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Chair

Mr. Chris Warkentin

Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Chris Warkentin (Peace River, CPC)): I call the meeting to order.

This is the 16th meeting of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. Today we are pursuing our study of supplementary estimates (C) for 2013-14. We have the privilege of being joined by the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

Minister Valcourt, we want to thank you for being with us today.

We also have the deputy minister, Michael Wernick, as well as Pamela d'Eon, who is the acting chief financial officer. Thank you so much for joining us as well.

Thank you all for taking time out of your busy schedules to join us this afternoon.

Minister, we'll turn it over to you for your opening statement. Then, of course, we will have some questions for you to follow up on that.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt (Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for inviting me and my officials to outline our department's supplementary estimates (C) for 2013-14.

Before I do—and you alluded to it—I want to thank committee members for the valuable role they play in ensuring that Canadian tax dollars are used wisely and are achieving their intended results, among them, jobs, economic opportunities, and long-term prosperity for aboriginals and northerners. I would also note that, as this committee sees I'm sure, our government is currently pursuing a heavy legislative agenda related to aboriginal peoples and the north, and I want to express my gratitude to this committee for its ongoing work in moving this agenda forward.

Mr. Chair, from the many local projects—roads, water systems, schools, and connectivity projects—to initiatives aimed at large-scale reform such as the recently announced first nations control of first nations education act or the Northwest Territories lands and resources devolution agreement, our government is delivering on its commitment to create jobs and economic opportunities for aboriginal and northern communities. We remain focused on ensuring that aboriginal peoples are an integral part of our government's broader jobs and economic growth agenda, while building a renewed relationship with first nations people.

I believe we have made important progress in that vein. Areas where we have seen significant improvements are skills and training, education, economic development, claim resolution, and removing barriers to better governance.

[Translation]

Through work with willing partners, carefully targeted investments, legislation as well as claims agreements, we continue to take the concrete steps necessary to create the conditions for stronger, more self-sufficient aboriginal and northern communities.

Through these estimates, we are continuing to make strategic and targeted investments in the amount of \$72.4 million that are directed at shared priorities we have with first nations, Inuit, Métis and northerners. Furthermore, the supplementary estimates earmarked \$36.1 million to meet the Government of Canada's obligations under the Northwest Territories Lands and Resources Devolution Agreement, which I had the privilege of signing in Inuvik last June, on behalf of the Government of Canada, along with the Government of the Northwest Territories and five aboriginal partners.

This historic agreement gives northerners greater control over their own lands and resources, all the while unlocking the economic potential of the region by modernizing the existing regulatory regime. This will strengthen environmental stewardship and protection and ensure that the Northwest Territories remains an attractive place to live, work and invest.

The health and safety of first nations communities is also something we have to heart and it is a priority of our government. To that end, \$33.2 million from our supplementary estimates will address health and safety concerns related to flooding and other natural disasters that occurred in first nations communities in 2013.

[English]

As you will recall, a number of serious weather-related incidents this past year put first nation residents at risk, including flooding in Saskatchewan and floods and storm surges in the Atlantic region. Several communities in northern Manitoba and Ontario also had to be evacuated due to forest fires. Funds allocated in these supplementary estimates go towards provinces, territories, or other organizations that incurred costs in both responding to and recovering from these emergency situations.

In November 2013 I also announced a new comprehensive approach to emergency management that will better protect the health and safety of first nations people living on reserve. This new approach will simplify the current process by creating a new single window for first nations to secure funding for emergency costs. This will eliminate overlap and provide first nations and provinces and territories improved access to emergency funding when needed.

As well, we are revising the emergency management assistance program to strengthen program management and provide greater clarity about expense eligibility. Within that reform, we are also providing \$19.1 million to negotiate and implement new or renewed agreements with the provinces and territories that support emergency preparedness. This includes the development of emergency management plans for first nation communities that will provide for timely, effective, and efficient support in times of crisis.

A further important initiative funded through these supplementary estimates is the new Centre of Excellence for Matrimonial Real Property. A portion of the \$1 million will be provided to the centre to implement and enforce the Family Homes on Reserves and Matrimonial Interests or Rights Act. I was pleased to be in Vancouver this past December, Mr. Chair, to announce its coming into force and mark another important milestone towards ensuring that families living on reserve have access to the same basic rights and protections as all other Canadians in the case of a breakdown in marriage, common-law partnership, or divorce—protections that they have been without for nearly three decades.

● (1535)

[Translation]

Mr. Chair, we know that aboriginal youth represent the fastest growing segment of the population, and yet they have one of the lowest graduation and unemployment rates today. This situation concerns us.

Supplementary estimates (C) has also set aside another \$1 million for Cape Breton University's Purdy-Crawford Chair and aboriginal business studies to encourage business studies by aboriginal students. This money, which was announced in last year's economic action plan, will enable more young people to develop business, investment and corporate skills to spur economic development in aboriginal communities across the country.

Mr. Chair, as you can see, the expenditures detailed in these estimates are vital to the lives and livelihood of aboriginal people and northerners. They are key to improving their standard of living and quality of life, and continued economic development, jobs and growth.

I welcome the committee member's questions regarding my presentation. My officials and I will be pleased to answer your questions about any aspect of the supplementary estimates (C).

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll begin our rounds of questioning with Ms. Crowder for the first seven minutes.

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Mr. Minister. It's always a pleasure to see you before the committee.

I think part of the challenge for us as committee members is that we get this document called the report on plans and priorities that sets out the direction for the coming fiscal year. Then we get various estimates that actually don't talk about whether the department is achieving what it set out in its plans and priorities.

In your speech you mentioned the fact that one of your initiatives was continuing to work with partners, and so on, with regard to claims agreements. I wonder if you could update us on something from page 32 in the plans and priorities. I didn't see it in the supplementary (C)s and I can't tell if the department has spent money on this.

In the plans and priorities, there was a commitment to continue to advance negotiations on the administration of justice, and it specifically talked about the Teslin Tlingit Council First Nation. I wonder if you could tell me whether funds have been committed to the administration of justice agreement for Teslin.

● (1540)

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: You know, I'm here to discuss the supplementary estimates (C), and I'm afraid I'll have the chance to come back to talk about the estimates for the next fiscal year—

Ms. Jean Crowder: No, this is estimates for last year, though. It was mentioned specifically in the plans for this year.

The only reason I raised it was that in your speech you talked about claims agreements, and of course the Teslin Tlingit justice agreement was part of a claims agreement. Since you were mentioning that you made this commitment, if you can't update us today, then I wonder if the department could tell us if money has been spent on the administration of justice agreement with the Teslin Tlingit.

Perhaps they could provide that to us in writing if you aren't able to answer that today.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: I will ask my deputy to answer.

Mr. Michael Wernick (Deputy Minister, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development): I'm not familiar with the status of that specific agreement. We'll provide it in writing to the clerk, if that's acceptable.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Perfect. That's great. Thank you.

Mr. Minister, in your speech you also mentioned that you're providing \$19.1 million to negotiate and implement new or renewed agreements with regard to emergency preparedness. But when I look at the supplementary (C)s, I don't see the emergency preparedness.

Was the \$19.1 million that you mentioned in the main estimates?

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: The supplementary estimates identifies \$33.2 million for funding related to the emergency response and recovery funding to our partners that was incurred during 2013.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Right. I understand that piece, but you also in your speech mentioned \$19.1 million.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: Yes.

Ms. Jean Crowder: I assume that's not included in the supplementary (C)s but that's money that was already profiled, and you were just talking about what the government had already committed to.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: Correct.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Right: so that money—

Mr. Michael Wernick: Let me see if I can just correct something. You will see it in the main estimates for the next year, because we shifted the program around, as the minister said, in November. There will be more money going into prevention and planning and exercising—and hopefully less, in future years, on recovery and response.

Ms. Jean Crowder: But the \$33.2 million that's profiled in the supplementary (C)s has nothing to do with emergency management on reserves, not prevention, not mitigation....

Mr. Michael Wernick: No. It's recovery and rebuilding. It's reimbursing the department for money that we put out to help the communities last year.

Ms. Jean Crowder: So the supplementary (C)s are not dealing with the serious concerns raised in the Auditor General's report around the fact that the \$19 million that was profiled was insufficient to deal with emergency preparedness.

Mr. Michael Wernick: That has been responded to, and you will see that in the main estimates for 2014-15.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Okay.

With regard to the reprofiling of the estimates, my understanding is that this is not any new money. What's happening is that money that was already allocated in the department is being reallocated.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: That is correct.

Mr. Michael Wernick: For which, sorry...? The \$19 million is reallocated—

Ms. Jean Crowder: No, but in the supplementary (C)s, my understanding is that there is no new money. It's being reprofiled within the department.

Mr. Michael Wernick: No. It is new money to the department, but we don't need to ask Parliament for a full appropriation of it because we got an advance from Treasury Board.

So we don't need to ask you to vote the appropriation, but it is net new money for that purpose.

Ms. Jean Crowder: It's net new money to the department.

Mr. Michael Wernick: For that purpose, yes.

Ms. Jean Crowder: So the total authorities to date and the total estimates to date don't look a lot different.

Mr. Michael Wernick: Pam will help me on this, but in some cases we have an authority, which is sort of a ceiling, for a whole bunch of programs. If we don't need all of the money in a given year, then we don't have to come to Parliament for a particular top-up.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Yes, I understand that. What I'm saying is that the money has been reprofiled.

Mr. Michael Wernick: Yes.

Ms. Jean Crowder: For example, there was \$33 million for schools. Now it's hard to believe that the department couldn't spend the \$33 million that was already allocated.

This was money that was reprofiled from budget 2012. Is that correct?

Mr. Michael Wernick: In vote 10, of almost \$6 billion, there is some slippage across about 50 different programs, yes.

Ms. Jean Crowder: I'm just wondering why it was that the department couldn't get the money out the door for schools. We know that there's a long list of schools that need to be built or renovated or remediated in some way.

What prevented the department from getting that money out the door?

Mr. Michael Wernick: You only pay as the projects are proceeding. The projects are built by the first nation. They do the contracting, they do the building, and we reimburse them in progress payments as things start. Each project has its own little project management challenge. Sometimes it's a slowdown in the tendering process, the availability of suppliers. We had a delay in one project because of winter road problems in northern Manitoba.

• (1545)

Ms. Jean Crowder: What is it that the department could do to make sure that money is fully expended, given the huge demand for schools?

Mr. Michael Wernick: We manage every project as intensively as we can with the first nations who are doing the building. What we're trying to encourage, but not force, is as much as possible standardized design, using the same blueprints more than once, bundled projects. If we can do four projects in one tender, we'll do it that way. If there was a good modular design built in one part of the country, we suggest that they use the same design instead of starting from scratch. We help move along the land processes. Anything we can do to speed it up, I assure you we try to do.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Am I done?

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll turn to Mr. Leef now for the next round of questions.

Mr. Ryan Leef (Yukon, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good to see you here on committee, Minister.

I'm sure you know that in January we went into Yellowknife to hear witnesses on Bill C-15. I'm looking over your supplementary estimates (C) in respect to the Northwest Territories devolution act. Of course, we've heard from people like Premier Bob McLeod, who has said that this devolution act could be a game changer for the people in the Northwest Territories. As a Yukon member of Parliament, I have certainly experienced the benefits that our territory has gained through devolution over the 10-year period that we've enjoyed those benefits.

There's approximately \$36 million allocated to help implement the devolution agreement. I'm just wondering if you can let the committee know what the progress looks like in terms of the implementation of the devolution agreement, and how it will increase economic opportunities for the people of the north.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: As you may remember, I was in Inuvik last June 25 in order to sign the agreement on behalf of the Government of Canada with the Government of the Northwest Territories and the five aboriginal groups who signed the final agreement. After you've done the work here, after passing through the House before Christmas, Bill C-15 was referred to the Senate. Just yesterday, Senator Neufeld tabled a very favourable report of the Senate Committee on Energy, the Environment and Natural Resources. So we've been making excellent progress on implementation, and I fully expect that we will be able, indeed, to meet the target date of April 1.

Now the \$36.1 million that you mentioned received in the supplementary estimates (C) for devolution will allow for the department to cover one-time costs that are associated with the transition, and thereby satisfy our obligations in the Northwest Territories devolution agreement. That was an undertaking of Canada. Of that \$36.1 million, there is \$20.5 million that is a recovery of grant payments that were internally cashed, managed in supplementary estimates (B), and paid to the Government of the Northwest Territories to offset their one-time costs associated with devolution.

The economic opportunities that this act proposes to bring to the north are vast and well documented. You know what has been the experience in your own Yukon, and we are hopeful that starting April 1, the Northwest Territories see a new day.

Mr. Ryan Leef: Thank you.

So \$36 million, particularly the volume, set aside for a one-time cost is obviously a significant investment. Can you put in perspective for us how long the people and the leaders of the Northwest Territories have been working toward this devolution agreement? Why is this agreement such an important milestone in the lives of the people of the Northwest Territories?

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: The people in the Northwest Territories have waited a long time for this day. This started almost 80 years ago with successive devolution agreements covering other aspects of local governance including education, health care, and social services.

The bill that we have passed, which I understand is about to become law, has been in the making for over 25 years.

In 2001 the Government of Canada, the Government of the Northwest Territories, and the aboriginal summit, which was the body representing the seven regional aboriginal organizations, concluded a memorandum of intent on devolution. In 2002 all parties commenced devolution discussions and concluded a framework agreement. In 2011 a devolution agreement in principle was signed in January. It was in March 2013, if I recall, when the Prime Minister came to the Northwest Territories, that the agreement in principle, the consensus agreement, was reached, which led to the introduction of the bill that will result in this being in effect on April 1, 2014.

So it's been a long wait, but the northerners of the Territories can be proud on April 1, because they will be the architects of their own future.

● (1550)

Mr. Ryan Leef: Minister, I'd like to congratulate you on getting close to finished now. We're getting near the finish line. But certainly, as you've articulated, success after 80 years of attempts to bring this historic agreement to fruition for the people of the Northwest Territories is certainly a monumental achievement. So congratulations on working well with your GNWT partners to make this happen.

I understand that the NWT is mirroring some federal legislation to prepare for the assumption of control on April 1. Can you share with the committee what steps are being taken to ensure investor and stakeholder confidence in this transition period?

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: As I've mentioned, the activities required to implement the devolution agreement are now well advanced. We're making really good progress toward meeting the target date of April 1.

AANDC's pre-April 1, 2014, obligations include one-time funding to the Government of the Northwest Territories, as I've said, and to aboriginal groups. Our work includes notifications to private sector interests, aboriginal consultations, introduction of legislation in Parliament, transfer of records, transfer of assets, human resources, creation of inventories and of waste-operating sites, the excluded lands. There's a lot of work taking place.

Coming back to those one-time costs, the majority of... We do have one-time costs, as a department, and they are associated with the payments to employees pursuant to the federal work force adjustment directive, which we must respect. We have made extensive efforts to ensure that the proper human resource and infrastructure systems are in place to allow for the smooth transition, which is proving to work.

The payments of ongoing devolution funding to the Government of the Northwest Territories and for aboriginal groups will commence in 2014-15. This is not part of these estimates; it will be in the main estimates.

The Government of the Northwest Territories will receive \$67.3 million in ongoing funding through an increase to the gross expenditure base portion of the territorial formula financing, with AANDC entering into grant agreements with the government for \$3.6 million for obligations associated with transferred land claim obligations, and with aboriginal groups for the \$4.6 million identified in ongoing funding for those groups.

That would be the extent to which stakeholders can have confidence that this transition is taking place effectively.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll turn now to Ms. Bennett for the next round of questions.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Lib.): Thanks very much.

Thank you, Minister.

As you know, there were concerns in regard to budget 2014 that the money invested in education, which was to complement the act, doesn't flow for at least a year in infrastructure and implementation, and it's even longer than that to close the gap. There is a huge concern and there's a lack of trust that money flows.

Although your deputy answered my colleague's question, I would like to know this from you as minister. When budget 2012 said that it invested \$175 million over three years—so that's less than \$60 million a year for infrastructure and schools—how do you, as the minister, explain that you reprofiled \$33 million of it that isn't going to schools?

• (1555)

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: Well, specific to the budget of 2012 and school initiatives, this reprofiling of \$33 million has been requested and approved for 2013-14 because of the number of delays, which the deputy has referred to. It's all right to have the appropriation and the authorization of Parliament to spend the money, but you have to be able to spend the money. In this specific instance, in the case of Shamattawa, winter road access prevented the bringing in of the materials, so you cannot proceed with the school construction. We had natural disasters, such as flooding, for the Siksika in Alberta. You can't build during a storm or when all the infrastructure is damaged thereafter.

Also, truth be known, some of those delays resulted from the negotiations with certain first nation communities because of project scope, which could not be agreed upon. So although these commitments are there to build the schools, it must be done within the confines of what is possible, of course, and instead of the money lapsing, it is simply reprofiled so that we may continue on these specific projects.

If I may, I'd like to give you another example. Again in 2012, for example—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Minister, these are just excuses for why it didn't flow. I'd like to know, really, how many schools have you been to see in the country? These are a disaster. The kids are sick.

They're empty. I've been in many schools across the country that were closed for the week because everybody was sick.

This is an urgent thing, and you have \$60 million a year and you have lapsed \$33 million.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: I'm afraid, with all due respect, that you exaggerate the situation. I've been to many schools with kids speaking their native language, in great settings—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Do you—

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: —and not all—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Minister—

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: —schools are in that situation.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Minister, \$175 million isn't even close to the need over three years. You know that it's not even close to the need, and people can't understand how you can't even get this \$33 million out the door.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: Well, I have explained why. Because that money was committed to certain projects—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: But you can fix the process, Minister.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: Well, I cannot fix the temperature.

I cannot impose the scope of a school on a first nation.

We respect one another, we dialogue, we discuss, and unfortunately I will not impose on first nations anything that we cannot agree on, so—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: But is this not just more paternalism? Why can't you just let the money go out the door, and if the road doesn't work, it'll get... I mean, they're going to get... They need that school built.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: Just let the money out the door... I know that in your party you believe that the budget balances itself, but we don't, so we have to be careful with taxpayer dollars, and we have to respect taxpayers by ensuring that those investments are made not only according to the rule of law but that they make sense.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Minister, are you saying that when you saw this number, this \$33 million lapsed on education, on school infrastructure, you didn't ask your department what on earth happened?

• (1600)

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: First of all, I will correct you. That money hasn't lapsed, it has been reprofiled. Yes, it did—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: It didn't go to schools.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: But it didn't lapse. The money is being reprofiled so that it can be spent—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Not away from schools...

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: —in the next fiscal year.

Now, you asked what I did when I saw this. The first question I asked was, why, with all the needs we have, haven't we spent \$33 million? The answer is the one you've been provided with. These are unavoidable circumstances like weather, circumstances that prevented the spending of the money. What is important here is that we make sure these funds that are targeted for school construction be for school construction. It will happen but maybe in the next fiscal year.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Minister, there is money, just over \$1 million profiled here for matrimonial property on reserve and implementing the act. From all the testimony we had at committee from Wendy Grant-John, and reports, it seems that everybody knew the act alone was not going to be enough to keep women safe. There needed to be more money for shelters. There needed to be more money for policing in communities.

So in this little bit of money that you have there for implementing the act, I don't see anything for shelters. I don't see anything to help with increasing policing. What is that money actually going to do? What are the training and education activities, and...key officials? I guess people are wondering about what the centre of excellence will do when there's such great need in communities particularly right now in Alberta, where the Alberta shelters are really crying for help.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bennett.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: This money is going to other things.

The Chair: Ms. Bennett, you are out of time but I do want to give the minister an opportunity to answer so we'll turn it to the minister.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: Thank you. I'll be brief.

This is about the matrimonial interests or rights act. It's not about shelters. It's about implementing an act of Parliament, and the funding of \$1 million will consist of some \$216,000 for operating expenditures to support the implementation of the act; a public education and awareness campaign of \$142,000; the operation of the Centre of Excellence for Matrimonial Real Property, \$529,000; and training and education for judges and legal experts, \$125,000. I want to point out that this act has come into force recently and these are funds for the fiscal year 2013-14. In the main estimates you will see there are other investments that will be made for the other concerns that you've mentioned.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll turn to Mr. Dreeshen now for the next seven minutes.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen (Red Deer, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here. It's been a few years since I was on aboriginal affairs but I'm happy to be back. During that time I was on public accounts, so I had some opportunities to go through some of the numbers over the years and again to take a look at some of the Auditor General's reports. Of course, I'm pleased to see that all of the recommendations were agreed to by your department to make sure that we are actually able to deal with the issues that are there as far as emergency management on reserves is concerned.

Dealing with the annex that was supplied in supplementary estimates (C), I notice there's \$33.2 million that they're funding for on-reserve costs. I know that in November you were in Winnipeg and you announced the changes for this. I was just wondering if perhaps you could take a look at how the streamlining has taken place with this funding and how there's greater cooperation now being able to take place with provinces and territories. Perhaps you could just fine-tune a little bit of these details to find out how we can get some greater certainty for first nations that are dealing with emergencies.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: We brushed on the topic a bit earlier. As you stated, I was in Winnipeg to announce this new comprehensive approach to emergency management on reserve.

What was important—because after the summer especially with the flood in Alberta, we saw in Alberta, the province with which we have an agreement...

● (1605)

I raise my hat to the first nations affected and the Alberta government and our department for how this situation was handled. That was done pursuant to a solid agreement, which we will use and build into these other agreements we propose to enter into with the provinces.

One of the big issues that the provincial governments and first nations faced was the fact that we were under Public Safety's disaster financial assistance arrangements. First nations had to go through Public Safety to access the fund. Then the province had to go through Public Safety but come to us for what was on reserve. There was overlap.

So with the new single-window approach for first nations to secure funding for emergency costs, we built on the four pillars of emergency management such that now we will have resources to ensure that we address all four of them: recovery, preparedness, mitigation, and response.

These estimates today are not about that. These are for investments that we have had to make because of those floods and fires that occurred in those provinces this summer.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Thank you very much.

Again, I had opportunity to be at Siksika and in the west country and saw the damage there. Certainly the response was amazing, so I thank you for that.

As a former educator I was extremely pleased to see first nations control of first nations education act and I'm looking forward to seeing where that is going to take us.

In your presentation you spoke of the Purdy Crawford Chair in Aboriginal Business Studies at Cape Breton University. When I was here many years ago I had opportunities to talk to some amazing individuals in the aboriginal community who were moving forward as far as business is concerned. I'm wondering if you can talk about how this aboriginal participation can be helpful for the Canadian economy.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: I'm glad you raised this because I also had the privilege of being here over 20 years ago. When we talked about post-secondary education very few of those aboriginal youth had the opportunity to pursue post-secondary education. We currently invest over \$300 million annually in post-secondary education, including support for the development and delivery of college and university-level courses for first nations and Inuit students.

This funding to Purdy is intended to promote interest among Canada's aboriginal people in the study of business at the post-secondary level and to support research specific to aboriginal communities, curriculum development, and mentoring programs. The funding agreement with the university is already in place in this instance so the department is ready to honour the government's commitment to that contribution. This initiative is not huge but it is meaningful and significant and it will help build a brighter future, I hope, for aboriginal youth and help promote the independence and economic self-reliance of aboriginal communities.

•(1610)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll turn now to Mr. Genest-Jourdain.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jonathan Genest-Jourdain (Manicouagan, NDP): Minister, you said in your presentation that these supplementary estimates earmarked \$36.1 million to meet the Government of Canada's obligations under the Northwest Territories Lands and Resources Devolution Agreement.

Could you tell me if the reclamation of contaminated sites and abandoned mining sites are covered by these \$36.1 million? These are federal obligations that are prerequisites to ratifying the agreement.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: No.

Mr. Jonathan Genest-Jourdain: So, is it because...

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: It is not covered. It is not in the supplementary estimates.

Mr. Jonathan Genest-Jourdain: However, these are obligations of the federal government according to the agreement.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: That is correct.

Mr. Jonathan Genest-Jourdain: Mr. Minister, we know that the sum of \$22 million under vote 10 as well as a sum of \$12.7 million under vote 1 will be allocated for the remediation of contaminated sites, and that five of these sites will need to be remediated by March 31, 2014 with this money. If I calculate that quickly, it comes to \$35 million.

How much do you estimate the remediation of contaminated sites and of abandoned mine sites in the Northwest Territories will cost under the agreement? This remediation is a Crown obligation. If we assume that \$35 million covers around five sites, what do you estimate will be the total cost?

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: I do not think that is the way we should estimate the costs. For these sites, the supplementary estimates set out money spent during the 2013-2014 financial year, but that has nothing to do with the total cost of remediation for these sites.

On March 21, 2013, we had already started the remediation of these 35 sites. I do not have the amounts, but I can provide you with them if you like. This program covers more than 100 contaminated sites. It constitutes a liability of around \$2.3 billion. This is very little compared to the sums that must be invested to protect health safety and the environment of these sites.

Mr. Jonathan Genest-Jourdain: So you are not able to say which sums would be allocated for the remediation of contaminated

sites and abandoned mine sites under the Northwest Territories devolution agreement. I know that the agreement is being ratified, so this is a Crown obligation. After all, you opened the door to this in the budget. I would like to know if there have at least been estimates and if you have an idea of the final amount that this would represent for the Northwest Territories.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: We are talking of around \$2.3 billion for the 135 sites. But I am sure we can give you information on the anticipated costs for the sites that have already been assessed. That information is available.

Mr. Michael Wernick: We maintain the responsibility for sites created before the devolution.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: That is correct.

Mr. Jonathan Genest-Jourdain: How much time do I have left, Mr. Chair?

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: Of course, we are talking about sites for which Canada maintained responsibility after devolution.

Mr. Jonathan Genest-Jourdain: Approximately how many such sites exist, Mr. Minister?

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: There are...

Mr. Michael Wernick: There are around 100 throughout the north.

Mr. Jonathan Genest-Jourdain: Around 100. Thank you.

I give the floor to my colleague.

[*English*]

The Chair: You have 40 seconds, Ms. Hughes.

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskaing, NDP): Well, what can I say in 40 seconds?

To perhaps stay on the same theme, when we are looking at the decontaminated sites, Wikwemikong first nation is one that has sites, and it's the oil wells. In figuring out these dollar amounts and how the government should make sure those dollars are spent wisely, why is it that when there are so many other wells that need to be capped, that money...? You have the cost of the machinery to put on there, but the machinery is already there, so the cost to have the other ones capped would have been much cheaper.

I'm trying to figure out how we can justify not moving ahead on some of these projects while the machinery is already there.

•(1615)

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: Again, here what is happening. The reason for reprofiling this \$35 million is the delays that necessarily follow or accompany these technical regulatory and procurement challenges.

We're in the north. These are very complex sites to remediate, whether you're talking about Giant Mine, Bullmoose Mines, United Keno Hill Mines or Great Bear Lake mine. All of these were delayed due to technical regulatory and procurement challenges.

What is important is that we cannot use the money that is appropriated for these sites and just shift it to others, because of course, we have to continue the work there. Those delays in the finalization of the work taking place result in certain funds not being spent that have to be reprofiled, which were reprofiled.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll turn to Mr. Seeback for the next round of questions.

Mr. Kyle Seeback (Brampton West, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I know you touched on it briefly in some of your remarks already today, but I do notice that in the supplementary estimates (C) we have two allocations for the implementation of the matrimony and real property rights legislation. I know that only received royal assent late last year.

Can you give us an idea on the progress you're making towards this implementation.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: As I indicated earlier, in December we announced the creation of the Centre of Excellence for Matrimonial Real Property. This group will be instrumental in helping first nations to adopt the laws they deem necessary to protect and provide these rights to those families on reserve.

Necessarily there has to be a campaign to inform first nations about the benefits of this legislation. As you know, the act came into force in December, but the federal provisional rules will only come into effect one year after; that is, in December 2014. At that time those first nations that do not have their own matrimonial property laws will be subjected to the federal act. At this time, as we speak, we don't have many first nations, if any, that have shown interest in passing their own legislation. But then I attribute this to the fact that the centre of excellence is taking its first breaths, starting to operate, and we'll be able to give more and better information and examples to first nations so they can get on it for the benefit of the families living on reserve.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: I think it's an excellent piece of legislation, and I think it will make a real difference. Other than the obvious benefits, why do you think it's an important piece of legislation?

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: It is important because for too long other Canadians, members of families or those in common-law relationships, even in the case of death, take for granted, as people living off reserve, the benefits of the matrimonial property rights we all enjoy.

I can't fathom the situation. So many attempts have been made for years to try to solve this problem. I happen to have been practising family law when it was decided by the Supreme Court that these laws did not apply on reserve.

Now in our—I could call it—action plan to protect women and children on reserve, they enjoy the same rights all other Canadians do. I think that was important to do, and now we are in the process of implementation. I trust that the centre of excellence, along with all first nation communities across the country, will pull together to ensure that this be efficiently and effectively implemented for the benefit of women, children, and everyone living on reserve.

•(1620)

Mr. Kyle Seeback: I'll share my final bit of time with Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Mark Strahl (Chilliwack—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Seeback, and, Mr. Minister, for being here.

One of the lines here mentions funding for out-of-court settlements. I'm wondering if you could indicate how many settlements that might have been or give us examples of, either you or the officials, what that refers to.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: In the first instance, this over-\$1 million item included in the supps was for an out-of-court settlement on which Canada and the plaintiff reached an agreement. It was Paul First Nation v. HMTQ. It's an out-of-court settlement that was reached. This was to the effect that settlement.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll turn now to Ms. Hughes for the next round of questions.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Thank you very much.

I'm going to share my time with my colleague, Ms. Crowder.

You referenced the first nations control of first nations education act and the need to continue to take the concrete steps necessary to create the conditions for stronger, more self-sufficient aboriginal and northern communities, yet there was a press release dated March 5 about the early childhood intervention program and the funding that's being stopped. It's saying the funding is to be cut at the end of June.

I'm just wondering if in fact that funding is being cut and is it being reallocated somewhere else?

The Chair: Ms. Hughes, I didn't hear the reference to the estimates with regard to that.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: The minister has mentioned the first nation education piece, so I'm just wondering if that is part of the first nation education. There is a little bit of flexibility usually when the minister is here, right?

The Chair: Absolutely, but I thought we were diverting maybe completely off the subject.

But, Mr. Minister, maybe if you'd—

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: I'd like to know to what you are referring.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: It's the early intervention program.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: Where?

Mrs. Carol Hughes: In Saskatchewan, in Saskatoon, this was a press release in Saskatoon.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: Okay, the press again....

Mrs. Carol Hughes: That's why I was asking you. This came out and I'm just wondering if in fact this funding, the early childhood intervention program funding, is being cut. It says that it's going to be done at the end of June. I'm just wondering if that is in fact the case.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: This has got to do with the estimates and the spending for the next fiscal year, it has nothing to do with the supps (C) before us. When we talk about the reprofiling, it has nothing to do with that. As to the amount of money that is invested for childhood and family services, that is in the main estimates. But this year, which is the year we are concerned with, I believe I can safely say that there have been no cuts to that program.

•(1625)

Mrs. Carol Hughes: So in fact there won't be a cut to the early childhood intervention program.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: I'm talking about the year 2013-14. As to 2014-15, I'll be able to discuss that when we do the estimates.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: I can't get an answer, so I'll pass it over to my colleague.

The Chair: Ms. Crowder.

Ms. Jean Crowder: I have a question that is in the supps (C), and it's with regard to treaty land entitlement. I know that there was money reprofiled from Manitoba and Saskatchewan. I wonder, first of all, what that impact was and whether or not there was any consideration of using that money around the creation of urban reserves within the TLE process. We know that there is a lot of demand.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: No, this is the implementation of the treaty land entitlement agreements. It is working, of course, with first nations in Manitoba to meet these outstanding treaty land entitlement obligations. As for the reprofiled funds, in the case of Manitoba where it's \$1.8 million, our federal payments set out in the Manitoba framework agreement for treaty land entitlement are for the Fox Lake Cree Nation, Shamattawa First Nation, and Sayisi Dene First Nation. These first nations, for whom this money is there, must first sign their treaty land entitlement agreements before we can disburse the funds.

Ms. Jean Crowder: But we know that there are significant delays in having the TLEs move ahead. The Auditor General's report from a few years back was very critical of the department.

Couldn't that money have been used for some other TLE?

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: To be fair to the process, with respect to treaty land entitlement acres available for acquisition or selection by first nations, approximately 40% of land has been converted to reserve status in Manitoba, with close to 9,000 acres remaining to be converted.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Does that include urban reserves in those numbers?

Mr. Michael Wernick: It can.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: It can, but it doesn't mean that they were all urban or not. Some of it may be urban reserves.

When you talk about treaty land entitlement, if you look, for example, with respect to those acres currently selected or acquired by first nations in Manitoba for additions to reserves under the treaty and land entitlement agreement, approximately 61% have been converted to reserve status, with close to 370,000 acres remaining to be converted.

If you want to know how much of these acres have gone to urban, I'm sure we could provide you with that information.

Ms. Jean Crowder: And the backlog...

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: And the backlog?

Ms. Jean Crowder: Yes.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: It's not so much the backlog. On the backlog, work is taking place all the time. I think they've made

serious progress in recent years and we are continuing because there are over a million acres that are provided for in the Manitoba treaty land entitlement framework agreement. I think we're making good progress.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Minister, again we want to thank you for the time that you've taken out of your day to spend with us. That went very quickly, but it is more than an hour. We do appreciate you being here.

We'll suspend, colleagues, and we'll return momentarily with the officials.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: Thank you.

The Chair: The meeting is suspended.

•(1625)

(Pause)

•(1630)

The Chair: I'll call the meeting back to order.

We do want to thank our officials for staying. We recognize that most of the questions that members wanted to ask have been asked of the minister. We want to thank you.

We also want to simply remind you that there was a commitment to get back to Ms. Crowder with regard to information on one of the questions. I don't think there is anything else.

Pardon me, Mr. Genest-Jourdain, there may have been something.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jonathan Genest-Jourdain: The minister also indicated that he would provide me with a written response, because some of my questions deserve to be answered in greater depth. I would like to draw that to your attention, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Very good.

If that can be undertaken it would be appreciated.

Mr. Michael Wernick: Certainly.

Mr. Chairman, I have a general comment that might be helpful on a couple of the questions. There were a lot of questions about why didn't you just move money from one thing to another within the year, and it's a fair question.

The basic ground rules are that once you have voted money and it has been appropriated for certain purposes, Treasury Board makes sure that the money is spent for the purposes that Parliament allocated it. I don't have the authority to move money willy-nilly from one thing to another. We usually have to go through Treasury Board to move money from one thing to another and in many cases we will have to come to Parliament to make those changes. Those often show up in the supplementary estimates.

We try to squeeze out every value that we can, but sometimes money has to move from one year to another and sometimes it does move within programs within the department's overall appropriation.

The Chair: Thank you.

Again, I hope we can get some of that information for which commitments were made.

I do appreciate your being here.

The meeting is adjourned.

Colleagues, these estimates have been reported back to the House.
Therefore, we will adjourn and see everybody in a couple of weeks.

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