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Chair

Mr. James Bezan

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• (0905)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC)): I call this meeting to order.

I'd like to welcome to the table, pursuant to Standing Order 32(5), the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, Mr. Scott Vaughan. He has with him Mr. Richard Arseneault, principal at the Office of the Auditor General; and Mr. Paul Morse, principal, sustainable development strategies, audits and studies, Office of the Auditor General.

Mr. Vaughan will speak on his report that he tabled on March 31, 2009, on the environment and sustainable development.

We look forward to your opening comments. Then we'll open it up to questioning.

Mr. Scott Vaughan (Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, Office of the Auditor General of Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[Translation]

Mr. Chairman, I am pleased to be here to present our 2009 Status Report, which was recently tabled in Parliament.

[English]

The status report shows what departments and agencies have done to address two issues that were raised in our past reports. In determining whether progress is satisfactory or unsatisfactory, we take into account the complexity of the issue and the amount of time that has passed since the original audit.

[Translation]

The two environmental issues that we cover in this report are fundamental to life: the safety of the water we drink and the quality of the air we breathe.

Let me turn to the first chapter of this report, Safety of Drinking Water.

[English]

The production and delivery of safe drinking water is often taken for granted until problems occur, at times with tragic consequences. How the federal government carries out its responsibilities for the safety of drinking water has an impact on millions of people, including travellers, visitors to national parks, federal penitentiary inmates, bottled water consumers, and federal employees.

[Translation]

The federal government is responsible for the development of the science-based Guidelines for Canadian Drinking Water Quality. These guidelines establish maximal allowable levels for 120 different contaminants that could be found in our drinking water.

[English]

The federal government, in collaboration with provincial and territorial governments, must ensure that these guidelines are current and take into account scientific evidence. Provinces and territories use these guidelines in a variety of ways ranging from general guidance to legislated standards. Under the Canada Labour Code, federal employers must provide their employees with drinking water that meets these guidelines.

[Translation]

In 2005, we reported that the process followed by Health Canada to develop and review the guidelines was based on risk, science, consultation and transparency.

However, we also reported that this process was consistently slow, with a backlog of 50 guidelines in need of a review to reflect current science. Since then, the department has largely cleared the backlog. I am pleased that Health Canada has also set up a process to update the guidelines regularly on the basis of scientific information and risks to human health, and produced new ones as needed.

In 2005, we observed that Health Canada had stopped all of its routine inspections of drinking water quality on commercial passenger aircraft. I am pleased that Health Canada has resumed this important work. However, its current coverage is incomplete.

[English]

In 2005, we were critical of the federal government departments and agencies because of gaps and inconsistencies in their procedures to ensure safe drinking water at their facilities and sites. In late 2005, Health Canada released a central guidance document to assist federal organizations in this area.

[Translation]

Of the two federal organizations we examined for this follow-up audit, we note that Parks Canada had systems in place to assure compliance with those federal guidelines. By contrast, we note that the Correctional Service of Canada did not follow some of the procedures in Health Canada's guidance. We especially note that high levels of lead were detected in some of the Service's facilities located in Quebec.

[English]

Finally, the chapter also examined Health Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's shared responsibility for assuring the safety of bottled drinking water. Among the five recommendations in this chapter is the need to revise the food and drug regulations for bottled water so they refer to the guidelines for Canadian drinking water quality.

[Translation]

We now turn to the Air Quality Health Index. The AQHI, as it is commonly called, is a snapshot of air quality at a given location. It combines three key pollutants that affect human health and that need to be monitored across Canada. Like the UV Index, the AQHI is designed to help individual Canadians make informed decisions about outdoor activity.

• (0910)

[English]

The AQHI measures the combined effect of three pollutants that exist in Canada—ground-level ozone, nitrogen dioxide, and particulate matter—that can affect human health. This is one of the first times an index has been developed that combines or correlates pollution data with probable human health risks. Until the advent of the AQHI, provinces and selected communities have communicated data obtained from national networks through their own indices. These indices report only the one pollutant with the current highest measurement in a given area. They are not based on combined measurements and they're not specifically related to human health.

[Translation]

We found that Environment Canada and Health Canada have made satisfactory progress in developing the AQHI, a commitment that was cited in their responses to petitions submitted by the public in 2002 and 2003. At the time of our audit, the Index had been piloted at several locations across Canada, including three completed pilot projects in Nova Scotia, British Columbia and Toronto.

Our audit found that Health Canada and Environment Canada consulted widely with stakeholders at every stage of the initiative, and are now in the process of rolling out the AQHI across Canada. The short-term goal is to have coverage for all cities over 100,000 people by 2011.

[English]

The departments have recognized that they face a number of challenges moving forward, including the need for better data collection in rural areas, working with the provinces on issues related to total or partial phase-out of existing indices, and the funding of further development that would allow for coverage of rural areas and include more regionally specific pollutant issues.

Mr. Chair, that concludes my opening statement. With my colleagues Mr. Arseneault and Mr. Morse, we will be pleased to answer your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner Vaughan.

Mr. McGuinty, would you kick us off on our seven-minute round.

Mr. David McGuinty (Ottawa South, Lib.): Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, Mr. Vaughan, and good morning to your colleagues as well.

[Translation]

Good morning, Mr. Arseneault.

[English]

Can I go back to the safety of drinking water for a second, Mr. Vaughan?

In your judgment or assessment, is the federal role in the development of these science-based guidelines for Canadian drinking water quality the circumscribed responsibility of the federal government, or are there other responsibilities here that accrue to the federal government on water quality?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Mr. Chair, thank you very much.

There are several responsibilities of the federal government. As you mention, the first one is ensuring that the national guidelines are up to date; that they're based on science and consultation with provinces, territories, and others; and that they are done in a transparent manner, which is a key responsibility of the federal government. But there are others, including the direct responsibility of the federal government over the areas for which it has direct control, for example, installations of federal penitentiaries and Parks Canada installations. In addition, via the Canada Labour Code, it is responsible for providing assurance that all employers make available safe drinking water in conformity with or guided by the national guidelines. Those are examples, and there are others, such as on bottled drinking water, which would be a shared responsibility of Health Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

Mr. David McGuinty: When you were examining the whole question of the safety of drinking water, did you examine it in the context of the government having said—not once but twice, I believe, in two throne speeches back to back—that it would deliver up, years ago, a national water strategy for the country? Is that something you examined?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: It's actually an interesting question. It's something that the team began to examine, and the position of the office is that we don't examine a program if it's based only on a press release. So there had been commitments to develop a national strategy or a national framework. What we said was that there wasn't enough at the time to audit. So we did not see any measurable progress in developing a national strategy or a national framework. However, what I'd like to say is that I hope we're going to go back and look at this more comprehensively in 2010.

Mr. David McGuinty: So I take it from your answer, then, that you concluded there is no national water strategy?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: There's no national strategy that has enough announcements in terms of commitments, budgets, resources, plans, and programs that we'd actually be able to look at. There have been announcements, but there weren't enough of them for us to go and say they would be the basis of an audit. So yes, your question is correct.

• (0915)

Mr. David McGuinty: What kind of efforts have been made then by the government? What is the timeline of your assessment?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Yes. The assessment began, I believe, in August 2007, and it ended in about August or September 2008. So it was within that 12- to 13-month period.

Mr. David McGuinty: Have there been any efforts you can ascertain between the federal government and its provincial counterparts to move the whole question of water forward nationally?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Not that I am aware of, but let me turn to my colleague Mr. Arseneault.

Mr. Richard Arseneault (Principal, Office of the Auditor General of Canada): When we started the audit, we wanted to follow up on the work we had done in 2005. We had done work on the federal water framework. The government at the time had produced a federal framework, and we made a recommendation.

What was the future of this thing? It existed on paper but did not materialize in terms of hard work on the ground. So when we started this audit, we looked at what was going on given that there was a new government in place, and the new government was starting anew and had announced a federal strategy. When we looked at this, what we saw was essentially site decontamination. That is essentially the work that was done. Important work was done on the Great Lakes and in areas like that where there were contamination problems related to water, but the government was also looking at prioritizing its interventions in terms of water. At the time we looked at it, they were in the midst of working on this. They had developed a document called a *diagnostique* of the situation. So we decided that it was too early to do an audit of that. Therefore, we decided to scope it out of our audit with a view to looking at it in the future. We don't know what the status of that initiative is currently.

Mr. David McGuinty: In your water work, did you examine the Walkerton report by Mr. Justice O'Connor and its potential application to the federal and national setting?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: In this report, no, we didn't. This is a follow-up to a report done in 2005. There were actually two reports in 2005. One was on federal responsibility. The second was on water quality for first nations, and they referred to the Walkerton incident in that report.

I don't know if there is anything else you want to add.

Mr. Richard Arseneault: Obviously we were very aware of the situation, and in fact, when we looked at the situation back in 2005, we saw that the federal government was getting interested in water again. Because of what happened in Walkerton, I guess there was a feeling that there were risks that existed and that the federal government needed to potentially intervene. That's why the federal water framework involved 19 federal organizations that had water responsibilities. It was kind of a mapping exercise: what is going on in the federal government regarding water? So they did this exercise. But what was the next step? We don't know. Then there was a change in government and then a re-start of an initiative.

Mr. David McGuinty: So in 2005 the new government inherited a framework, which built in part on the findings of Mr. Justice O'Connor, which Canadians will remember was a report that examined and investigated the deaths of 22 Canadians and the sickness of over 2,200, some of whom are still living with the long-term effects of E. coli infection. The federal government came in in

2006, and since then you cannot point to any progress, seemingly, on a national water framework or to any building on the framework they inherited. Do I have this right?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: You have that right. What we've said is that there have been a couple of media releases. There have been some announcements. But when we went into the departments, there wasn't enough in terms of discernable progress to say that it actually looked as if there's something in place.

Mr. David McGuinty: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you. We're going to continue.

Go ahead, Monsieur Bigras.

[Translation]

Mr. Bernard Bigras (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, BQ): Mr. Chairman, I'm going to share my time with Mr. Ouellet.

I understand Mr. McGuinty's questions, but we have to be careful when we talk about a national water law and suggest that certain disasters might not occur if the federal government decided to create a federal law. The evidence is that the federal government's responsibility for drinking water quality in penitentiaries in Quebec is a lamentable failure.

You have to be quite careful when you say it would be preferable for the federal government to be responsible for evaluating water quality in the provinces and territories.

On page 22, you say this:

The cause was lead from the facilities' aging water distribution systems and not the municipal water supply to which they were connected.

Am I to understand that the problem was not water quality, but rather aging federal infrastructure? If prisoners were drinking poor quality water that didn't meet the standards for lead concentrations, it wasn't because the water supply and quality control systems put in place at the source by the municipalities, which are responsible to the provinces, were obsolete, but rather because the federal infrastructure was. Is that what I am to understand from your report?

• (0920)

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Thank you for your question.

Yes, that's precisely the problem that we noted in the report. All departments and agencies are responsible for verifying the quality of drinking water in federal government facilities. The Correctional Service's facilities in Quebec are a problem: some are very old and the problem doesn't stem from the source, but from the infrastructure of those facilities. I think the Correctional Service of Canada has eight facilities.

Mr. Bernard Bigras: A number of buildings and infrastructures are under federal responsibility. The Parliament buildings, for example, don't date back to 1996.

Could it be that the problem of aging infrastructure does not just concern the penitentiaries, but also other federal departments that have offices in other places?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: I'm going to hand over to Mr. Arseneault in a moment.

In last month's report, we only examined two departments, Parks Canada and the Correctional Service of Canada. We haven't yet done —

Mr. Bernard Bigras: I'm thinking of National Defence and the military bases, such as Valcartier and others. Has the environment commissioner prepared reports on water quality at the Valcartier base or other military bases?

Mr. Richard Arseneault: In 2005, we examined the operation of the procedures system at six departments, including the Department of National Defence, and those of federal agencies. We realized that procedures were not standard from one department to another, that water sampling and testing measures were not consistent. Certain departments had a number of measures and tests, while others did none. For that reason, in 2005, we recommended that Health Canada develop a guide to assist departments in ensuring that the water at federal buildings and sites was potable and that the risk was properly managed.

In our follow-up, we noted that Parks Canada had complied with the Health Canada procedures and guide. In the case of the Correctional Service, we noted deficiencies in procedures that had not yet been updated. The Correctional Service would probably have discovered the lead problem in the water in prisons if it had updated those procedures sooner. It eventually discovered the problem and took measures to correct it.

There are other federal departments. In Ottawa, we know that the water in certain federal buildings is a problem with regard to lead. We discovered that a number of years ago, and we know that measures have been taken.

• (0925)

Mr. Scott Vaughan: It's a good idea to ask questions on the condition of federal government facilities. You could ask Health Canada or Public Works for the average age of facilities and to what extent drinking water quality is guaranteed there.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Ouellet, go ahead.

[Translation]

Mr. Christian Ouellet (Brome—Missisquoi, BQ): Mr. Vaughan, I would like to talk to you about an area of federal jurisdiction: navigation on waterways containing drinking water. You say the short-term objective is to target cities of 100,000 inhabitants. Certain waterways serve as many as six municipalities with more than 100,000 inhabitants. Do you think that all municipalities should be checked in case their populations exceed 100,000 inhabitants, or should we overlook them because they're too small?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: I'm going to ask Mr. Morse to talk to you about that.

I think your question concerns Environment Canada's air quality health index objective. As you said, the objective is to ensure that that index is available for cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants. However, you have to consider whether rural communities will also have access to that index.

Mr. Christian Ouellet: I'm going to come back to that question.

Mr. Paul Morse (Principal, Sustainable Development Strategies, Audits and Studies, Office of the Auditor General of Canada): The question regarding cities with 100,000 inhabitants concerns the air quality health index. In the chapter on water, I don't think we mention cities with 100,000 inhabitants. In that chapter, we follow up on our 2005 recommendations regarding federal commitments. The immediate priority of both departments is to put the air quality health index in place for cities of 100,000 inhabitants by 2011.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Scott Vaughan: You're right that there are deficiencies in the water safety inspection system in airports, and we have noted that in our report.

Mr. Christian Ouellet: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Ms. Duncan, the floor is yours.

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's nice to see you. Thank you for coming to meet with us again. I appreciated the briefing you provided previously. I thought we had a good dialogue then, and some follow-up.

I have a perspective probably slightly at variance from that of my colleague next to me. I think the federal government is failing to assert the jurisdiction it does have. The thing that troubles me is that in the past two excellent audits that your office did, the federal government has come back with increasingly narrow responses. Then what has happened is that the follow-up audits are on those increasingly narrow responses.

In your office's audit of 2005, before you came there, there was a recommendation that the federal government look towards an overall federal water framework. The federal government has a lot more jurisdiction and responsibility over water than is contained in the federal guidelines document. I noticed in your opening comments, Mr. Vaughan, that you specifically say: "The federal government is responsible for the development of the science-based Guidelines for Canadian Drinking Water Quality." In fact, the federal government is responsible for the development of safe drinking water, period—not necessarily by guideline. They have chosen to do it by guideline.

That is an issue on which, in review after review over the last 35 years—and I've participated in many of them—the same recommendation comes down every time, including lately from the Gordon Water Group, saying that it is time to have some federal water standards.

I wonder whether you can comment on that. Your office has done excellent audits on aboriginal safe drinking water. You have done audits a number of times over on different aspects of safe drinking water in Canada. What has fallen between the cracks is the overall coordination and consensus within the federal regime of responsibility for regulating safe drinking water, including at tap and at treatment, and the source water. What I see as falling through the cracks is protection of the source water, which keeps down the costs to municipalities, first nations, or small communities to treat and provide safe drinking water.

Could you briefly comment on this movement away from actually addressing the bigger issue?

I can throw at you one more thing that you might comment on. It's a provision that troubles me that is never acted on. In the Canadian Environmental Protection Act there is a mandatory duty laid upon the federal Minister of Health to take action and to look into any situation upon which information has come to her attention that there may be a connection between a health impact and toxins. That's a mandatory duty. Among all of these statutes there is jurisdictionally quite a big mandate, and yet we don't seem to be moving this forward. I wonder whether you could comment on whether, despite seeing the department reporting on some of the narrow recommendations, we are moving forward or not on the bigger issue of what the federal responsibility and mandate are and, if we're not getting the cooperation of the provinces, on what the federal government can do to move this agenda forward.

I'm sorry, that's a big question.

● (0930)

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Yes, and thank you very much.

As the previous member pointed out, we note in the report that our understanding.... And you're right, in the context of the programs we looked at, the starting point was that this is a shared responsibility and that the provinces as well as municipalities have an important jurisdictional responsibility, specifically on tap water.

As for general trends, this is something I wouldn't have a perspective on. It may also be touching on policy-related areas.

The report we've just tabled is by definition a narrow report because the terms of follow-up reports are to follow up on what was addressed in the previous report, which would be a full audit. We intentionally try to be as specific as possible, in terms of what the responses were to the recommendations that had been made. Are they satisfactory? Are they unsatisfactory? Are there new problems being addressed?

Finally, in terms of the triggering mechanism, of attention being brought to the Minister of Health, one of the examples we looked at in the bottled water section—these are areas of shared responsibility between Health Canada and CFIA—in the course of this audit was the number of inspections and whether there are triggering mechanisms that go into place, including obviously recalls if there is significant human health risk posed in this.

Given this area's complexity, general trends and responsibility may fall on the policy side, which we generally don't comment on.

Ms. Linda Duncan: I understand that, but if we're looking at federal jurisdiction over water and responsibility, we have different regimes for first nations people and different regimes for setting guidelines for the rest of us, and for first nations. It's done by contribution agreement. So if you don't have a contribution agreement, you have no standards.

I know your office has done excellent reports and recommendations previously and I understand that federal Indian Affairs is now moving forward with some kind of regime, but it would seem to me there's a need for somebody—and probably your office would be one appropriate body to do that—to look across DND lands and

facilities, other federal facilities, Indians lands, Indian peoples' water sources, trans-boundary issues, and so on.

We had a brief discussion at the briefing, talking about water from a tap and bottled water, but in between I've discovered in the course of my research that a lot of rural communities are provided water by container and some of those communities are first nation, Métis, and non-first nation, and the regulation is falling through the cracks. So I don't think it's that easy to draw the line in the sand and say, okay, the feds will just do these guidelines and the municipalities will look after everything else, because in northern Canada, the northern prairies, everything is falling through the cracks. In many cases, the provincial officials are trying to fill in the gaps, even though they may not have jurisdiction.

In your previous report, on that paragraph 4.61, there is the recommendation, in collaboration with other federal departments and agencies, to actually work on the federal water framework, as Mr. McGuinty has mentioned. I think given the fact that there are little bits and pieces of improvement but not overall improvement, it's really important to do a thorough audit on that again and maybe ferret out the good stuff that's going on and where there are cracks.

● (0935)

The Chair: Mr. Vaughan.

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Chair, thank you very much. I have just three quick points.

First, you mentioned the 2005 first nations audit. I just want to say the office took those findings extremely seriously. The findings were unacceptable, given the level of risk of water quality in first nations. I mentioned a couple of weeks ago that we're planning on doing a follow-up to that as a stand-alone, given the significance.

As for the second one, the framework issue, I want to mention again that it's something we'll be looking at: more general issues of federal management of water, including upstream and the relationship between upstream and downstream in 2010. Then finally, we're also gearing up to look at a related issue, which is climate adaptation, and we know that one of the most important conduits of climate change impacts will be water, either through increased precipitation or increased drought. So that's also planned for 2010.

Thank you for your suggestions on potential follow-up issues related to this.

The Chair: Thank you. Mr. Warawa.

Mr. Mark Warawa (Langley, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Commissioner, for being here.

I want to first respond to some questioning from Mr. McGuinty. When we took over as government in 2006, we found we had inherited an environmental mess. Yes, Walkerton did happen under the previous government's watch. We inherited federal infrastructure neglect, over a decade of neglect, and Mr. Arseneault is quite right that we have to be focused, and our focus was on site decontamination. I had the honour of announcing the funding for the cleanup of the Sydney tar ponds and flew back.

In the last three years I believe we have accomplished a lot. Your report focused on water and air. I was quite happy that you started off by saying that environmental issues are fundamental to life, and you're absolutely right. The David Suzuki Foundation did a report a couple of years ago that elaborated on the importance of a clean environment that is sustainable. Environmental pollution in our water, in our land, in our air, is a direct causal factor in about one in twelve deaths, prematurely ending our lives and costing our health system billions of dollars every year. There's an importance to making sure we have a cleaner environment, and our government has been committed to that since becoming government three years ago.

Your report says you found satisfactory progress. In your last report regarding the recommendations of 2005, you reported that Health Canada was slow to develop and review the guidelines for Canadian drinking water quality. At the time there was a backlog of about 50 guidelines, potentially in need of updating to reflect current science. You've reported that we have made satisfactory progress in both the environmental issues, water and air.

I want to focus on the consultation process. You've elaborated a little bit on that for both water and air, and you said the consultation that was done was a model of how future progress could be made. Could you elaborate on the consultation, who we consulted, and why it would be a model? Also, could you elaborate on the costs incurred by the departments to successfully move forward in addressing these challenges? So consultation and cost.

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Great. Thank you very much.

Let me go first to the consultations. You're absolutely right, we've said in the development of the air quality health index that this was an example of looking at the expertise of non-governmental organizations across Canada, as well as consultations with the provinces and consultations with urban areas. There were, I believe, 30 independent non-governmental organizations consulted. I think it just underscores that among the best recipients or guardians of environmental information are grassroots organizations. These are people who get up every day and work hard on this. I think we went out of our way to note this because this was an example of actually moving towards a better outcome.

In terms of the different groups, I'll ask Mr. Morse, but there were both national as well as local NGOs. We can provide you that list.

As for the second one, in terms of the cost incurred in the consultative process, I don't have that information here. I'm not sure whether the audit team asked the department in the process of that, but we can send that information to you in a follow-up letter, Mr. Chair.

Paul.

● (0940)

Mr. Paul Morse: Thank you.

In our report, we don't name all the groups. I guess I'd have to get a list. There were some municipalities and obviously the nine provinces and the territories. Originally Alberta was part of it but dropped out. So it was originally ten and then nine provinces, and as Mr. Vaughan said, a number of groups were consulted.

Also, one of the things we mention here is that some of the criteria we used were the Treasury Board Secretariat of Canada guidelines for effective regulatory consultations. We looked at those guidelines and the way it was done in this case. We found that what was done matched those guidelines very well. So those guidelines are already there, not necessarily for...because this is not a regulatory exercise. Nevertheless, they applied pretty well, and they were followed. With the exception of Alberta, which had some reservations about it, all concerned seemed quite satisfied with it and felt it was very worthwhile.

When it comes to the cost, I don't think anyone actually costed that exercise, what it would have cost. We certainly don't have any figures on that.

Mr. Mark Warawa: So consultation with water was largely focused on the provincial and territorial consultation. Is that correct?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Exactly. With the water consultation, say on the development of the guidelines, this would involve, as I mentioned... I mean, there's a very, very strong federal-provincial committee in place on ensuring that the guidelines are up to date, so the consultations are with all the provinces. In addition, Health Canada draws on input from, for example, the World Health Organization and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. There are other groups involved as well, including municipalities, in ensuring that the guidelines are up to date.

Mr. Mark Warawa: The consultation process took place from when to when?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: On the guidelines, the consultation is ongoing. As I mentioned in the opening statement, there are 120 different contaminants, but that is not a fixed list. If there's a new risk or new information on toxicity data or other data that comes in, the list either would increase or some things would be dropped if there's a problem that's addressed. This is an ongoing exercise that happens virtually every week somewhere in the country.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Are the provinces and NGOs happy with this consultation?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: My understanding, both from the air quality health index as well as the development of the guidelines.... We didn't go back, as part of the audit process, to interview non-governmental organizations and industry associations as well, but everything we've heard from the departments as well as other partners has been that this was a very effective consultation. So we'd assume they're satisfied with the process.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Your report, at page 42, says that most participants said they were satisfied with the consultation process.

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Excuse me, on the air quality health index, you're right. I'm talking about the guidelines for the water.

For the AQHI, as Mr. Morse mentioned, they did follow the Treasury Board process of getting feedback. Actually, they came back and said this was a really, really good example. They were highly satisfied with the consultative process.

Mr. Mark Warawa: That's good to hear. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to go to the five-minute round.

Mr. Trudeau, will you lead us off?

Mr. Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Lib.): Thank you.

Commissioner Vaughan, I'd like to talk a bit about bottled water now. Bottled water is a federal area of jurisdiction and responsibility because of the interprovincial nature of it. Bottled water is monitored both by CFIA and Health Canada. The use of bottled water has definitely been on the rise for the past decade or so.

I'm a little concerned that the food and drug regulations only date back to 1973, with some modifications in the 1980s. Can you talk a bit about the guidelines for Canadian drinking water quality and why they don't apply to bottled water?

• (0945)

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Thank you very much.

First of all, as you noted, the consumption of bottled water has actually been skyrocketing, and we had a graph on that.

We noted in the report, and you're absolutely correct, that the regulations covering bottled water can basically be traced back 35 years. There has been some updating, but we've said in one of the recommendations that those regulations, in order to be up to date, should take into account the national guidelines that were developed by Health Canada. That's one of the recommendations we've made to this report.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: Take into account or follow the guidelines for Canadian drinking water quality?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: I think it's the latter, actually. You're correct.

What we found in the report is that there was a lack of clarity on who's responsible in terms of roles and responsibilities. The guidelines served as the basis for what CFIA would be specifically looking at in terms of trace residue or contaminants in bottled water.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: Are municipal water supplies required to adhere to the guidelines for Canadian drinking water quality?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: No. As the honourable member previously mentioned, I think the guidelines are essentially normative standards.

They're set up as normative standards. There are some provinces that adopt them wholesale and put them in the legislation, and other provinces take some parts and others, but they remain normative standards. They're guidelines. From my understanding, the municipalities would be looking at the provinces to say what the acceptable norms are.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: Then even in terms of federal institutions, say Parks Canada or Corrections, is it up to those institutions to see whether they adhere to these guidelines?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: No, and thanks for the question.

The second part of it is that the federal institutions have a responsibility to comply with the guidelines. The recommendation from a 2005 audit, as Monsieur Arsenault had mentioned...we've said they found there were gaps in those institutions that are under direct federal responsibility; for example, military bases and others. So for those, Health Canada produced what's called a central guidance. That central guidance, one, is anchored to the national guidelines, but two, provides the basis for the inspections of the installations and assets under federal responsibility.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: To return for a moment to bottled water, Health Canada has been looking for the past seven years at the guidelines. Where are we on that?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: It's getting up on eight years now, yes.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: Okay. There's a mention of a March 31 deadline for publishing a report, which was three weeks ago. Have they published a report on their action on that?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: We looked on March 31 and there was nothing on their site. We called the department, and they said it would be any moment. I didn't look this morning, but they did not meet the deadline they set.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: So Health Canada is not living up to its obligations to protect or to revise the food and drug regulations related to bottled water. Did you set that timeline of March 31 or did they?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: No, they set that timeline. That was a commitment they made in their response to the 2005 audit and then in response to this audit as well.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: And they failed to live up to it.

Mr. Scott Vaughan: They missed their own deadline, yes.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: As for the difference between bottled water that is treated tap water and water that is classified as spring water, is there any difference in the application of the guidelines or of the jurisdiction issues around those?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: I'll defer to Monsieur Arsenault on that, but I believe the guidelines cover all categories. I think there are four or five categories of bottled water, and they don't differentiate in terms of acceptable levels of trace contaminants within the bottled water.

• (0950)

Mr. Richard Arsenault: That's the answer.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Mr. Woodworth.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth (Kitchener Centre, CPC): Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Vaughan, Mr. Morse, and Mr. Arseneault, for being here. And thank you particularly because in reading this report, I really see credit being given to the hard-working men and women who represent Canadians in the environment department. As you know, often my concern with audit reports is to be sure the front-line people who actually do this work get credit, and so I was very happy to see the positive comments in your reports today.

There are three areas I want to try to cover in the four minutes and 35 seconds I have left. One of them is this. Do I understand correctly that in just the last three years, under the issue of safety of drinking water, the government has in fact reviewed or revised 53 guidelines? Is that correct?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: That is correct, yes.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: And do I understand correctly that in the 13 years of the previous government, there was a backlog of 50 guidelines that had been neither reviewed nor updated? Am I correct about that?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: I think the backlog we noted was that some of the guidelines had not been reviewed in up to 15 years.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Yes, and so that has to include the 13 years of the previous government, I'm presuming.

I am just astounded by that, because the public relations battle that has been waged suggests the previous government was doing a fine job in environmental matters. And it seems to me those two facts alone constitute the best example I can give people of the difference between a government that actually gets things done and a government that only talks about getting things done.

The second issue I wanted to ask about was regarding the air quality index. As I understand it, there were commitments first made at the 2001 Toronto smog summit regarding the air quality index. Is that correct?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Yes.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: As I read your report, not much if anything was done until there were some petitions presented in 2002 and 2003. Is that correct?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: I believe the work began in 2002, so the petitions did not so much trigger the development of the index as actually ask about the status of the index.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: The only work that I could see in your report prior to 2006 was, first of all, an all-important public opinion survey that determined that Canadians were concerned about air quality. And then there was a 2003 workshop and a 2005 peer review. Did I miss anything? That's about it?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Those are the main components. Yes.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Strictly from an audit point of view, can you tell me whether you consider that degree of effort to be satisfactory progress between 2001 and 2006?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Let me turn this over to Mr. Morse.

Let me just say on the peer review process that these take time.

On the other two components you had mentioned, I wouldn't comment on whether or not they were quick.

On the peer review process, these are inherently complicated because they're dealing with different scientific weightings. And actually, this was a complicated process. But there were other things—

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: My question was directed not only to the peer review process but more to the government response between 2001 and 2005. We often see from your office, as auditor, comments about whether there was satisfactory progress. I'm just wondering if you consider that satisfactory progress was made on the 2001 commitment between 2001 and 2006.

Mr. Scott Vaughan: I'll let Mr. Morse reply.

Mr. Paul Morse: Thanks for the question.

Our report doesn't break it down that way. When we looked at it, we said that overall there was satisfactory progress. As Mr. Vaughan was saying, there was quite a bit of scientific work that had to be done to look at the old method of measurement that was based on 1979 methodology in regard to what would be the best way to go forward, what pollutants should be looked at and whether they could be looked at in combination.... There was a lot of scientific work done, papers were published, and so on.

Overall, it seemed to us that satisfactory progress was being made. People were following the scientific method. The consultation, according to the criteria we had, was following the Treasury Board guidelines. So I wouldn't want to break it down and say, in 2001 did they do enough, and in 2002...? I don't think that would be fair at this point.

●(0955)

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: I'll apologize a little bit to you, because I can understand why you wouldn't want to break it down. But I certainly do, and I'll approach it from a different point of view.

I noticed in your report there was reference to a commitment of \$30 million in July 2007 on the issue of the air quality index. And I didn't see anything about any previous financial commitment. Am I correct that the \$30 million was the first discrete commitment of funding by either the previous government or this government in response to the 2001 commitment?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Thanks for that question.

I think there was obviously a budget in the development of it, but it was quite a bit less, and it was bundled in with other programs. So the announcement in 2007 of \$30 million was a significant commitment to move the air quality health index forward. It also included some other activities.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: I'm out of time. I'll leave my other two questions for another day.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Monsieur Ouellet.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Christian Ouellet: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to continue along the lines of what I was saying earlier and talk about navigation on waterways that supply drinking water. This is entirely a matter of federal jurisdiction.

I want to point out that 80% of the population of my riding draws its water from various waterways on which there is navigation. The majority of the population is affected by this situation, not the minority. There are no regulations or statutes in Canada including a standard on oil or gasoline discharges into drinking water attributable to motor boats.

Once again I go back to the fact that we're talking about drinking water here. Tetraethyl carbons present in drinking water are very hard to detect, highly carcinogenic and found in tap water. These discharges are attributable to boats.

Canada is one of the only developed countries that has not set a standard for oil and gasoline discharges from boats navigating on waterways containing drinking water. The Conservatives have been in power for three years, but they have not yet introduced a bill on this matter and aren't proposing any either. When you look at others, you also have to look at yourself.

Do you take this factor into account when you assess the quality of drinking water in Canada?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: I'm going to hand over to Mr. Arseneault in a moment.

We examined certain matters included in this chapter. As for determining whether there is a national system for guaranteeing water quality, I will say that there is an obligation, regulations. We noted in the report that there were deficiencies. With respect to boats, we were unable to identify any inspection system designed to ensure water quality on board boats. In that sense, you're right.

If I understood correctly, the federal government has a responsibility for boats travelling from province to province, within Canada, or that travel outside Canada. In the 2005 report, we noted that there were serious problems regarding inspection and penalties imposed in the case of boats that did not pass inspections. We noted that there were major problems.

Mr. Christian Ouellet: If I understand correctly, you're telling us about discharges from large boats. However, there are no regulations in effect for small boats and pleasure boats. And yet they produce discharges. You are no doubt aware that one part of gasoline contaminates one million parts of water. That's enormous. If you don't check what there is at the source, how do you go about assessing what there is at the end? Are you recommending that the government conduct this follow-up?

Mr. Richard Arseneault: We didn't study that question as part of this audit. What interested us was whether the drinking water provided in boats carrying passengers met Canadian standards. We didn't check to see whether boats were discharging pollutants into the water. That would be the subject of another audit.

Mr. Christian Ouellet: Do you think you will eventually look into this matter?

Mr. Richard Arseneault: We want to study the issue of water resource management at the federal level in Canada. We'll have to decide exactly what we want to examine. For the moment, I can't tell you what that will be. We could raise that issue.

• (1000)

Mr. Scott Vaughan: I'd simply like to state that we intend to conduct an audit on the problem of contamination caused by boats and water craft. That's planned for 2010-2011.

What you're suggesting is very useful to us. Obviously, as regards discharges from smaller boats in particular, there are sources of contamination, but the problem is that it's hard to establish a monitoring and inspection system in that case.

Mr. Christian Ouellet: The fact remains that the problem is being left to the provinces and municipalities and they are being asked to purify their water. It isn't feasible. It's like heavy metals: they are very hard to extract.

Do I have a little time left, Mr. Chairman?

[English]

The Chair: Sorry.

[Translation]

Mr. Christian Ouellet: Do I have a little time left?

The Chair: Just a little time.

Mr. Christian Ouellet: For a very brief question.

Every citizen, organization or company of a country incurs a real debt to the environment by reason of the fact that they use non-renewable resources.

Do you think that, in a sustainable development management context, that debt incurred by each of us should be taken into consideration by the government? Are you making any recommendations into that effect?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: You said that all Canadians should have access to high-quality water—

Mr. Christian Ouellet: Regardless of the resource we are talking about, we are still drawing on the environment.

Mr. Scott Vaughan: The government is developing sustainable development systems. The purpose of the work underway is to develop a federal strategy for dealing with air and water quality and for integrating the environment system into tax policy, transportation and industry.

In my opinion, this is an opportunity to advance the idea of sustainable development. The idea isn't just to identify problems, but also to establish an overview that will enable the government to move forward in that direction. I think that strategy will be a topic of dialogue for the committee in the coming months.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[English]

Mr. Calkins.

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Wetaskiwin, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll be asking a few questions, and if I have any time left over, I'll be sharing that time with Mr. Woodworth.

First of all, I'd like to say thank you very much for being here today. One of the questions I have is a follow-up on the lead-off questions Mr. McGuinty posed, to which I heard two conflicting answers. I would like some clarification on this.

Mr. McGuinty asked whether or not progress had been made on the overall water framework. I heard Mr. Arseneault say there was not enough of a program left to audit, and I heard you, Mr. Vaughan, say there was nothing there. Can I get some clarification, please? Is there something there, or is there just not anything there that is worthy of an audit yet? To me, those are two completely different and conflicting answers.

Mr. Scott Vaughan: I apologize if we gave conflicting answers.

I'll ask Mr. Arseneault to clarify, but my understanding, coming into the office last summer, was that when we looked at the status of the framework, there had been announcements about the framework or a federal strategy related to water, but there was not enough there to be the basis of an audit. There have been commitments from different ministers to move this forward. We would audit programs, and we would audit whether there was evidence of programs and management systems in place. There wasn't enough there for the basis of an audit.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Thank you very much.

Before I came to this place in 2006, it seemed to me there were quite frequent media reports, and we had massive evacuations of first nations reserves. Kashechewan comes to mind. I didn't see anything in your report here that dealt specifically with it. I know you've scoped it out, and you've looked at Parks Canada, and you've looked at the federal penitentiaries, and so on. I'm just wondering if you can elaborate. When do you plan on following up with a report? To my recollection, since 2006 there haven't been any evacuations of any first nations reserves. There is certainly a plan in place to deal with first nations drinking water, which scopes out three different priority levels to deal with or address drinking water quality issues on first nations reserves.

Can you update this committee as to when we might expect a report on the status of that work?

• (1005)

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Thank you for the question.

As I mentioned at the beginning, we're looking at this right now. I wish I could give you a specific date. The general lead-up time for these audits is between 16 and 17 months, but given the importance of this issue as well as the seriousness of the findings in the 2005 report, with my colleagues in another part of the OAG, I'm looking at something within the next two years. In the course of this audit, we did not look at whether there were any trends we could discern from the 2005 report.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Thank you.

I'd like to share the rest of my time with Mr. Woodworth, please.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Thank you very much.

Going back to the air quality index, as I understand it, the problem with the previous situation is that some provinces and some municipalities would have their own indices, and they wouldn't necessarily all be consistent. So do I understand correctly that the project the federal government is now undertaking is to take a leading role to bring some uniformity across the country? Is that correct?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: That's absolutely correct. The information you would get in Newfoundland and in Saskatchewan and British Columbia would be using the same indices.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: And I think that's a very important job for the federal government to be doing.

The second thing I want to understand is with regard to the pilot projects. It indicates there are three completed pilot projects. Are there more pilot projects going on under the air quality index?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Thank you.

The pilot project phase of the index has now been completed, and there is now a rollout, which is now covering virtually all provinces. In British Columbia there are now 14 different communities. It's in place now here in Ottawa and in the Outaouais, so there's actually a national rollout.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Excellent. So it's going ahead pretty quickly, then. Is that correct?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Yes, sir.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: And those pilot projects obviously must have been highly successful. Is that correct?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: They were highly successful. The pilot project in Nova Scotia was tried in a couple of communities, and the Nova Scotia government came back and said they'd like to apply it across the province.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: And it seems to me the strategy of putting these in place in the large centres is a good, intelligent, first-things-first approach where the largest number of people are and where perhaps the greatest number of pollutants arise. Is that a sound assumption on my part?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: That would be a sound assumption.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Excellent.

I have one last thing I want to ask you about. As you know, I've been developing an interest in the audit process, and it would be really helpful for me to know, taking this air quality index as an example, how much money it has cost the government to come up with this program. Do you have any way to assess the benefits for us? In other words, can you help me perform a cost-benefit analysis beyond just the obvious political calculation that clean air is good? What is the cost of this program, and how do we assess the benefits?

Thank you.

Mr. Scott Vaughan: I'll ask Mr. Morse, who's an experienced auditor on this. But in terms of assessing the cost and benefits, I think the report notes that there are 2,400 deaths caused by short-term acute respiratory illness related to exposure to high levels of pollution. How you calculate those in terms of values is difficult, but clearly, any life that is saved or any sickness that is avoided is good public policy.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Do we have data on reductions?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Well, I think it's probably too early to go back and look at it, but it's something maybe to follow up. Statistics Canada keeps data in terms of respiratory illnesses, premature deaths, and others. So we'll take note of that, and if we're going to do a follow-up, we'll try to see whether we can tease this information out.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: And the cost?

I'm sorry, I'm out of time. Thank you.

The Chair: Just a quick response, Mr. Morse.

Mr. Paul Morse: I just want to find the paragraph, but I believe that when we looked at it there had been about \$13 million spent on it so far from the federal side.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: There was a \$30 million budget commitment.

Mr. Paul Morse: Yes, that's going forward.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Excellent. Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Rota, the floor is yours.

Mr. Anthony Rota (Nipissing—Timiskaming, Lib.): It will be Mr. Trudeau.

The Chair: You're going to share your time. Okay.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: Thank you.

Again, going back to bottled water, I'd like to follow up a little bit on the risks associated with bottled water. I know there were a number of studies—and you refer to it in the audit, actually. The food safety science committee looks at industrialized countries and results around bottled water. There have been a number of troubling studies out of the United States that talk about the amount of bottled water that is less safe than comparable municipal drinking water standards.

Does that apply? Have there been similar findings in Canada?

• (1010)

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Let me turn to Mr. Arseneault on it, please.

Mr. Richard Arseneault: As we mentioned in the chapter, there is a science committee that looks at all the information that is available, including inspection results from the CFIA, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. They've done risk assessments, and the conclusions are that it's low risk. Obviously it's relative to other food, like meat products and all that. Bottled water, like many things we buy in the grocery store, is low risk; therefore, the level of effort of inspection reflects that. But the results they're obtaining through their studies are confirming that bottled water remains a low risk. They haven't found major problems in bottled water in Canada.

Now, is their sampling sufficient? That's a big question that we did not look at because the CFIA's approach to monitoring safety of food is a big thing. All food is included, and they decide on priorities with the resources they have. But based on the sampling they've done, the results confirm that it is a low-risk food.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: Now, on the evaluation and the designation of something as “low risk”, obviously, sliced meat products are a considerably higher risk than bottled water. But does it take into account the amount of bottled water purchased? The commissioner used the word “skyrocketing” for the amount of bottled water intakes. Obviously, something that is low risk and not particularly largely used or distributed is genuinely low risk. In their evaluation, do you know if they took into account the amount of bottled water consumed, and therefore the concerns around toxins and contaminants that may have been identified in the guidelines for Canadian

drinking water quality, but are not particularly highlighted in the existing regulations for bottled water?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: I'll defer to Mr. Arseneault.

If you look at it one way, in terms of potential exposure levels and the reason that the audit team included bottled water in this follow-up, which wasn't in the 2005 report, it's exactly because Canadians are consuming more. In terms of their risk assessment, they'll look at total level of consumption and then total level of potential exposure to different contaminants that could exist. So that part of it is, yes, you would look at whether or not there's increased supply or increased demand for this. Then they would take it into account in how much they're going to be focusing on levels of inspection to provide an assurance on whether the right risk level is indeed correct, because the stakes get higher if the consumption is higher, obviously.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: As we've talked about before, federal agencies aren't responsible for municipal water supplies. But I'd be curious to know, if you can perhaps give me this assessment, the relative safety of your average municipal water supply versus your average bottled water. Or is that something you've looked at?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: No, we did not compare tap water to bottled water in terms of whether there is some general trend that one way is safer than others. I mean, we do know, as I mentioned when we launched this report, that the Canadian Medical Association has said that at any given time there are between 1,500 and 2,000 boil advisories across Canada for municipal drinking water. There are problems. We know this.

I might just add that in the course of the audit, when we were doing this, CFIA said that they did 78 inspections of bottled water facilities across Canada, including both domestic bottlers and imported bottlers. From that, they didn't find anything that would change their ranking of this being low risk. But as a result of those 78 inspections, they did announce two recalls. We noted in the report that those were not class one—potential or urgent problems for human health—but there were administrative or other paperwork issues that could hide some problems if not done correctly.

• (1015)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Trudeau.

I want to follow up a little bit on this idea of bottled water. In your report, one of the recommendations is that not enough has been done to monitor water quality on air carriers, including regional carriers.

Actually, we had a discussion yesterday that most regional carriers serve bottled water. So if air carriers are not serving potable water but are serving bottled water, then maybe we've already got this covered on the bottled water side.

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Thank you, Mr. Chair. That's a question we had when the team was moving forward on this.

I think you're right, if it's a smaller aircraft, they generally will not have a galley facility, and therefore, when people are getting something to drink, it's from bottled water. The question we posed is whether the government knows the regulated population. They said they've made good progress on the 13 largest carriers in Canada. We have asked them for the total number of carriers and how many of those smaller carriers would be serving water from a galley.

That's what they yet do not know, and that's why we've said there are some gaps.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Watson, the floor is yours.

Mr. Jeff Watson (Essex, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the environment commissioner and to his officials for appearing before committee.

I will go right to a sentence from your opening statement: "In 2005, we observed that Health Canada had stopped all of its routine inspections of drinking water quality on commercial passenger aircraft." Your statement is not specific as to when those inspections were ceased—or when they were resumed, for that matter. Do we have a more specific timeline as to when those were stopped and when they were resumed?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: I can get you the specific date, but I believe they ceased around 1995 and resumed in 2006.

Mr. Jeff Watson: I would like you to provide a follow-up and isolate for the committee when those inspections were in fact stopped, if you would.

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Yes.

Mr. Jeff Watson: Further, could you describe for the committee the improvements that have been made in implementing the Health Canada guidelines for Canadian drinking water quality in national parks and historic sites since your original work in 2005?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: I'll let Mr. Arseneault elaborate, but I will say that when we looked at what Parks Canada was doing—this was important, because 22 million visitors each year go to different facilities—we said that Parks Canada had a system in place that actually was aligned with the central guidelines developed by Health Canada. They had good systems in place in order to provide assurance that the drinking water available at those facilities was in accordance with assuring the safety of drinking water.

Mr. Richard Arseneault: In response to the question, when we visited some of these sites, we also asked for specific data to show us what they were doing. What they were doing aligned very well with the guidance issued by Health Canada in late 2005, after our audit. Their procedures also corresponded very well with the central guidance that Health Canada issued. That's why we concluded, based on the sample we looked at, that Parks Canada was doing a good job.

When we looked at Correctional Services, we saw that there were some issues; they hadn't fully updated their guidance.

Mr. Jeff Watson: I detect that's a bit of a trend with Parks Canada in a number of areas, as we've seen them audited or dealing with other issues.

Let me move to the air quality health index. I think you referred to the consultation process for the development of the AQHI as a sort of model for other programs. Could you elaborate on that? Secondly, did you contemplate where else that type of model could be applied?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Thank you.

As Mr. Morris has noted, there are different guidelines from Treasury Board and elsewhere on what effective consultations are. We found that this program both met and exceeded those guidelines. It sought the views of different stakeholders, including non-governmental and private sector associations. It engaged provinces, municipalities, and territories. So in developing a program that will be used by the public, getting as much public input into the development of that program and index is an extremely important step. That's why we went out of our way to denote this.

On how a similar process could be used, you may want to ask Environment Canada or other departments. Clearly there are programs that are moving all the time, and I very strongly believe that seeking meaningful public participation and public input in this program only makes for a better program in the end.

• (1020)

Mr. Jeff Watson: I ask about that because there must have been some contemplation that it should be applied elsewhere. You say it's a model, so would you like to see that model expanded for use elsewhere?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: I can name specific programs under way that are seeking scientific input. They're actually looking at getting the resources of public organizations. You could go through the gamut of biodiversity strategies, climate adaptation policies, water responsibilities, and others, and each one of those would have a consultative process of some sort in place.

Mr. Jeff Watson: I want to ask an interesting question. I've now been on this committee for nearly five years. One of the things I've noticed in very recent responses from departments to recommendations is that timelines are being issued for certain actions, with general expectations of when they expect to deliver on something. I'm not sure I recall seeing that in reports four or five years ago. I don't know if that's a trend you've discerned or not.

You may or may not want to speculate on that. I'll leave it for the record if you don't.

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Okay.

Mr. Paul Morse: In the past year our office has issued a new guide for entity relations. The Auditor General had discussions with the Secretary of the Treasury Board and they agreed, with some other deputy ministers and so on, to include in this guide that recommendations from our office be responded to in that way. That will definitely make it easier for us to follow up on status reports, and it will make it easier for you to call them to account if you bring them to a committee hearing.

Mr. Jeff Watson: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Braid.

Mr. Peter Braid (Kitchener—Waterloo, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, Commissioner Vaughan, Mr. Morse, and Mr. Arseneault, for being here this morning and giving us this very thorough report highlighting the progress that the government is making on the safety of drinking water and on the air quality health index.

Starting with the safety of drinking water, you indicated in the report that under the previous government, in 2005 there was a backlog of 50 guidelines that needed to be cleared. Significant progress has been made on clearing that backlog, but how many are left to be reviewed?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: We have actually gone out of our way not to say a backlog, but I think there are over 50 that have yet to be reviewed. As important as clearing the backlog, though, is the need to have a system in place in order to reveal the priorities that the department has in place. What Health Canada has said is, first, they've cleared the backlog, and second, they've set up a priority with a schedule. So what they are committed to do is to look at 30 before 2011, which is actually an accelerated timetable. That would be based on risk, so the most important ones will be addressed between now and 2011.

Mr. Peter Braid: Excellent. Thank you for that clarification.

With respect to the inspection of drinking water on commercial passenger aircraft, the monitoring of drinking water on passenger aircraft was ceased under the previous government. It has since been resumed. You go on to indicate, however, that current coverage still remains incomplete. Could you help me to understand what work still needs to be done to close that gap?

•(1025)

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Thank you.

There are three. The first one, as the chair mentioned, is smaller carriers. That would simply be to say, does the department know the extent of the regulated population? The second one would be foreign carriers landing in Canadian airports and departing from Canada, which would then presumably include Canadian passengers. They are not all subject to inspections. Third would be the airports themselves, which are also under federal responsibility, for which we've noted that there seems not to be a systematic inspection system in place. That would be for food services going onto the airplanes for which water may then pose a potential risk. We're not saying there are risks; we're saying that there should be a system and inspection in place.

Those would be the three.

Mr. Peter Braid: Thank you very much.

Are you aware of any work under way at Health Canada with respect to addressing one or all of these three areas?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Let me ask Monsieur Arseneault to follow up on this.

Mr. Richard Arseneault: We made a recommendation, and the department agreed with the recommendation and is working on it, but we don't know what they've done recently. However, they agreed

with us that there was a gap and that they were going to work toward filling that gap over time.

Mr. Peter Braid: Very good, thank you.

Finally, under the category of the safety of drinking water and the revision of the food and drugs regulations, you indicate that those need to be updated to reference the guidelines for drinking water. Is that simply an updating process, a communications process? What is involved? What needs to be achieved there?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: I am sure Health Canada and CFIA would probably be better placed in terms of how complex this is, but it is fairly complex in terms of the inclusion of the guidelines, actually. There are thresholds involved, so it would be a complicated process. It's not a matter of simply taking a document and then including it within the existing regulations.

Mr. Peter Braid: Do you have any sense about how long that process may take, or the steps involved?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: As one of the honourable members said, they've made a commitment now for seven, coming up to eight years. We understand from Health Canada that they will soon make an announcement on moving the process forward, but it wouldn't be for me to say when that would actually take place.

Mr. Peter Braid: Moving now to the air quality health index, I have a final question here. I want to confirm that you see good progress being made with respect to the short-term goal to have coverage for cities over 100,000 by 2011. Is that the case?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Yes, absolutely.

Mr. Peter Braid: And you are continuing to monitor that closely.

Mr. Scott Vaughan: No. We finished this audit itself. We always go back and look at whether we would follow up, but we wouldn't monitor a program after we've issued an audit. But we may go back to look at this as a future follow-up on it.

Mr. Peter Braid: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Braid. Your time has expired.

We do have a notice of motion on our agenda. I'd like to save 15 minutes at the end of the meeting for this, so for our third round I want to go to a four-minute round, if that's okay with committee members.

With that, for four minutes, Mr. McGuinty on this final round.

Mr. David McGuinty: It is Mr. Scarpaleggia.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.): I welcome you, Commissioner. Or you should be welcoming me, I guess, since I came in a bit late today.

I have a quick question about water on commercial passenger aircraft. A couple of years ago I read that Health Canada had responsibility for monitoring the quality of this water, but when I brought it up with a pilot friend of mine, he said there was really no need because they use bottled water in every instance.

I am unclear as to why there's a federal role in this, and whether there is a real need for a federal role. Are they all using bottled water? Whenever I'm on a plane I always get bottled water poured out of a big bottle, so I'm interested in your comments on that.

I also read in your report that there were problems in obtaining the cooperation of the airlines in terms of negotiating some kind of standard or monitoring procedure. I am hoping you can elaborate on this issue.

• (1030)

Mr. Scott Vaughan: As for the water served on aircraft, my understanding is that things like coffee and tea would come from a tank. These tanks are occasionally flushed out. My brother is a pilot on an airline. Sometimes they're flushed and sometimes they're not. There have been inspections in which they found traces of E. coli as well as other microbacterial residue. Also, people will use tap water in washrooms even though there's a sign saying non-potable water. So those are two examples: the tanks for coffee and tea, and water used where it shouldn't be.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: Even though it says not to drink the water in the washroom, people still do it. I'm wondering at what point the federal responsibility ends. If people don't follow signs, then I wonder if there's a federal responsibility. You said in your report that it's a slow process to negotiate with the airlines on the water quality in the tanks for coffee and tea.

Mr. Scott Vaughan: The reason the inspection program ceased in the mid-nineties was that there was a new policy of a cost recovery. It was uncertain whether inspections would be paid for by the airlines or the government. The negotiations went back and forth. My understanding now is that inspection costs are borne by the federal government.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: Are the inspections going ahead as they should at this moment? Have the problems been resolved?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: We said that there was a gap in 2005. There is now a system in place. The system is based on inspections, and the problem looks like it's resolved for the major carriers, the 13 largest carriers in Canada.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: How frequent are the inspections? We saw that only 6% of plants for bottled water were being inspected, and that they were rather infrequent. Is there a follow-up? Is there a standard for the frequency of inspections that should take place under this new system where the federal government bears the cost?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: We don't have that information. I'm glad you asked the question. I think it may be a question that would be useful to pose to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. It would depend on their ranking of risk. For the airlines themselves, there are four major airports at which the inspections take place. They're done on a regular basis.

For the bottled water part of the report, during the course of the 2007-08 audit, there were 78 inspections in all provinces in Canada. There were no major problems that would actually change the level of risk for bottled water.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Duncan.

Ms. Linda Duncan: About three-quarters of an hour ago, there was a discussion about setting risk based on certain population levels. I want to put on the record that I am extremely upset about that. We dealt with that issue in Alberta. We had the federal and provincial governments at the table dealing with new standards in air emission management for coal-fired power. We finally got both

governments to realize that you can't set these risks based on big cities, because in most cases the major pollutants are falling out on the real communities. We had a problem with doing health evaluations, with getting both federal-provincial health authorities to do health risk assessments, because they simply say it's not valid and they can't do it. We have a situation now in the tar sands. Benzene is one of the most critical pollutants the federal government is supposed to be regulating, but they're not even monitoring benzene from the tar sands, despite the fact that there are a lot of aboriginal communities living downwind.

I wonder if you could speak to that. You spoke to it earlier when there was a question about risk assessments based on 100,000 population and over. It basically violates the environmental justice principle that no one community is supposed to be unduly subjected to environmental impacts.

• (1035)

Mr. Scott Vaughan: This is a fundamental question that would be useful to pose to the government. It would be useful to get a clear sense of whether there's a coherent strategy in place. Is there a coherent method for assigning levels of risk? Is there an effective system of inspection and monitoring, against which previously assigned risk levels are periodically checked?

Risk exposure affects all people, no matter where they live—large communities, isolated rural areas, the north, marine and coastal areas. Human health risk potentially affects all Canadians.

Ms. Linda Duncan: Mr. Vaughan, there is an additional aspect to that, and that is the fact that the federal government has been progressively pulling out of doing air emissions monitoring. While they've done this work on the air index, in my jurisdiction in Alberta there are now gaps where there are serious industrial facilities and there is no monitoring. What Alberta has adopted is a policy of private, non-profit airshed monitoring groups. What is to be monitored is based on how much money that group can raise. In most cases, those non-profit airshed groups have industry and government people, and only in some cases do they have local community people, although they try to. It's a totally volunteer organization, and the monitoring that is done is totally based on the ability to raise funds.

So I think that raises a critical question. Where is the responsibility of the federal government in filling those gaps or making sure air emissions of concern to human health or broadly to the environment...? What is the role of the federal government in making sure it's not backing out of responsibility by allowing the reliance on non-government airshed monitors?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: If I may, I have just two quick responses. Thanks for the question

First of all, we tabled a report in February that was giving examples of the federal government's approach to controlling air emissions generally. They were certainly not comprehensive. There were selected approaches from different menus of options.

Then the second one: we looked in this report only at the air quality health index. We didn't look at general trends and others. There are other indices, as Mr. Morse noted, and it isn't necessarily that one would replace the other, but it's not something we looked at. We looked specifically at the air quality health index for this report.

Ms. Linda Duncan: Fine. I would suggest—and far be it from me to suggest what the next topic of the audits is—there's increasingly a need to look at the broader mandate of the federal government and whether or not, when it is reaching accommodation with other levels of government, it is creating a gap where the federal government still has a duty to be making sure the gap is filled.

I have one last quick question, and this may have been asked. Have you looked at whether or not Health Canada or Environment Canada actually monitor to see how quickly the provincial or territorial governments actually adopt and put into place the updated guidelines on drinking water?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: What we look at is within the federal venue, so that's what we looked at within the audit. We have information on all the provinces, what their status is in terms of whether they've legislated parts or wholesale. I can provide that to the honourable member.

Ms. Linda Duncan: Interesting.

Mr. Scott Vaughan: It would list all the provinces in terms of which ones have adopted all the guidelines and which ones have adopted some of the guidelines. It's not something we would continually monitor, but there is a federal-provincial committee in place for drinking water standards.

Ms. Linda Duncan: Are there any citizens on that?

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Warawa, this is the last round. The last question goes to you.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Thank you, Chair.

Again, Mr. Vaughan, Mr. Arseneault, and Mr. Morse, thank you for being here. It's good news. The government is committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, but also to clean the water we drink and the air we breathe. You provided a report, an audit, that we're making satisfactory progress.

I've got one quick question on the air quality index. How is that going to be implemented in such a way that Canadians are going to be able to benefit from that? When we watch the weather channel—I often do, and a lot of Canadians do to find out what the weather is going to be like, what the UV index is going to be, whether we have to worry about a sunburn, and there are pollen alerts too in the spring—are we also going to be seeing air quality index on that, on the news, on the weather? You said the pilot projects are over now, and it's all to benefit Canadians. Is that how we're going to see this implemented so it will benefit Canadians?

•(1040)

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Thank you for the question.

I think that's the plan of the government, to roll this out across Canada. I think the model they looked at is exactly like the UV index. That's something. Imagine 20 years ago if somebody said they're rolling out an index where people would actually be informed enough to make decisions about whether they wanted to go out

because of levels of UV. People would have said, no, no, they'd leave it to the experts. I think now there's a growing sense of literacy among all Canadians as we watch the weather and care about the weather. The idea is to take the similar model of the UV index and make it equally understandable and accessible, so people can make their own decisions about whether they want to go out and do exercise or whether they want to take it more easy, if it's high and there's a high smog day. That's the idea, to leave it to the judgment of individual Canadians, and the more they become aware of it, the more they will use it.

Mr. Mark Warawa: In your report you said that one of the provinces was not participating. Which province is that?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: It's the Province of Alberta.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Thank you.

Mr. Woodworth had a couple of questions.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Thank you. I'm a little unsure, after listening to Ms. Duncan's questions and her comments, that the federal government is not monitoring. The way I understood these pilot projects and the program was that the federal government, either alone or in conjunction with the provinces, is not only providing the index but also monitoring and reporting. Can you shed any light on that for me? Am I right or not?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: To answer that very quickly, there are national systems in place from the Meteorological Service of Canada under which there are 700 different monitoring stations across Canada. Those are in both rural areas and urban areas. There's greater concentration and monitoring in urban areas, but there's coverage in rural areas as well. Those collect data on pollutants, criteria pollutants, levels of greenhouse gas emissions, and others. So it's a complicated network.

In terms of the AQHI, the pilots have finished. The rollout is across Canada. The first stage to 2011 is to get at the communities of 100,000 and over. My understanding from the department is that after that first stage is finished, they want to go to fuller coverage, including rural areas.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Just so I understand, that includes not just setting up the index but also doing the monitoring. Is that correct?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: The monitoring is done by the federal government, but the provinces also have systems in place to provide information on the monitoring systems.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Regarding the next piece, the rural communities, can you give me any sense of the anticipated cost of rolling that out to the rural areas that will not be covered under the existing plans?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: No. I wish I could, sir. That's something you may want to ask the department. In the report, we've noted that this is something that needs to be addressed, because the government has not yet provided coverage of the rural areas, which in our view is something that remains to be done.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: So when you make a recommendation like that, or a suggestion, you don't cost it out?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: We noted there was some further work to be done, but because it was not a recommendation, the department did not have an obligation to respond.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Thank you.

Mr. Scott Vaughan: If they're launching a program, they have to cost it.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Right.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Woodworth. Your time has expired. I know it goes by when you're having fun.

I want to thank you, Commissioner Vaughan, Mr. Morse, and Mr. Arseneault, for your participation today and for giving us this very fulsome briefing. I think it was very worthwhile. You are dismissed, and we look forward to your report on May 12.

With that, we will now go to committee motions.

Before we get to Ms. Duncan's motion, I first want to deal with some housekeeping here. A motion that the committee approve the operational budget for the amount of \$26,250 for the study of the statutory review of the Species at Risk Act was circulated. Could I have somebody move that motion, please?

Mr. Calkins moves it.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The second motion is that the committee approve the operational budget for the amount of \$33,000 for its study of the oil sands and Canada's water resources. This is operational, not travel-related. The travel budget has already been approved. Could we have a mover, please?

It is moved by Ms. Duncan.

Do you have a question, Mr. Bigras?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bernard Bigras: I would like to know what that \$33,000 will be used for. Is it intended for the witnesses?

[*English*]

The Chair: It's for witnesses to appear at committee.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bernard Bigras: All right.

[*English*]

The Chair: It's for travel for them. It's not for our travel out to Alberta. It is strictly for witnesses appearing before committee.

Are there other questions? Mr. Warawa.

Mr. Mark Warawa: We are going to be using video conferencing whenever possible. Is that correct?

● (1045)

The Chair: Yes.

Are there any other comments, questions, or debate?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Ms. Duncan, you have a motion. First you can move it to the floor, and then you can speak to it.

Ms. Linda Duncan: My motion reads as follows:

That consistent with the practices of previous committees, the Parliamentary Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development contract the services of an independent consultant to provide assistance in the timely drafting of a report summarizing proceedings, findings and recommendations from the following:

1. Review of SARA, and
2. Study of oil sands and water issues,

And to contract the consultant as soon as practicable to enable the consultant to observe the committee's proceedings.

I would like to speak to the motion.

The Chair: Speak to it now, Ms. Duncan.

Ms. Linda Duncan: I have appeared before these committees previously, and it was my understanding that committees actually hired a consultant on contract to help do the proceedings. It's been suggested to me that on some occasions our Library of Parliament people do that report.

I brought the motion forward because I thought we should deal with it and have clarity to make sure we produce our report in a timely fashion, that we simply have agreement. My concern is that we haven't even talked about the framework of what a report might be coming out of either of those reviews. I thought it merited a discussion.

The Chair: Before we open it up for discussion, I'll reference a couple of things to the committee.

Standing Order 120 does provide that:

Standing, special or legislative committees shall be severally empowered to retain the services of expert, professional, technical and clerical staff as may be deemed necessary.

Also in the binder, which I think all of you have, is the "Financial Management and Policy Guide for Committees". Page 22 actually says:

Committees are authorized to retain the services of experts...as may be deemed necessary.

Prior to hiring temporary help, the Committee Clerk must first verify with the Deputy Principal Clerk that assistance is not available internally.

When budgeting for temporary help services it is necessary first to determine the nature and volume of work to be performed.

The costs of hiring temporary help locally for a travelling committee are covered by the committee's travel budget....

And it goes on. And then there are guidelines on how much we can pay in hiring staff.

Now, I know that in the five years I've been here I've only been on one committee, agriculture, where we hired expert staff to do a survey of companies in Canada and in the United States that couldn't be undertaken by Library of Parliament. But other than that, it's not something that's been commonly done. All these reports are prepared by Library of Parliament, to my understanding.

I have Mr. Warawa and then Mr. Bigras.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Thank you, Chair.

In addressing the motion, it says “consistent with the practices”. Chair, I don't believe this is the norm, as you've mentioned. So this would not be consistent with practices; this would be exceptional.

Also, the motion says to provide the report in a timely fashion. I've always found in the five years I've been here that the reports from the clerk and the analysts do come in a very timely fashion. I'm very happy with the service we receive from the Library of Parliament. I don't see any need for this motion, so I won't be supporting it.

The Chair: Monsieur Bigras.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bernard Bigras: I'm going to vote against this motion as well.

I've been a member of the Standing Committee on Environment for 12 years. And we have never called upon outside services. We should undertake a process to determine who the consultant should be. It's as though we were claiming that consultants were automatically independent. I believe that the Library of Parliament and its researchers do independent work.

I believe this is Parliament's responsibility. We have the necessary resources. So it will be very hard for me to support this motion.

[*English*]

The Chair: Monsieur Trudeau.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: Did you have a consultant in mind, Ms. Duncan?

Ms. Linda Duncan: I don't have a particular consultant in mind. I assure you, in no way am I slurring the Library of Parliament staff—quite the opposite. It's just that it was not discussed at all in the committee.

I'm a new member of the committee. I have testified for 25 years before committees, and I know that consulting firms such as Stratus, previously RFI, for years worked with the committee in helping to develop the issues. If it's the Library of Parliament that is developing the report, I'm absolutely happy. But it has not been discussed by our committee, or even the steering committee, about what we see as the framework for the reports coming out of our two major reviews.

I would be more comfortable if we simply had a discussion about that. We're ad hoc bringing in witnesses, but it's not really clear to me what our expectations are or if at some point we're going to talk about recommendations out of our review. That's basically what I was generating. I simply wanted clarity on the outcome of these two reviews. Is there going to be a written report, and will it include recommendations? Do we need any additional help?

If the Library of Parliament staff are perfectly capable of doing it, I'm totally happy. I'm not necessarily for or against my motion; it was simply the way to get the matter on the table and have a discussion about how we're proceeding.

• (1050)

The Chair: Mr. Braid.

Mr. Peter Braid: Mr. Chair, I wonder if we could simply have a confirmation through our analyst that we do have adequate resources from the Library of Parliament to complete this work.

The Chair: There hasn't been any indication that they cannot. As you know, both our analysts have strong environmental backgrounds on the legal and academic sides, so I don't have any concerns at all in our ability to put this together.

On the oil sands study, we have laid out a framework for our direction. At the subcommittee on agenda and procedure, we talked about how we're going to move forward in hearing witnesses under the main themes. Those themes become the main focus of the report. I know that Tim and I have talked about that as well when putting that together.

It's also hard, until you have all of the witnesses appear, to prejudge the comments they're going to make and the recommendations they're going to bring forward for us to consider. So you pretty well have to hear the witness testimony first before you actually start fleshing out the recommendations and go forward with the report. I know the analysts are already compiling the information from the witnesses we've heard, and they have that information at their disposal for when they start writing the report as we get near the end of the study.

Mr. Woodworth.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Thank you.

Quickly, I do want to thank Ms. Duncan for raising this. As a new member, I had no idea how these reports were prepared or who prepared them, so it did merit some discussion. But having heard what I've heard about the role of the Library of Parliament, I'm quite content to let them proceed with the matter. Therefore, although I appreciate the motion, I probably won't be supporting it.

The Chair: Are there any other comments?

Ms. Duncan, if you want, you can withdraw the motion—or do you want to vote on it?

Ms. Linda Duncan: We can withdraw the motion. It was simply my intention to generate a discussion. We've had a good discussion, but I do encourage the committee, as we're plotting our time in our meetings, to make sure we set aside time to actually discuss these reviews.

The Chair: That's what we're going to discuss next when we move over to our next meeting in the subcommittee.

Ms. Linda Duncan: Very good.

(Motion withdrawn)

The Chair: If there's no other discussion, I'll ask for a motion to adjourn, so we can clear the room.

Mr. Jeff Watson: So moved.

The Chair: So moved by Mr. Watson.

We're out of here.

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