren't doing prescribed burns. We've had several testimonies. We had people on the landscape. We had foresters. We had indigenous knowledge. All were sitting on the landscape.

I don't know. It makes my blood boil when things like that happen on my landscape, so I can't imagine what you went through.

**Mr. Jim Eglinski:** You are absolutely correct. I was passing on the message of the residents of Jasper, the employees of Jasper park, the industry in my area and the communities. Hinton was as terrified as Jasper was. They're just up the road. Edson, where I live, is just a little further down the road. Everybody was afraid. We all saw that tinderbox there. We all saw the dead pine trees. We knew that something was going to happen, as I mentioned earlier.

The people there were concerned. I had to bring it forward. That was my job, to bring their concerns forward, and I believe I did that job.

• (1805)

**Mr. Dan Mazier:** Thank you.

Do you believe the Liberal government was negligent in protecting Jasper?

**Mr. Jim Eglinski:** I believe Parks Canada could have done more. We can't control who starts the fire. We know 99% of the time it's lightning, and it happens. Could more have been done? I believe more could have been done.

**The Chair:** We'll go to Mr. van Koeverden now.

**Mr. Adam van Koeverden:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Despite calls from witnesses, despite calls from people who have emailed all of us—because I think we've all received these emails—to turn down the political rhetoric on this issue, it's really disappointing to see that this is continuing at this level.

Unfortunately, I feel as though I need to ask Mr. Eglinski if he'd care to correct the record. Back in your time as a member of Parliament, and perhaps just prior to it, Stephen Harper's deficit reduction action plan took \$30 million out of Parks Canada, which affected over 1,600 employees. The result of those Conservative government cuts was that in 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014, there was no mechanical thinning conducted in Jasper National Park, and there were no prescribed burns.

Are you aware of that?

**Mr. Jim Eglinski:** No, I'm not aware of that, but I would like to clarify one thing that you said.

**Mr. Adam van Koeverden:** I have other questions, sir.

The result of those Conservative government cuts was that there was no forest management in Jasper during that time. Then, the Liberal government was elected in 2015, and a couple of months later, in 2016, you urged the government to develop a strategy for mountain pine beetle. Is that correct?

**Mr. Jim Eglinski:** That's correct.

**Mr. Adam van Koeverden:** Are you aware of the fact that, in 2016, a forest management strategy for mountain pine beetle was developed and implemented?

**Mr. Jim Eglinski:** I believe one was started, yes.

**Mr. Adam van Koeverden:** When you said that nothing happened after your calls for action, four months into the tenure of the Liberal government—

**Mr. Jim Eglinski:** Nothing happened [*Inaudible—Editor*].

**Mr. Adam van Koeverden:** Do you agree that in 2016 a forest management strategy for mountain pine beetle was developed around the same time that you were calling for it?

**Mr. Jim Eglinski:** Yes.

**Mr. Adam van Koeverden:** Thank you for clarifying that.

Did you also know that, in 2016, our government provided over \$42 million to Parks Canada in new funding, and that since then, our government has invested over \$800 million in initiatives related to improving wildfire management?

**Mr. Jim Eglinski:** I wasn't aware of those numbers, sir.

**Mr. Adam van Koeverden:** These are all incremental investments because of the Harper years deficit reduction action plan absolutely gutting these environmental measures. That's all I have to say about that, and I appreciate your willingness to clarify the record.

Ms. Cardinal Christianson, I'm really glad you could be here with us virtually. I'm a huge fan of the guardians and of the Indigenous Leadership Initiative. I should declare that I'm friends with Valérie Courtois. We've been up north together.

I just went over to the Lands Need Guardians website, and I'm not trying to brag, but there's a picture of us together in front of that great big house that was erected on Parliament Hill a couple of years ago. It was a really moving event for me.

Our government has been really proud to collaborate with the indigenous guardians and the Indigenous Leadership Initiative. I know that our government has an indigenous fire stewardship program with Parks Canada. How can we continue to move this forward? How can we continue to maximize all of the cultural knowledge and wisdom that first nations and other indigenous peoples have in Canada to prevent these types of disasters, or to mitigate them, I should say?

**Ms. Amy Cardinal Christianson:** Thanks for the question.

One thing that we see because of colonization, which Dane kind of mentioned, is that there's been a massive.... It's not a loss of indigenous knowledge because we didn't drop it; it was ripped from us. We really need to accelerate capacity in our communities again, especially around fire. We'd really like to see more investment in that area, actual action on the ground, in terms of training indigenous people in fire.

Another issue that we're seeing is the long-term, sustained funding. We have had investment in guardian programs, which has been great, but it's three- to five-year funding. Communities continually have to reapply. That's one thing that's been an issue in trying to get these things instated. When we look at our colleagues in Australia, lots of them have a much longer-term funding basis that they can draw from to keep their programs running.

**Mr. Adam van Koeverden:** Thanks. That's a really good recommendation. It's something that we can bring to Parks Canada as a recommendation.

I know there are a lot of indigenous employees and workers with Parks Canada, but I also would like to see that the guardians initiative and the Indigenous Leadership Initiative have more than just a seat at the table and that they have a more long-term goal.

Thank you very much. Thanks for being here.

Ms. Gartner, I have an article here from the Jasper Local.

First, I admire your work with Protect Our Winters, and I thank you for your climate action advocacy.

The article from the Jasper Local was so closely tied to what you were recommending with respect to the misinformation, the toxic politics that have entered into this committee meeting. Have you read the article in question from the Jasper Local? Do you have any insight or perspective from it? Would you like to add to it at all?

• (1810)

**Ms. Lindsey Gartner:** Sure. What it really points to is that the people who know the community best are locals. Those are the people who are going to drive forward changes and recovery. Empowering them and giving them the spotlight is the most important thing. Other narratives take power and change-making capacity away from local communities.

To reinforce what Amy and Dane both said, a lot of these solutions lie in empowering our local communities and our indigenous knowledge holders, centralizing their ability to understand a relationship with the landscape and being the leaders in that.

**Mr. Adam van Koeverden:** Thank you very much, Lindsey.

I have one final question. As a Jasperite, would you like us to continue to have these meetings and partisan conversations about what happened to Jasper, or would you like us to wrap it up?

**The Chair:** Answer very briefly, please.

**Ms. Lindsey Gartner:** I would like you to wrap it up.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Denis Trudel:** I'd like to thank all the witnesses who came here today to talk about this very important topic.

Mr. de Souza, I'll start with you. When we talk about the wild-fires and what happened in Jasper, I think co-operation is key, not only between the federal and provincial governments, but also with indigenous partners. This is needed to prevent and prepare for potential fires. As you surely know, we have 11 indigenous nations in Quebec, and many of them have been and will be affected by forest fires. So we need to work with them. I think we can all learn from each other.

In your opinion, what's been done well—there's no reason we can't talk about that too—in terms of forest fire prevention, and what hasn't been done well or at all? Finally, what needs to be done, in this spirit of co-operation between all partners, to prevent situations like what happened in Jasper?

[*English*]

**Mr. Dane de Souza:** What could have been done isn't really in the context of the time frame that's being discussed here. What can be done is what I've mentioned: investing in those ground-level, long-term, sustained roles in wildfire management that take into account local realities, that decentralize decision-making and that incorporate indigenous knowledge of the landscape and the factors that affect wildfires and how they behave on the landscape.

It's really about relationship building. It's about truth and reconciliation, and it's about understanding that, right now, these conversations live and die at liability. That's where the buck really stops when it comes to prevention. So many indigenous fire stewards, communities and wildfire practitioners are waiting, raring to go, to put fire on the land to prevent these disasters and prevent these tragedies, but it all stops with liability.

You have forest rangers who make virtually nothing. They have two-year diplomas. It's an old boys' club. They get a proposal for a burn that comes onto their desks, and they have to pick up the liability for that. They know darn well that this is a politicized event. If it goes over two hectares of the control lines, that's their pension. That's food on their table that they have to consider when they're signing off on these things.

If we step back and actually have an honest conversation, this is a natural phenomenon. It doesn't exist in a box. You can't put a little grid on a map and say that is exactly where the burn is going to start, stop and end. You're there monitoring the conditions—not saying that on July 10 you're going to burn. You're sitting there with the community and saying that, when the conditions are right, you're ready to go.

It's about empowering that level. That's what can be done. It's about removing that bureaucratic tape. It's about not putting people in positions where they have to take their career into their own hands by doing the right thing.

• (1815)

[Translation]

**Mr. Denis Trudel:** You said that there needs to be a little more concern for indigenous knowledge. What exactly do you mean, in the specific case of forest fires?

[English]

**Mr. Dane de Souza:** Thank you.

Indigenous knowledge is very much landscape-based. It's knowing the rivers, trees, rocks and winds—how all of that landscape and ecology play into each other in a localized environment—because you've been there forever. You can see the same thing when you talk to farmers about their land. They know their land. They know every corner of it. They know where the coyote den is, etc. These things all influence how a fire behaves on the land. Indigenous fire stewardship is so rich and deep in knowledge of the landscape and of how these fires behave and will react to certain conditions. It goes back more than 20,000 years, as I mentioned.

That being the case, when you get to the day where the conditions are perfect.... You can tell this by what the land is telling you. For example, I was on a traditional burn with Amy in Rocky Mountain House. I was there with the Banff crew, who are all good friends of mine. They are great firefighters—the best on the planet. We did the same thing we've done at every wildfire I've ever been on in my career. We sat on a tailgate and got a readout from Edmonton saying, “Okay, our fine fuel moisture codes are  $x$ ,  $y$  and  $z$ , which gives a readout of this. Our head fire intensity should be this, which means this and this. Does everybody feel safe? Let's get out there.”

What we all did was the exact same thing: We each went to a different corner of that burn plot without talking about it. We picked up some grass, rubbed it in our hands, smelled it, threw it in the air and did that again. Then we came back to the middle. These are indigenous and non-indigenous fire stewards. They're experienced firefighters. It was, “Dane, what's happening in your corner?” “Well, I noticed over there that I'm smelling some moisture on the grass and, with the way the shadows are tracking, I don't think that's really going to dry up and burn until about 2 p.m. or 3 p.m. What do you think?” “Well, over in my corner, it's a bit wind-exposed. You can tell that from the way the land is sloping. You know, this will probably take off, but I don't know if we'll get the energy to go and burn that plot right there.” What did those readouts do for us? Nothing. They just helped with that liability.

This is a landscape-based phenomenon. You need to be experienced. You need to know what you're talking about. You need to understand the landscape, and no one understands it better than those who have been stewarding it long before Canada.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Your time is up, Mr. Trudel.

That's very interesting.

Ms. McPherson, you have the floor.

[English]

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much to all the witnesses. This has been very interesting, and I'm so in awe of some of the testimony brought forward today.

What we're hearing is that, if indigenous knowledge and science had been used, there would have been better management of this forest. From what I understand—I wasn't here for this testimony—there is one person in Parks Canada identified as the indigenous fire expert. I could be wrong on that. However, my understanding, particularly from the testimony you gave, Mr. de Souza, is that it would be very difficult for somebody from one area of the country to represent or have any sort of understanding about other areas of the country.

I'd like your thoughts on that, but I'd also like you to talk a little about how we can decolonize forest protection across Canada and what that would look like.

I'll start with you, Mr. de Souza, because you're in the room. Then I'll pass it on to those who are online.

**Mr. Dane de Souza:** I'll start by talking about that individual, because he's a good friend of mine.

That individual used to be Amy, who is a mentor and an idol to me. For me, it's like being with Bryan Trottier on the ice. I'm more of a Darcy Tucker. It's not about that individual having all the knowledge. It's about them having relationships with the people who do have the knowledge. That individual is someone who is remarkable in their ability to transcend borders, languages and landscapes. There are so many indigenous nations, even in the area where I grew up, Moh'kinstsis—Calgary, Alberta. This individual has the talent, skill and ability to make those relationships. It's not about that one individual carrying all the knowledge. It's about that one individual being able to connect.

Could you quickly repeat the second part of the question?

• (1820)

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** How do we decolonize firefighting in this country? How does that happen? What are the steps the government needs to take? We recognize that we have a racist, deeply colonized structural system in place. How do we fix that?

**Mr. Dane de Souza:** Don't ever start a meeting with me with a land acknowledgement. That's your first step. I don't need your land acknowledgement. I need you to do some darn work. That's where it starts.

It's about acknowledging the truth. We talk about truth and reconciliation. The two truths we reconcile involve land acknowledgements and wearing orange shirts. That's not the truth of my ancestors. That's the truth you've imposed upon us. The truth of my ancestors is this right here. It's a beautiful truth. It's a human truth. Fire stewardship—how we manage and steward the land for the betterment of everyone—that is a truth we can all gather around. We can reconcile. We can take part in it. We have individual obligations to this. It's not your office that has an obligation to this. It's you. The people who live, earn and work in this country have an obligation to amplify, champion and enable that truth.

That's the reconciliation needed here. We talk about decolonization. Decolonization is having a conversation and making relationships, like the individual I just talked about. That's what it's about. It's giving that trust and having the ability to learn from each another.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Dr. Cardinal Christianson, go ahead please.

**Ms. Amy Cardinal Christianson:** I can speak specifically to the role of the indigenous fire specialist with Parks Canada. I was in that role as the first one. It was through my manager at the time, Pierre Martel. He felt that it was a huge piece that was missing from the fire management picture at Parks Canada.

I came in and was part of the national fire management division, which is basically a team that provides a national overview for Parks Canada, but then there are also field units that have fire management teams.

What the indigenous fire specialist does is work with people who are in those areas and help to support them with work that they're doing in their local parks. That way it's not one person trying to manage all these complex relationships. It's really that we're trying to support the field units or the parks in doing that work in a good way.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** To follow up, I'd like to get your comments as well on how we would decolonize the wildfire firefighting services across the country.

**Ms. Amy Cardinal Christianson:** I know one of the NDP things that you've been a supporter of is the federal firefighting force. What I'd ask you to consider is looking to indigenous people as that group.

I just can't believe sometimes that we're not already doing indigenous fire guardians in Canada. It's such an easy win. It gives people jobs, it gets people out on their territory, it increases the health of people and their landscapes, and it also reduces fire risk. To me, it's something that we can do. Compared to the amount we

spend on international folks coming in, it's actually very cheap to do this.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** I would like to ask my last question of Ms. Gartner.

One of the things we have heard from residents of Jasper is that the economic recovery has been hampered because so many people work in the tourism industry, and many of them weren't able to access EI.

I'd like to hear your perspective on that, and I'd like to hear other steps that the federal government could take to support the people of Jasper right now.

**Ms. Lindsey Gartner:** I think that's a really great question. It speaks to how tourist economies can be precarious, and they're very dynamic.

Increasing support for tourist economies to create more stable systems, including reducing the precarity of work and working with associations to try to build more careers in tourism and not be reliant especially on immigration systems that are built for precarity, and instead developing systems that support people to live in a community long term and have that stability, are essential.

On that note, like we're hearing from Dane and Amy here, it's very important that recovery is community-led, and the path forward needs to be owned by the community. That's essential.

**The Chair:** We're well over time.

We'll go to a very quick second round—a three-minute round.

Mr. Lloyd.

**Mr. Dane Lloyd:** Thank you.

A famous German chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, said that laws are like sausages—it's better not to see them made. Politics is not for the squeamish. We are here to ask uncomfortable questions, because we need to get the uncomfortable answers.

The fact is that, at the very beginning of this study, when we had Minister Guilbeault, Parks Canada officials and another minister, Minister Sajjan, they made claims that everything that could be done had been done. They made claims that no stone had been left unturned in the preparations to prepare Jasper for the fire.

It's only through the efforts of members of this committee, particularly the Conservative members of this committee, who have been fighting for additional meetings, fighting to get answers so that Canadians can learn the truth.... We've had excellent witnesses, such as you yourselves and other witnesses, who have come forward with very compelling evidence that this government did not consider indigenous knowledge. They did not consider the knowledge of our forest products associations, and they did not consider the knowledge of foresters like Ken Hodges, who warned this government in 2017 of the risk of fire.

I do take exception when members of the government team... I know it's uncomfortable for them to have these meetings and to be held accountable, but that's their job—to be held accountable. It's my job to come and ask witnesses to get the truth for Canadians. That's why we're asking these questions.

Mr. de Souza, I'm going to start with you. You've said quite clearly that you think this fire could have been mitigated. Are you aware of any prescribed burns that were cancelled this past year just for Jasper park?

• (1825)

**Mr. Dane de Souza:** If you mean in Jasper itself...no. However, I don't work for Jasper National Park.

**Mr. Dane Lloyd:** You were talking about a hundred years ago, looking at photos of Jasper National Park, and there were grasslands. It was not this sea of conifer trees that are prone to wildfire.

Do you think that better forest management, including the indigenous perspective that you spoke about, could have prevented these fires from happening in Jasper, at least as intensely as they did?

**Mr. Dane de Souza:** I think that to approach this from the lens of forest management is only to continue all the mistakes that have led up to this, regardless of the governments that have put them forward.

I think stewardship—indigenous fire and land stewardship—is really the lens that we need to approach this with. Management is far too short-sighted. Management is far too susceptible to the whims of the political winds that affect it. Stewardship is an ongoing relationship and practice of stewarding the land so it can steward you.

I think getting to that place in this country through conversations like this is inspiring.

**Mr. Dane Lloyd:** One thing you did say that really struck me was that you were sickened that we're not talking about Lytton, or Enterprise in the Northwest Territories, which was devastated in 2023, as well as Fort McMurray or Slave Lake. The reason we're talking about this is because it happened in a national park, which is under federal jurisdiction.

I think you're absolutely right. These discussions about protecting our communities from fire are very important.

Do you think that it's a discussion that we just need to wrap up?

**The Chair:** Unfortunately, we won't have time for the answer, at least at this point.

We'll go to Mr. Longfield.

**Mr. Lloyd Longfield (Guelph, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

With three minutes, I want to talk to Mr. de Souza at length. I also want to talk to Ms. Gartner and Ms. Cardinal, so we'll see how that all goes.

These are tremendous ideas on the reconciliation in action, finding ways to have relationships and to learn new ways of implementing old ways. With the review that's ongoing right now, I want to double-check that indigenous people are on the board of the

management of the park or that these ideas are also being discussed where they need to be discussed.

Do you know whether any of that is going on?

**Mr. Dane de Souza:** I can't speak to Jasper specifically, but the relationship that I do have with Banff National Park is exemplary for exactly that.

As far as wrapping up this conversation goes, this conversation needs to come to the province.

**Mr. Lloyd Longfield:** Thank you.

We're in a culture where confrontation is the order of the day. Unfortunately, that doesn't help fight some of the challenges that we have together. Again, the lessons from indigenous people need to be something that we embrace as part of reconciliation in a real way—not with orange shirts, as you said, but with real action. Thank you so much for being here.

I'd like to flip over to the screen. I'm sorry to cut us short; it's just the time.

Ms. Gartner, thank you for being such a reasonable voice at the table. The youth in Guelph have been saying to me that, instead of fighting each other, why don't we fight climate change and stop fighting each other? In the last nine years, I've really embraced that message they've given me.

When it comes to topics like reconciliation and involving the youth in these discussions, do you have any quick thoughts that you would like to share on that theme?

**Ms. Lindsey Gartner:** I think reconciliation is a huge part of this process because the indigenous world view demonstrated taking care of the earth so much better than the western world view did.

That is the future. The future is to take that narrative and shift the paradigm to focus on social and environmental well-being. That's what we all want. That's number one. The youth will be the ones to make that shift. I feel confident in that.

• (1830)

**Mr. Lloyd Longfield:** We need youth to be at the tables that we're sitting at, and we need youth to transform politics. Please stay involved. We need you.

Ms. Cardinal, it's great to see that we have a hero in the room. I'm really grateful for the work you've done on mentorship and for bringing your wisdom to our table.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Longfield.

Mr. Trudel, you have the floor.

**Mr. Denis Trudel:** Ms. Gartner, I'm going to ask you a question as well. You gave some fascinating testimony on cross-party politics. That said, what should we do?

Canada is still an oil powerhouse. Oil is responsible for a large portion of the greenhouse gases we emit. Therefore, if we want to fight climate change, we have to cap oil and gas sector production. My party agrees that we need to stop subsidizing the sector. According to a study by the International Monetary Fund, or IMF, the federal Liberals gave \$50 billion in direct and indirect assistance to the oil industry in 2022. That same year, the five big oil companies made \$200 billion in profit. Let's not forget that the IMF doesn't donate to Greenpeace or Équiterre.

I'm all for cross-party politics. We've been screaming for that. However, two major political parties here are still promoting the oil and gas industry. So how can we make these cross-party politics a reality?

[*English*]

**Ms. Lindsey Gartner:** Yes, I'll try to be really fast here. I just want to preface here that I come from a rural farming town and community in Alberta. My family has worked in oil and gas, so I understand the culture. Number one, when we think about a green transition, we need to think about a labour transition and empowering people to move out of that so that they can have a livelihood in a different way. We also need to think about our consumption, because we're not going to power our current consumption use on renewable energy. We need to slow things down and get realigned with our energy use if we are going to transition from oil.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. I'm sorry to interrupt you. It's just a question of time, as Mr. Longfield said before.

Ms. McPherson, you have a minute and a half.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

A minute and a half is not very much time, but Ms. Gartner, as somebody who is in Jasper, who is a resident of Jasper, can you give us any additional information about what the people of Jasper need from the federal government right now?

**Ms. Lindsey Gartner:** I think they need to ask that question to the people on the ground and listen with a willingness to really support them. It's like those are the folks who are going to drive forward and build their community really strong and really beautiful and shape that future. Why Jasper was such a special place was because you could feel the community first. Yes, there were the mountains and all this beauty, but a community thriving is what enables everything else to thrive. Supporting that community to thrive, listening to what they need and allowing them to shape their own future are essential.

Then secondly, absolutely, we need to rebuild broken relationships with the people who were removed, the indigenous people who were removed from the land, and ensure that they are part of that future as well in a meaningful way. The last thing I'll say is that we need structures and policies that protect our social and economic systems from corporate opportunism, not just in Jasper but across Canada.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Deltell, you have the floor for three minutes.

**Mr. Gérard Deltell:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to move the following motion.

Given that the Jasper wildfire investigation has revealed:

a) Then Liberal Environment Minister Catherine McKenna was warned in 2017 by multiple forestry experts that a catastrophic fire in Jasper was inevitable if the Liberal government did not act;

b) "Nothing was done to address the landscape of beetle-killed timber to prevent the mega fire of July 22, 2024", according to testimony from forestry expert Ken Hodges;

c) Former Liberal Environment Minister Catherine McKenna has refused to testify at the Jasper wildfire investigation on multiple occasions despite repeated requests from the committee.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(1), the committee summon former Liberal Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Catherine McKenna, to appear on November 6, 2024.

This is not the first time we've asked the former minister to appear before the committee.

**The Chair:** Mr. Deltell, I remind you that we were in camera at the time.

**Mr. Gérard Deltell:** Mr. Chair, I submit to you that we'd like the minister to be present. We've heard a great deal of testimony questioning the current government's management. Out of respect for the former minister, I think it only stands to reason that she should be able to appear before this committee and respond to the arguments made and, more importantly, the testimony that we heard, particularly from the former member for Yellowhead, who is here today and who spoke directly with the minister. The minister needs to come and testify, tell her side of the story and answer our questions.

• (1835)

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. van Koeverden.

**Mr. Adam van Koeverden:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Look, I've said this a number of times already, that I think the overpoliticization of this issue has gone on far too long. That has been corroborated now by locals, by journalists in the area and by witnesses on this committee. Despite that, the Conservatives seem hell-bent on overly politicizing this and turning it into a political issue when it's one that we're discussing with experts, one that we're discussing with scientists and indigenous leaders, who virtually unanimously say that there are things that we ought to adopt in terms of policy considerations and recommendations. However, they have all asked us to depoliticize and turn down the heat on this overly politicized rhetoric.

I referenced the article entitled "Recipe for disaster: Misinformation and wildfire". It was published last week. I would like to send it to all members of the committee so they can read it, but before I do, I'm just going to read some sections that I think are very pertinent to the recommendation that we continue this study and invite former ministers to the meeting:

Record dryness, extreme heat, high winds, and a lightning storm. This summer in Jasper National Park, all of the ingredients of a recipe for disaster were in place.

Now, two and a half months after that disaster came to pass, another set of circumstances—misinformation, toxic politics and facts-starved social media blowhards, desperately looking to pin blame—have lined up to wreak havoc.

It moves on to some discussions on Parkland and Yellowhead counties and who showed up, in particular, the aforementioned enterprise Arctic Fire. With reference to that, the article goes on to suggest—

**Mr. Dan Mazier:** I have a point of order.

What's the relevance? We want Catherine McKenna here. We want the previous minister here. We just heard testimony that she ignored him, so it's a point of order.

**The Chair:** That's a point of debate. I see it as relevant.

Thank you for the opportunity to thank the witnesses for being here.

We're going to have to stop the panel. We were almost done anyway. It was a fascinating discussion, I must say. We really appreciate all of you being here and sharing your time and your thoughts on this issue. I think we've all learned a great deal. Thank you very much. We'll now go to this debate on future business. Again, thank you for being with us.

Mr. van Koeverden, go ahead and continue.

**Mr. Adam van Koeverden:** Thank you, Chair.

I was referring to this article. I'll continue. It reads:

Jasper said yes. To resources. To help. They said yes early and they said yes often. They said yes to wildland teams and they said yes to municipal departments.

"We kept saying yes," [Landon] Shepherd said.

But they didn't say yes to everyone.

Unified Command did not immediately say yes to an independent fire fighting businesses seeking to access Jasper to perform structural protection services for a private company.

They did not say yes to a group of trucks and personnel who—while having had been deployed by the Government of Alberta—did not have prior arrangements for access.

They did not say yes to a self-dispatching team who had not signed an agreement to abide by the ICT's rules of engagement.

And they did not say yes to a crew of mercenaries known as Arctic Fire Safety Services, the bulk of whose resources arrived the day after 350 structures burned in Jasper.

Mr. Chair, I'll go on. It later reads:

Fanning the flames of these politically-driven comments sows division, mistrust and hard feelings amongst Canadians in general, but among Jasperites in particular. The negative rhetoric is wearing on locals, many of whom were involved in the incident, and many others who lost their homes and livelihoods to fire and desperately want fact-based answers.

Even Jasper's Mayor, now well-known to Canadians for his diplomacy, fortitude and tact, weighed in on the scuttlebutt.

"The present atmosphere of finger pointing, blaming and misinformation is beyond merely an annoying distraction, it delays healing".... "It introduces fresh wounds at a time when we need a recovery and unity."

Facts matter. What Arctic Fire Safety Services have said about their involvement in the Jasper Wildfire Complex is not accurate. Unified Command should not have to explain why they were not prepared to upend their established processes of deploying resources safely and effectively because some cowboys with big trucks wanted to act on "instinct."

He goes on to say in the article:

...to ignore the bad actors trying to make political hay from our crisis....

But if we can put politics aside and filter out good information from bad, Jasper—the town and the park—has all the right ingredients to make its rebuild unprecedented, too.

That's what we should be focusing on—not politics and not bringing ministers to this meeting to lay blame, particularly when we had the former member of Parliament for Yellowhead acknowledge that what he said regarding actions following those studies was actually incorrect.

I would provide an amendment to the request to this. The amendment would simply say, with respect to the fact that in 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015, due to Harper's deficit reduction action plan cuts, which affected over 1,600 employees at large at Parks Canada and resulted in no burns and no mechanical thinning—no prescribed burns at all in Jasper—between 2012 and 2015; with respect to the fact that in 2016, a forest management strategy for mountain pine beetle was developed by our government under the leadership of the aforementioned Minister Catherine McKenna....

If we're going to go back in time to revisit all of these actions, Mr. Chair, then I would also ask that we ask ministers why they decided to eliminate funding to Jasper National Park. Those ministers would be the Honourable Leona Aglukkaq, Minister Peter Kent and Minister Peter Kent's policy adviser at the time, who happens to be Melissa Lantsman.

If you'd like to have Catherine McKenna appear, those individuals can appear too.

● (1840)

**The Chair:** I'm going to need that amendment in writing. I don't know where it goes in the motion. Is it a point d? Is that what it is? Okay, but what's the wording for it? I need wording.

**Mr. Dan Mazier:** I would like it in writing and in both languages, please.

**The Chair:** I'm saying add point d.

**Mr. Adam van Koeverden:** I'm just adding names to the list of people we should be inviting.

**The Chair:** Okay. I wasn't sure.

**Mr. Dan Mazier:** Don't you have it in writing? Don't you have any...?

**Mr. Adam van Koeverden:** The names of those witnesses are the same in English and in French.

**The Chair:** No, I understand.

**Mr. Dan Mazier:** All right. You went on for quite a while. The amendment was quite lengthy.

**The Chair:** Let me try to understand this. The amendment would read "the committee summon former Liberal Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Catherine McKenna", and then you want to add names.



**Mr. Adam van Koeverden:** It's former Conservative environment ministers Peter Kent and Leona Aglukkaq.

**The Chair:** Just a second. You're going too fast.

What is the point of order?

**Mr. Dan Mazier:** Can we get it in writing? We want them in both French and English. It's quite a lengthy amendment.

**Mr. Adam van Koeverden:** No, it's three names, actually.

**The Chair:** Let me finish.

I'm going to try to insert this as an amendment. Then we'll see where we stand.

After “Catherine McKenna”, we add “former environment minister Leona Aglukkaq”. Is that what you...? What is next?

**Mr. Adam van Koeverden:** It's Peter Kent—

**The Chair:** We add “former environment minister Peter Kent”.

**Mr. Adam van Koeverden:** —and his policy adviser at the time.

**The Chair:** It's “and his policy adviser at the time, Melissa Lantsman”.

Is that where it ends?

**Mr. Adam van Koeverden:** Yes.

**The Chair:** Okay. Then it's “to appear on November 6”.

**Mr. Dan Mazier:** I have a point of order.

**The Chair:** Yes.

**An hon. member:** Chair.

**The Chair:** Just a second.

What's the point of order?

**Mr. Dan Mazier:** You can't [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] members of Parliament.

**The Chair:** We're not summoning. We're asking them to appear.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Can we let the witnesses go? I know you said that, but I'm not sure if they explicitly know.

**The Chair:** You may disconnect and go about your day. I didn't mean to keep you here. I'm sorry. Maybe I wasn't clear. You can stay if you like. It's a public meeting.

Thank you, Ms. McPherson.

**Mr. Dan Mazier:** To go back to my point of order....

**The Chair:** We're not summoning anybody with a motion that says “invite”. It doesn't say.... What we're doing here is after “Catherine McKenna”. The wording is the same as that in the original motion. It's just that we're adding names.

Oh, there is the word “summon”. Okay.

Mr. van Koeverden, maybe you want to change “summon” to “invite”.

**Mr. Adam van Koeverden:** Yes, I do, for all of them.

**The Chair:** Okay.

That's the amendment. We're going to write it down and distribute it to everybody by email. It's not that complicated. We're changing “summon” to “invite”, and we're adding Leona Aglukkaq, Peter Kent and his then policy adviser, Melissa Lantsman.

Go ahead on your point of order, yes.

● (1845)

**Mr. Dane Lloyd:** I believe there was already an invitation sent out to former minister McKenna, which was declined. The reason for the summons is to compel former minister McKenna to come. It would be appropriate, I think, to maintain the word “summon”. I know this is debate, but the invitation—

**The Chair:** You can vote against the amendment.

Ms. Taylor Roy.

**Ms. Leah Taylor Roy:** Can I put forward a motion to adjourn? We're over time. This is committee business and people have to go.

**The Chair:** There is a motion to adjourn. We're going to have a vote.

**Mr. Dan Mazier:** How about a motion to suspend?

**The Chair:** We have a motion to adjourn. If that is defeated, you can have a motion to suspend—though I don't think there's much of a difference, in this case.

We have a motion to adjourn. We're going to vote. Then we'll take it from there, depending on the result of the vote.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 7; nays 4)





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