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Chair

Mr. Harold Albrecht

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•(0845)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC)): Welcome, committee members. I would like to call the meeting of the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development to order. This is meeting no. 80. That sounds like a busy year.

We're privileged this morning to have with us a witness from Ambioterra, Priscilla Gareau, director. She will proceed with a 10-minute opening statement followed by questions from committee members. Then at 9:45 we will move to in camera to consider instructions for drafting our report.

Madam Gareau, welcome, and we will ask you to proceed with your opening statement.

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau (Director, Ambioterra): Thank you. [Technical difficulties]

[English]

The Chair: We'll suspend for a few minutes due to technical difficulties.

•(0845)

(Pause)

•(0845)

We'll reconvene.

Madam Gareau, proceed please.

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: Hello, my name is Priscilla Gareau. I have a doctorate in environmental studies and I am the director of the environmental group Ambioterra.

We are very grateful for this opportunity to contribute to the debate on the conservation and protection of biodiversity in Canada.

Ambioterra is a not-for-profit charity organization. The board of directors is elected by the members. We work in the south of Quebec, more specifically in certain sub-watersheds of the Châteauguay River, which is part of the Upper St. Lawrence Valley or the St. Lawrence Plain.

We are also a member of Quebec's Club and Small Percidae Recovery Team. As I was saying, we work in the south of Quebec where the highest level of biodiversity is found. It's like Ontario, in fact. The two regions are similarly rich in biodiversity. Unfortunately, these are also areas where there is the most urbanization and

farming. It is often in these areas where the risks are greatest, compared to the north of Quebec.

Another unique feature of our territory is that 95% of it is privately owned. There is practically no publicly owned land. This is why we mostly work together with private landowners. This territory is compartmentalized, making biodiversity protection even more difficult. Moreover, there are many landowners, and they are not as well informed as the federal, provincial and municipal authorities. Clearly, these authorities are better informed on endangered species and biodiversity since they are the policy-makers.

This leads me to our first recommendation. It reads as follows:

That the national conservation plan put a particular emphasis on the methods, programs and tax incentives necessary to encourage landowners to protect habitat, biodiversity, and especially species at risk.

The landowners are very open. Given that we receive most of our funding from the federal and provincial governments, particularly through the Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk and the program Partenaires pour la nature. This allows us to advise the landowners and update them on the federal and provincial initiatives that help them protect their natural heritage. Of course, if they had to pay for such consultations, the natural heritage would not be protected. They have neither the necessary means nor the expertise.

To carry out our projects, we use the ecosystem approach which Environment Canada has been promoting since the 1990s along with a number of researchers. This approach requires that interventions and policies be thought out taking into account the spatial and temporal skills of the characteristics of natural components. I will explain this concept to you in more concrete terms. We, the human beings, establish the regions in an administrative fashion. Each region is considered a unit of territory. However, the watershed of the Châteauguay that I referred to is considered to be in another category. In the case of this watershed, the federal and provincial governments as well as a number of regional county municipalities and the municipalities intervene. Currently, policies often do not take into account the natural components.

For example, the regional county municipalities are in charge of the waterway development plans. However, the regional county municipality (RCM) that is downstream must deal with the consequences of activities carried out by the RCM that is upstream. The downstream RCM must pay the price for any harmful activities carried out by the upstream RCM. That is why we devise our plans according to the watershed as a unit of territory.

In any case, the federal government has implemented a number of examples of the ecosystem approach, for example the St. Lawrence Action Plan, the priority intervention zones and the Great Lakes projects, which date back almost 30 years.

● (0850)

I suspect that a previous speaker has already defined what a watershed is. Basically, it is not just the waterway itself, it is also all of the land and waters that drain into it. For example, because the St. Lawrence River is massive and covers almost all of Quebec, it cannot be studied as one watershed. It has to be subdivided. Terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems are inseparable, as they are in constant interaction.

This leads us to our second recommendation:

That the national conservation plan include measures to protect not only terrestrial areas, but also aquatic areas, both freshwater and marine.

We work with most of the stakeholders in our area. As I mentioned, a number of federal departments are involved, such as Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Agriculture Canada and Environment Canada. It's the same thing at the provincial level.

However, we find in the field that the third level of government, the municipal level, is not very familiar with provincial and federal policies. So there is a lack of communication among the three levels of government. In our opinion, it is important to bring the municipal level more on board. For example, the municipalities are completely unaware of the existence of the Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk developed by the federal government, under the auspices of COSEWIC, and do not incorporate it into their land management plan.

As a small local and regional group, we can try to advocate, but it is quite difficult, given our limited means. As I already said, private property owners are completely unaware of existing policies and how they could benefit from them, including through their taxes, if they protected their natural heritage.

The municipalities wield tremendous power over land use, at least in Quebec. I suspect it's the same for the other provinces, though the names of the planning tools may vary. Quebec has established development plans for the regional county municipalities and land use plans that the municipalities have to take into account. Unfortunately, a small municipality of little means and no budget may only be able to afford an inspector one day a week. Clearly, that inspector will not be able to do many inspections to enforce the rules and policies.

This brings us to our third recommendation:

That the national plan grants a larger place to municipal entities, as was adopted at the COP10 of the Convention on Biological Diversity [...] which specifies that efforts must be made to increase the involvement of municipal authorities in the protection of biodiversity. In this context, it would be appropriate to review the financing of the Green Municipal Fund (Federation of Canadian Municipalities) so as to develop a specific program for the protection of biodiversity.

This is just one of many examples.

In August 2012, Environment Canada introduced the biodiversity goals and targets stemming from the Aichi Strategic Plan, adopted by the signatory countries of the Convention on Biological Diversity. Note that on page 8, goal A includes Canada's waters, thereby

reinforcing our previous position in favour of the inclusion of bodies of water in a national conservation plan.

It is not our intention to review each of the biodiversity goals and targets identified by the Government of Canada. However, it seems to us that certain of them should be clarified, made more binding, and incorporated in a more specific implementation schedule.

This brings us to our fourth recommendation:

That the national conservation plan clarify its goals, objectives, targets, results indicators and allotted budget, incorporating them in a predetermined implementation schedule, so that everything is grounded in the rules of result-based management as promoted by the Government of Canada for its grant recipients. [...]

In order to run a program properly, we ourselves should have a schedule that sets out our goals and means, our results, our deadlines and our allotted budgets.

● (0855)

[...] Furthermore, everything should be based on the current state of scientific knowledge and on an ecosystem approach, including the precautionary principle.

Lastly, we are convinced that the voluntary approach is necessary and beneficial, and we use it every day. However, we are also convinced that enforcement is complementary to the voluntary approach. Unfortunately, there will always be certain stakeholders who do not want to participate voluntarily in habitat protection. It is therefore clear that without the enforcement of legislation governing destructive practices, the deterioration of Canada's natural environments will continue.

Note that harmonization is important. Each level of government must enforce regulations. Take, for example, a farmer who complies with the regulations, but whose neighbour does not. When we make contact, that farmer is going to ask us what good it does to protect the environment and comply with the regulations if the neighbour does not, and the authorities do not enforce the regulations. That is extremely important.

This brings us to our fifth recommendation:

That the national legislative framework for the protection and conservation of natural environments and species at risk be maintained and improved. An assessment of the application of laws and regulations by the various parties involved in biodiversity protection is necessary in order to identify the points requiring improvement.

I am going to conclude my presentation by sharing with you our final recommendations, without any contextual information, because I have already gone over my time limit.

That funding programs for the protection of habitat and biodiversity, such as the Habitat Stewardship Program, be maintained and improved.

That responses to funding applications be sent out no more than 5 months after the applications are filed, i.e., in April of each year, out of consideration for the intrinsic characteristics of the work related to collection of conservation data, which has to be conducted mainly in the spring and summer.

That in the interest of transparency, letters denying applications for funding that are sent out by Environment Canada specify the criteria and the scoring for each of those criteria which were responsible for the decision made.

That summarizes our positions.

We commend the work of the committee and thank you for your attention.

• (0900)

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

[English]

We will now move to the questions. We will begin with Mr. Sopuck.

Mr. Robert Sopuck (Dauphin—Swan River—Marquette, CPC): Thank you very much.

Ms. Gareau, you said you favoured the ecosystem approach to conservation. I certainly do as well. I would assume that is as opposed to the species-by-species approach. What are the weaknesses of the species-by-species approach and what are the strengths of the ecosystem approach?

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: The two approaches are not necessarily contradictory. It's more in contrast with the traditional sectoral approach, with each department having its own regulations and no real communication among departments.

That is the main thing with the ecosystem approach. You have to take into account the various policy levels. We go more by that than by the species-by-species approach, although the ecosystem approach does require us to take into account the species-by-species approach.

Basically, the question has to do with where the priorities lie. Clearly, for example, areas where there are species at risk should take priority over an area where there is another ecosystem or another species that is less at risk.

[English]

Mr. Robert Sopuck: You mentioned the habitat stewardship program. Of course there is the companion program, the natural area conservation plan that the Nature Conservancy is delivering. I have a number of projects in my own constituency under both of these programs. Does your group use these programs? Are these good and effective programs?

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: Yes. The Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk and the Partenaires pour la nature program are the two government programs for community groups to protect biodiversity. These programs are essential to the protection of regional and local biodiversity.

[English]

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Thank you.

Seeing as I represent an agricultural constituency, I'm interested in your views on agricultural policy. Should Canadian agricultural policy be changed or augmented so that agricultural producers can be provided with incentives to deliver ecological goods and services?

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: Clearly the programs are needed to insure good agri-environmental practices among farmers. If they benefit from incentive measures and regulations are applied, they will be motivated to change their behaviour for the sustainability of species and biodiversity.

[English]

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Does your group have much contact with Quebec farm groups, such as the UPA, and what is your relationship with them? What are the UPA's views on the idea of providing producers incentives to deliver ecological goods and services?

• (0905)

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: We are in touch with the UPA and environment agri-environmental groups, among others. They are open, but it is clear that for farmers respecting regulations on the shoreline, for instance, whereby they are not to seed a one to three-metre-width strip along the waterline, represents lost profit. Of course, they do not consider this loss in yield to be a good thing, even though those are the regulations.

With incentives in place, they would obviously feel that the situation was better. They would like to be compensated for production losses. I think that is the position the majority of them hold. At the provincial level, and I believe the federal government also contributes to the Prime-Vert program, a change was made this year and farmers were not pleased about that at all. Indeed, under the new program, they will no longer be reimbursed for the one to three-metre-width strip. So these are costs they are going to have to incur. I know some of them are unhappy about this.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Sopuck, you have more time.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Do I? Okay.

In terms of the national conservation plan, you talked about us needing to clarify the goals, to set targets, and to measure indicators. I'd like to zero in on the issue of indicators. Once a national conservation plan is implemented, which indicators would you recommend government use to determine the effectiveness of the national conservation plan?

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: For instance, we could set a percentage for reducing degradation due to the fact that from year to year we lose part of our wetlands. There are also a number of species at risk every year. There needs to be an indicator established to reduce this number. The same principle could be applied to natural environments and degraded environments. For instance, within the plan you could designate a given number of kilometres or an area in square kilometres to be rehabilitated.

[English]

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Those seem like very good indicators to me.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: You still have 50 seconds—

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Fifty seconds? Wow. Time flies. This is so interesting. I don't know where the time is going.

To go back to the farm groups, does the UPA have an environment committee and a group of producers that meet to discuss agricultural environmental policy? Do you think the farm groups in Quebec are conscious of the non-farming public in Quebec and their views on agricultural practices?

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: To my knowledge, there are no environmental committees. However there are agri-environmental clubs, that are the environmental equivalent to them. However, I am not sure they take into consideration the opinions of other stakeholders, given the fact that they represent their union, in other words producers.

Organizationally speaking, at the UPA, I do not know where things stand. We have more dealings with the regional UPA federations than with the central one.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Sopuck.

We'll move now to Madam Quach for seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Beauharnois—Salaberry, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Madam Gareau, and congratulations. Indeed, you recently celebrated the 10-year anniversary of the establishment of your organization. I am quite pleased you are appearing before our committee.

You referred to shortcomings in the implementation of environmental legislation. As we know this legislation plays a crucial role in habitat conservation. Yet last year Environment Canada laid off hundreds of scientists, biologists and technicians. Do you think that will hamper the enforcement of this legislation? Do you believe these are adequate measures?

You referred to lapses in the case of some producers. What could the federal government do to ensure better enforcement of environmental legislation?

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: Assuredly, budget cutbacks with respect to field inspection will hamper the enforcement of laws and regulations. That will mean an increasing number of offenders who are breaking the law.

• (0910)

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Will the loss of scientific expertise be detrimental to habitat protection?

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: Certainly; if you do not have a picture of the situation, you cannot ensure scientific follow-up of the evolution of this situation, thanks to the indicators I referred to earlier on.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: You also mentioned the importance of using an ecosystem approach. You stated for example, that one cannot separate protecting the land from protecting wetlands.

How might the changes made to the Fisheries Act and the Navigable Waters Protection Act, which currently protect less than 2% of our waterways, compromise habitat protection?

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: These changes will effectively be damaging to all the waterways. There are already very few stakeholders responsible for enforcing laws and regulations, and since citizens are not aware of the procedure to follow, they will not be able to lay complaints in that respect. There will therefore not be any offences, since no one will be able to agree and determine that there has been habitat degradation or destruction.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Did the previous laws protecting the waterways help to preserve habitats?

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: Most certainly. The Fisheries Act was one of the most important statutes, at least for Quebec.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Could you provide us with a concrete example illustrating the use you could make of it?

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: If there was habitat degradation, we could complain to Fisheries and Oceans Canada, since certain powers had been delegated to the Department of Natural Resources of Quebec. We could make a complaint so that the party having committed the offence could be sued.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: You mentioned that you often used the Habitat Stewardship Program for endangered species, but it was a bit difficult to obtain answers. You recommended a response time of five months. Did it take longer beforehand?

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: Over the last year, we adapted our financial year to correspond with the government's, the government being our main source of funding. Our fiscal year and our biodiversity projects both begin in the spring in April, since that is when we must do our floristic inventory.

Last year, we received our answer in November, but we had submitted our request one year earlier. It is impossible for small community groups such as ours to work under such conditions. You would have to be a millionaire or have an incredible margin of credit to be able to manage.

We did manage in any case thanks to the support received from other funders, but it is impossible for small groups to work under such conditions.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: How could we improve the management of these programs? Do you have to submit a request for a subsidy each year? Is it possible to request a long-term subsidy?

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: We cannot do that. To request a long-term subsidy, you need guaranteed funding from another funder. For example, if we were to ask the federal government for 50% funding, we would have to find the other 50% somewhere else.

We do not have statutory funding such as the funding received by watershed organizations or regional environmental councils. We are not beneficiaries of such programs, since we are a small regional and local group. The funds are therefore distributed on a per project basis. Furthermore, since no funder will provide funds over several years, we cannot submit such a request under that program.

I would however like to congratulate Environment Canada, because this year we received our answer in April, as we should have. We would like to congratulate the department for showing this improvement in the current year. However, we asked for \$70,000 in funding, and received only \$30,000, without any explanation. This is why we have provided recommendations. Environment Canada has announced a plan with criteria. We would have liked the letter we received in response to include our score. There must be some kind of scoring grid, since such a tool is used by officials and elected officials to make decisions.

• (0915)

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Indeed, there must be specific criteria.

You also talked about the lack of communication between the three levels of government. You think it might be more relevant to have more information and support for the municipal level. You mentioned the Green Municipal Fund. Are there other funds that would allow the federal government to help municipalities that are on the ground to take appropriate action to protect habitat?

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: Yes, there are different funds. I don't know all of them, but minimal programs could be created. For example, in Quebec, there are organizations that are responsible for watersheds, but there could be an organization to coordinate the different environment divisions of the three or four levels of government. There must be more coordination for biodiversity and species at risk.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Quach.

We move now to Mr. Woodworth, for seven minutes.

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

We always appreciate the benefit of having experience on the ground come to this committee. I found all of your remarks in your opening comments to be very helpful, and I want to thank you for that.

Regarding a question that was raised by Ms. Quach about fish habitat, as of today, the existing section of the Fisheries Act that applies to all waterways in Canada says:

No person shall carry on any work, undertaking or activity that results in the harmful alteration or disruption, or the destruction, of fish habitat.

Then there are exceptions essentially if there is a permit and specific conditions. Are you aware of that provision? Are you aware that's how we protect fish habitat in Canada?

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: Yes.

[English]

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Is that a good provision, to generally prohibit any activity that is going to destroy fish habitat unless it's the subject of a permit and conditions? Is that, in your opinion, a good provision?

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: There is a list of bodies of water, and some are more protected than others. I don't see how we can insure good protection if there is that kind of list.

Regarding the section, people need to apply the regulations. Following the cuts at Fisheries and Oceans Canada, I think it is very difficult to apply the regulations in Quebec.

[English]

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Just so we're clear, do you understand that the provision applies to every body of water in Canada that contains fish habitat? Do you understand that? I'm not sure that everyone at this table understands that, but I'd like to make sure you understand it.

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: In that case, I don't understand. We are talking about changes to the list at Fisheries and Oceans Canada. What is the distinction then?

[English]

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: That's exactly what I want to make clear, because the only change made was to the laws that protect navigation. The laws that protect fish habitat were not changed, and there is some confusion in the public mind over this. It sounds like perhaps I could send you something that would assist in clearing up that confusion. Would that be all right?

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: That would be good.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Thank you very much.

[English]

Ms. Gareau, what kinds of projects or environmental outcomes have you been able to accomplish in the area in which you're working?

• (0920)

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: We have been active on the ground for four years. We have done diagnostics with 44 landowners that we call volunteers. We made recommendations to them on protecting wetlands as well as riparian and aquatic areas and also forest species. We also conduct research, in parallel with COSEWIC reports, to integrate those recommendations in the way they can protect species at risk.

Here, we are talking about 44 landowners and 3,000 square kilometres that are morally protected under this project.

[English]

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Do you employ scientists to do that research and to perform those diagnostics?

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: Yes. I myself have a PH.D. in environment, and all of my employees have a science degree, for example in environmental studies, forest engineering or aquatic biology.

[English]

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: What change if any has there been in federal government funding for your efforts since you began 10 years ago?

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: Over the past 10 years, there have mainly been delays in response times. This year, there were cuts.

[English]

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: How about amounts? How much has your funding changed from when you began 10 years ago?

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: This year, it is about \$40,000 less.

[English]

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: So it's less than when you started 10 years ago.

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: For five years.

[English]

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: What amount of federal government funding did you receive 10 years ago, and what amount are you receiving today?

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: We received between \$50,000 and \$60,000. This year, the amount is \$30,000.

[English]

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Sorry, this year you received what?

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: We used to receive \$50,000, but this year, the amount received is \$30,000.

[English]

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Thirty thousand.

[Translation]

Thank you very much.

[English]

Can you tell me about the 44 diagnostic plans you prepared? Have you monitored and followed up on how many of them have been implemented?

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: Yes. We cannot follow up on all the 44 landowners. It depends on funding. If we received more, we could do all of those follow-ups. We do them especially for those who signed an agreement. Landowners' documents are the first step in their commitment to protecting the environment. It can take a number of years before they do that and have long-term, legal protection.

Currently, we do about 10 follow-ups per year, but it always depends on funding. We receive funding from the Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk and the Quebec Wildlife Foundation. Regarding funding that we receive from the latter, it

is based on new landowners. The foundation does not pay for follow-ups. We can do it through donations, but they are a small proportion of our funding, compared to government grants.

[English]

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: You can't give me a number?

The Chair: Your time is up, Mr. Woodworth. We'll need to move on.

Ms. Duncan, you have seven minutes.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[Translation]

Thank you very much, Doctor Gareau.

[English]

You said there needs to be a higher integration with municipalities. Could you please give this committee very specific recommendations for what the federal government could do that would help?

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: As I was saying earlier, it would be giving municipalities or RCMs as examples showing them how they could apply biodiversity policies regionally, for example. The government could also provide experts, given that usually neither municipalities nor RCMs have the money to hire biologists. In southern Quebec, they don't hire biologists. They need scientific support and funding.

There must also be coordination among the different levels of government. Environment Canada, for example, could delegate a person or two to look at existing programs and see, for example, how they could be applied regionally.

Regarding land-use planning, there are Regional Conferences of Elected Officials, which bring together elected officials in the regions. They can see how different federal programs can be integrated in plans. There is the conservation plan, for example. It should be looked at to see how the points it contains could be integrated. It is important to take these principles into account.

● (0925)

[English]

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you.

You mentioned a green municipal fund. You also talked about funding programs that need to be maintained and improved. If you could make your wish list to this committee, what would you like to see the federal government do to make your life easier?

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: For funding, as I said, there is the Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk, for example, and interdepartmental funds. There are a number of funds. The different existing programs must be considered. There is also a list of species at risk.

Currently, for example, Quebec's Chub and Small Percidae Recovery Team has less than \$5,000 a year to operate. That is not enough. It would be very helpful to have funding earmarked for these recovery committees or projects based on species at risk. For example, Quebec's Chub and Small Percidae Recovery Team monitors about 15 species at risk. The funding needs to correspond to the number of species covered and the scope of the action to take to carry out the work.

Responses also need to be sent on time. Ideally, since the financial year begins in April, the response should be sent in February or March for organizations to have enough time. In fact, as a non-profit organization, we have to seek funding and counterparts elsewhere. Before doing so, we have to wait for the responses. We have to have received a letter of support, for example the positive response from the HSP, to receive funding, otherwise we will not receive funding. Given that situation, reducing response time as much as possible would help us.

[English]

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you. I couldn't have heard this right. Did you say \$5,000 dollars for the recovery of species, when you have 15 species at risk? What's the money you really need to do that work?

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: I could not give you the exact amount because I have not done an evaluation. However, to provide a full-time salary, we would need at least \$50,000 for a coordinator, for example. That would be the minimum, certainly.

[English]

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Could you talk to the importance of the Species at Risk Act?

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: The act is very important, because without it, species would not be protected. It is essential, certainly.

Regarding its application on the ground, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans can work with the Department of Natural Resources, with municipalities and NGOs like ours to enforce the act.

[English]

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Does SARA need implementation? Better implementation?

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: Yes, certainly, but there needs to be funding in order to have officers on the ground to enforce the act.

• (0930)

[English]

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you.

The last thing I want to ask you about is the national conservation plan, for which you said we need clear goals, targets, and indicators. If you could make your wish list to this committee, what would you like to see?

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: You would probably need to categorize them by type: natural area, aquatic area, and so on. Even if it is an ecosystem issue, you must nevertheless take into account the various types of natural areas and species. As regards indicators, earlier, I gave an example of the percentage of restored areas or the number of protected areas.

In Quebec, the people at Conservation de la nature developed a way of establishing priorities for areas to protect, based on the species at risk that are present. They call them *hot spots*. To do that, the organization used data from the federal government, the provincial government, and some NGOs. Based on that, it is possible to identify networks for connectivity, for example between protected areas and farmers. They have residual forests, corridors and riparian zones. That would make it possible to create a network everywhere, as well as connectivity among the species. It could be part of the plan.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Duncan. Thank you, Madam Gareau.

We'll move now to Mr. Pilon for a five-minute question, please.

[Translation]

Mr. François Pilon (Laval—Les Îles, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Ms. Gareau.

Several experts have told us that wild species are on the decline in Canada. Can you tell us a little bit about the situation in the St. Lawrence Plain, such as what percentage of the area is protected and how the protected species are doing? Are we talking about a decline here?

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: Yes, we are talking about a decline. As I said at the outset, the upper St. Lawrence Plain is the area with the most biodiversity, but also with the most species at risk, given the variety of threats affecting it. I think that less than 3% of the area is protected, because it is highly developed. In the Haut-Saint-Laurent RCM, for example, there are more than 70 endangered species. In that regard, things are not improving.

Mr. François Pilon: You talked about urban sprawl and aquatic areas.

Is the decline in aquatic areas—it is surely not in decline in your region—worrisome? Are steps being taken to restore them?

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: The current focus of our work is not on aquatic areas. However, we are working with voluntary landowners who have aquatic areas on their property. There are not very clear statistics on degradation for our region. Normally, the provincial government does the follow-up. But because of a funding shortfall, it has not been done. It was done in Laval, and a 20% to 30% per year rate of degradation and loss of wetlands was identified. The statistics must be more or less the same for us.

Mr. François Pilon: Once again, you talked about voluntary conservation.

Can you explain this approach to the committee?

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: Yes, it is something that was developed about 50 years ago. Landowners voluntarily decided to protect their natural heritage. At the first stage, we target landowners who live in priority zones and where there are species at risk. We send them a letter asking them if they are aware of what voluntary conservation is. We speak to them about protection incentives created by the two levels of government, for example the Ecological Gifts Program at the federal level and tax cuts at the provincial level. The municipalities can also grant these types of exemptions. In fact, not all municipalities are aware of this. Therefore, they need to be informed about the existence of such tax measures.

• (0935)

Mr. François Pilon: In general, are landowners receptive to this?

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: Yes, but there are too many landowners for the funding that we have available to us. Of course, some of them will never be interested. Up to now, the funding that we receive allows us to take care of 10 to 15 landowners, but 40 of them are interested. Many of them are interested.

Mr. François Pilon: You also spoke about a shortage of inspectors. You said that there is one inspector for one day during the week. Can the federal government do something to improve the situation?

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: I don't know if that would be possible, but perhaps. That would require finding ways for the different levels of government to communicate.

Mr. François Pilon: Let's continue talking about municipalities.

How can we integrate and increase awareness among stakeholders and the RCMs? We know that there will be urban sprawl, but how can we ensure that it is done responsibly? Do you have suggestions for us in this respect?

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: That would require different experts in various locations. For example, as I was saying earlier, not-for-profit organizations would have to come together with representatives from each level of government that have expertise in sustainable urban development. Then, it would be essential that the RCMs benefit from this expertise and the available resources.

Mr. François Pilon: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[English]

We'll move now to Ms. Rempel, for five minutes.

Ms. Michelle Rempel (Calgary Centre-North, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Dr. Gareau.

I wanted to pick up on Madame Quach's questions about looking at ways to perhaps make our granting programs in these areas more efficient and more effective.

You had mentioned in your testimony that there should be a five-month time period by which notifications are brought out. Could you just speak a little bit more to that recommendation, why it's important for your group, and how it would be different from the existing system right now?

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: The projects begin in April of each year, at the same time that the government's new fiscal year starts. We receive the answers 10 to 12 months after the request has been made. Consequently, we don't necessarily have the means to carry out the projects.

Currently, we are advancing the money so that the projects can get underway, since the diagnosis on the ground must be done in the spring in April. When we receive answers in November, like we did last year, obviously this compromises the majority of natural diagnostic projects.

[English]

Ms. Michelle Rempel: Which program is this that you're referring to specifically?

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: I am referring to the Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk.

[English]

Ms. Michelle Rempel: Okay. Are there any other programs that you interact with right now where you see similar types of delays?

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: No.

[English]

Ms. Michelle Rempel: Great. That was very helpful. Thank you.

A lot of your programs are working in partnership with landowners and other groups. I was wondering if perhaps you could speak to some of the best practices that your group has developed in order to maintain those partnerships or to go out and seek new ones.

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: With the voluntary landowners, we provide a number of recommendations. When it comes to cutting down trees for example, of course they can use their forest, but we make recommendations on how they can do so sustainably. If there are species at risk in the area, we recommend that they maintain a buffer zone around these species and instead go to cut their firewood in areas where there are less noble species or those that are less endangered. In terms of riparian strips, we tell them that they must protect a minimum of 10 metres of this strip. We also make recommendations to them on plant species.

We also participate in the consultations held by the various Conférences régionales des élus in order to incorporate the—

• (0940)

[English]

The Chair: If there's a phone ringing, can someone identify whose it is?

A voice: I think it's the administration. I don't think it's a cellphone.

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Sorry about that. I just thought if we could interrupt that interruption.... Please proceed.

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: As I was saying, we also participate in the consultations held by the various Conférences régionales des élus in order to, for example, ensure that the recommendations on species at risk are implemented. There is currently a lack of communication between stakeholders. They do not maintain a close relationship. That is why we meet with them, and during consultations we try to get recommended recovery programs for certain species at risk included in the RCMs' plans.

[English]

Ms. Michelle Rempel: How much of the work that gets carried out by your organization is done by volunteers?

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: It's approximately 10%.

[English]

Ms. Michelle Rempel: How do you recruit volunteers? Is it mostly with the landowners? Is it just from the community? How do you incent interest in the community into coming out and volunteering for your organization?

[Translation]

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: It's both. Of course we hold public meetings with volunteer landowners, given that they are our primary target group. In addition, we recruit volunteers during our activities, whether those are public meetings or our meetings with the different players or from our partnerships with other regional and provincial NGOs.

[English]

Ms. Michelle Rempel: Great, thanks.

[Translation]

The Chair: The last turn goes to Ms. Quach.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will use my speaking time to allow you to inform us some more.

The Minister of the Environment, Mr. Kent, appeared before the committee Tuesday morning to speak to us about the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy for Canada. He said that it was a little more difficult to invest in Canada's parks, in particular, increasing the network of protected areas and following up on other measures, such as these, and at the same time invest in protecting people's health.

I would like to know what you think about the fact that when we protect the environment by providing incentive measures or more tools to groups like yours, Ambioterra, and when we encourage citizens to raise awareness, ultimately, our health benefits simultaneously.

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: Definitely. Protecting the environment is the first step in our health system. People are still not aware that we need quality water, air and food. That's what we are made up of. If our water, air and food are polluted, the risk of cancer will definitely increase, as well as epidemics caused by bacteria in water.

Clearly, investing in the environment is the foundation of a health system.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Earlier you were saying that 95% of the lands are privately owned and that the landowners do not have enough information. You have to send them letters. There are 40 landowners who would like to protect their properties. However, you have just lost 50% of your funding this year.

Does the federal government not have a role to play in this? Is it not up to them to hold public consultations, provide information to private landowners and contribute more money to the Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk in order to do this work?

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: Of course, if we had additional funding, we could get more work done at all levels. All the players could contribute more and disseminate information to the greater public and to the landowners.

• (0945)

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: All right.

Earlier Mr. Pilon spoke about species at risk. What types of stresses put species at risk? Is it due to human activities? Should we pay closer attention to certain human activities that create pollution for animals, among other things?

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: All of our activities can be destructive, but there are always ways to reduce our environmental footprint. Most policies are already in place. Unfortunately, there are not enough people on the ground enforcing these laws, policies and regulations. If there was better enforcement at all levels of government, I think there would be far fewer environmentally destructive practices.

Take for example farming practices. On the industrial and municipal level, most technologies and practices exist. However, often this requires people to change their behaviour. They are not used to using these technologies or it costs them something. Clearly it is also important to invest in this transition.

I would like to reiterate that it is essential that the laws and regulations be enforced. Most of the existing laws and regulations are good ones. It is their enforcement that needs to be improved.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: So we don't need to reinvent the wheel.

We spoke about interdepartmental dialogue. On that topic, a few witnesses appeared before the committee and suggested that the Department of Environment work more closely with the Department of Agriculture and Agrifood, in order to guarantee the protection of the environment and habitats. What do you think of this?

Mrs. Priscilla Gareau: That is part of the ecosystem approach. A number of Canadian authors have written on the topic of this approach. Given that there is not enough communication between the different departments and directorates, this approach promotes greater and continuous cooperation between the different departments.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Thank you very much.

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

[English]

It was good to have you here with us today.

Thanks to our members for their good questions.

We're going to suspend now for just a few minutes while we move in camera to consider the draft report. *[Proceedings continue in camera]*

Thank you.

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