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Chair

Mr. Harold Albrecht

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•(1100)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC)): I'd like to call to order the third meeting of the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development. I realize that the clock at the back doesn't quite show 11 o'clock, but our BlackBerrys are all showing 11, so I'm going to begin. We do have a quorum.

We welcome today the Interim Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, Mr. Neil Maxwell. He has with him James McKenzie, Bruce Sloan, and Andrew Ferguson. Welcome to all of you.

Mr. Maxwell, I understand that you have an opening statement you'd like to make, so please proceed. Welcome again to our committee.

Mr. Neil Maxwell (Interim Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, Office of the Auditor General of Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and good morning.

I'm pleased to present my fall of 2013 report that was tabled in the House of Commons last Tuesday. In this report we looked at what the federal government has done to protect nature and to advance sustainable development on behalf of Canada. To support the understanding of these issues, we have included in our report a backgrounder on biological diversity. This document explains the nature and importance of biodiversity, the threats to it, and some good management practices.

As in past reports, our work has led us to conclude that the government has not met key commitments, deadlines, and obligations to protect Canada's natural spaces. Let me give you a few examples from our most recent audits.

When we looked at the conservation of migratory birds, we found that Environment Canada had missed key deadlines. More than half of the conservation strategies being developed by the department have been overdue since 2010. In addition to playing a key role in our ecosystems, for example as pollinators, birds are considered good indicators of the health of the environment. I am concerned that some groups of birds, such as shorebirds, have declined by 40% to 60% since the 1970s. Declines in bird populations highlight the need for action on conservation strategies.

[Translation]

While Environment Canada and its partners have achieved good results with their efforts to restore waterfowl populations, the

department's conservation planning is lagging for other groups of birds.

Improvements in waterfowl populations show that results can be achieved through partnerships, using good conservation planning and clear objectives. Environment Canada needs to apply these types of approaches to help with the conservation of other bird groups.

One of Canada's main approaches to protecting biodiversity is to establish protected areas to maintain habitat for wildlife, including migratory birds and species at risk. In our audit of protected areas for wildlife, we found that Environment Canada has not met its responsibilities for preparing management plans and monitoring the condition of the protected areas it manages.

Habitat loss is recognized as the greatest threat to plants and animals in Canada. Environment Canada's protected areas are roughly the size of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia combined, and the department acknowledges that the state of more than half of these areas is less than adequate. The department's management plans for its protected areas are largely outdated and monitoring is insufficient to track ecosystem changes and address emerging threats.

[English]

Given the poor state of many protected areas and the pressures they face, Environment Canada needs to develop relevant management plans to ensure that its protected areas fulfill their intended purpose as a refuge for wildlife.

Turning to our audit of ecological integrity in national parks, we also found that despite Parks Canada's significant efforts in many areas, the agency is struggling to protect ecosystems in Canada's parks. Parks Canada has missed important deadlines and targets and is facing a significant backlog of work. It has yet to assess the condition of 41% of park ecosystems. Of those it has assessed, many are in poor condition and many are in decline. The agency has not clarified how, nor by when, it intends to clear this backlog and address threats to the integrity of ecosystems in Canada's parks.

Given the increasing threats to park ecosystems and the challenges Parks Canada faces, the agency needs to clearly map out how it will avoid falling further behind in its efforts to protect ecological integrity in Canada's national parks.

Our audit of the plans and strategies to support the recovery of species at risk also showed missed commitments and significant delays in planning activities. Environment Canada, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, and Parks Canada have not met their obligations under the Species at Risk Act to develop recovery strategies. Of the 360 strategies they had to produce by March 2013, roughly 40% were overdue. Environment Canada is responsible for most of this backlog, with 84% of its strategies lagging by more than three years. At the current rate of progress, we estimate that it would take the department at least 10 years to catch up.

●(1105)

Recovery strategies and plans are the road map to the recovery of a species. They set out the actions needed to stop or reverse a species' decline. With so many overdue, Environment Canada, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, and Parks Canada are missing the necessary tools to direct recovery efforts.

[*Translation*]

We also examined funding programs that promote the recovery of species listed under the Species at Risk Act. In that audit, we were pleased to note that Environment Canada is tracking the results of individual programs. Going forward, the department should roll up results across programs to fully understand what its funding achieves.

In another audit, we looked at whether Environment Canada had fulfilled selected responsibilities under the international Convention on Biological Diversity. While the department has led the development of goals and targets for Canada, it has not defined the actions needed to achieve them. Canada's targets under the United Nations' Convention on Biological Diversity are key to conserving biodiversity in our country. Achieving them will require a concerted effort from many players, from governments to businesses to individual Canadians.

Given the amount of work that needs to be done by 2020, Environment Canada must play an active role in developing and coordinating priority actions to address increasing threats to biodiversity.

In this report, we also present our reviews of federal and departmental sustainable development strategies. Canada's sustainable development strategies are a key tool for directing the government's activities and communicating results in this area.

Though the government is producing sustainable development plans and providing reports to Canadians on its progress, we found that these documents are not fulfilling their potential. They do not clearly communicate past progress or future direction.

[*English*]

Finally, I am pleased to see that Canadians continue to use the environmental petitions process to raise their concerns with federal departments. This year, petitions touched on federal research on hormone-disrupting substances, risks related to the proposed increase in tanker traffic in British Columbia, and the long-term management of federal contaminated sites.

In closing, these audits show that despite some important accomplishments, government has not met key commitments,

deadlines, and obligations to protect Canada's wildlife and natural spaces. The challenge of protecting Canada's natural heritage is immense and the pressures are growing.

So where does that leave us?

I believe it is time for departments to follow through on their commitments and improve on their results. In the face of growing pressures and significant challenges, it is clear that to make any headway in protecting Canada's environment, government needs to look differently at the problems and find new solutions.

Mr. Chair, I would like to sincerely thank you and your committee members for the invitation to appear today regarding our report. You as parliamentarians contribute to the effectiveness of our work because of the crucial role you play in the accountability process. You do so when you invite senior officials, as you have today, to answer questions about our findings and describe their action plan to implement responses to our recommendations.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Chair, that concludes my opening remarks. We would be happy to answer your questions.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Maxwell.

We will now move to the opening round of questions. We'll begin with the government side. Mr. Carrie.

Mr. Colin Carrie (Oshawa, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and I want to thank everyone for being here today.

I'll get right to the questions.

Mr. Commissioner, your report identifies the need to increase transparency and engagement. However, consultation and collaboration are mentioned as key factors contributing to delays in completing recovery documents.

Now, given the commitment of our government to consult with aboriginal communities and other experts in the field, isn't it appropriate to ensure that recovery documents are supported by the people who have important information to contribute and are best placed to implement the recovery?

I ask because it seems like a catch-22, in that the delays are being caused by extensive engagement. I was wondering if you could comment on that.

●(1110)

Mr. Neil Maxwell: Certainly, Mr. Chair.

Consultation is absolutely important here. The federal government has some important places where it can act on species at risk, particularly the federal lands. Those are not inconsiderable: the protected areas of Environment Canada, as I mentioned, are equal to New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. That's a large area where the federal government can act on its own, as it can in national parks and other federal lands.

That said, I quite agree. I think action on species at risk depends upon action by everyone. We really signal that as an important area for action.

In terms of the impact on timelines, we know that this is some of the explanation for the delays that we have noted in our report. I think I'd just simply highlight the importance of getting those tools in place. It is a concern that of the over 500 species at risk in Canada, at the moment only 7 have the recovery strategy and the action plan necessary.

I support the efforts of the government to try to deal with that backlog.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Your report does seem to be critical of Environment Canada's progress in completing these recovery strategies for species at risk. It's my understanding that the reason for the slower than expected completion of these strategies is the extensive consultation process that has been undertaken. For instance, when Environment Canada was consulting on the boreal caribou, they held not one but two rounds of consultation where over 500 aboriginal communities were contacted.

Don't you think the delay can be justified if it's due to the engagement of aboriginal communities?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: Again, I think the collaboration is very important.

I will say that when we looked at the recovery strategies and action plans that have been completed, even though we are critical that there are far too few of them, they are extremely well done. I've looked at those myself. I'm impressed.

We were critical of action plans in many other areas. When you look at an action plan that's done for the recovery of species by those three departments, they're very thorough. You can go to the back and find, very clearly, what projects are going to be done, who's going to lead them, and what it's going to cost. So they are extremely well done.

The consultation does take time. I would be the last person to say that we should rush it and do it poorly. However, I come back to saying that these are species at risk. We estimated that it will take Environment Canada 10 years to deal with that backlog. Many species at risk are undergoing quite significant and steep, rapid declines. The beluga population in the last 10 years has declined by 10% to 20%. I think the urgency of the matter suggests that the department needs to accelerate its efforts.

Mr. Colin Carrie: In your report you are critical of Environment Canada's progress on the recovery strategies. It appears that you somewhat overlook the fact that roughly 70% of the identification of critical habitat has been completed. I'm sure you know that this step in the recovery strategy process is the most laborious and time-

consuming. This is to say that the majority of the work for the species that require these recovery strategies is complete.

Why does it seem that you've overlooked this important piece of information when commenting on Environment Canada's performance? When I look at it, a lot of these timelines are self-imposed—things that we have put forward.

In looking around the world, I'm curious if you're aware of any other jurisdictions that are doing work this complicated. If so, how many are actually out there doing this type of work? Could you comment on those questions, please?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: Certainly, Mr. Chair.

We do comment. We have a slightly different number. That may simply be due to the fact we finished our work slightly earlier than the numbers you might have. At the time in we did the work, 40% of the recovery strategies were missing critical habitat.

Certainly identifying critical habitat in some of these species is quite self-evident. In many other species, scientists don't know what that critical habitat is. That does add time to it.

On the question of whether we've looked what other countries are doing in comparable cases, we did not do that in this particular piece of work.

I think I would maybe underscore two things again. The fact that critical habitat so often isn't understood well by scientists speaks to one of those big challenges. We talk quite often in the report of the big challenges facing the people who are charged with this. That's one of them. Scientists really don't understand well how ecosystems are working. That does make it a practical difficulty when they're doing recovery strategies.

Again, I would just come back to the urgency of the situation to suggest that work does need to accelerate.

● (1115)

Mr. Colin Carrie: I think we acknowledge that. I was wondering if you could acknowledge that a lot of these timelines that we put out there are self-imposed ones. As far as the rest of the world is concerned, it seems that Canada is leading the world in this type of work. I'm not aware of other jurisdictions that are doing this work as well as Canada is doing it.

Mr. Neil Maxwell: The timelines, Mr. Chair, are self-imposed in the sense that they are embedded in laws passed by Parliament. They are imposed. It is something that is a hard requirement under the act.

Again, I can't comment on how Canada is doing relative to others. I'm struck by the fact that we have over 500 species at risk in this country now and at this point in time only seven have both those tools in place.

The Chair: You have about 30 seconds.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Mr. Chair, I just would like to say that I think Canada overall.... When you look at the very aggressive timelines that have been put forward, when you start to consult as intensively as we have, there are certain things you can predict and certain things you cannot predict. But I think it's important, as the commissioner said, that we get this right and do our best to get these in as quickly as we can.

The Chair: Okay, thank you, Mr. Carrie.

We'll move now to Ms. Leslie for seven minutes.

Ms. Leslie.

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks very much for appearing here and for this report. It's good reading.

My first question is really an overall one, not looking at a particular chapter.

When you started your comments, Mr. Maxwell, you said that government had not met key commitments, deadlines, and targets. As an opposition member who wants to hold government to account, what I want to know is why?

Is it due to cutbacks? Are these targets impossible to achieve? Is it, as Mr. Carrie alludes to, a problem with consultation eating up a lot of that time? Why exactly aren't we meeting these targets and commitments? Is it management? Is this a question of structure within the organization and management?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: Thank you, Mr. Chair, that's an important question.

I think there are multiple factors here. I think in some cases resources are a factor. I would say, though, that it's important to remember that these problems really date from some time ago. We talked about many of these problems back in the 1990s. In the time since, there have been periods of reductions in resources and periods where resources have been increased. So I think it's a factor, but it's only a factor of several.

I do think that in many of our audits we found that management could use existing resources better. In some cases we identified processes that could be simplified and streamlined. The process to update a management plan at Environment Canada has 60 steps in it, so there are some cases where things could be simplified. That's important. I'd also underscore the number of times we found unclear plans and objectives, which can't help but lead to a situation where efforts are not clearly focused. That's never a good use of resources.

Part of this is setting priorities. It's management 101—setting priorities and following through. We auditors talk about that a lot, but we talk about it a lot because we find those absences a lot.

The final thing I'd come back to, as I did in answer to an earlier question, is that these are immense challenges. The ecosystems in Canada are on the receiving end of all the other environmental problems we face: climate change, pollution, and invasive species. So a lot of this is just the immensity of the task.

I was reminded of an analogy one of my predecessors once used. He said this is like trying to go up the down escalator. It's not that the

government's not doing important things; a lot of this is simply just the immensity of the challenges.

I am quite troubled by many of the trends that I see in the ecosystems in Canada.

Ms. Megan Leslie: Your management 101 comment strikes a chord with me because you do point out that there have been successes. There are well-managed projects out there, but clearly it's not happening across the board.

I'd like to move on to targets. You did talk about not meeting targets or commitments or deadlines. We've had a lot of talk at previous committee hearings by some members about how targets are politically motivated, that they're sort of not worth the paper they're printed on. I personally disagree with that.

I'm wondering if you see these targets as achievable. Do you see them as being real, based-on-science, as things that we can work towards? Do these targets actually make sense?

• (1120)

Mr. Neil Maxwell: It's difficult to say across the board, obviously. By and large I would say that the targets do make sense. I mean, they are based on science. The targets for the Species at Risk Act are self-imposed. They are in law, but again, when I look at how quickly species at risk are degrading, how the population is deteriorating, there's a reason for urgency. So by and large, as I look across these audits, Mr. Chair, I don't see a situation where unreasonably stringent targets have been reached.

I can give you a few examples. There's a Parks Canada one I can give, but I don't want to burn up the member's time.

Ms. Megan Leslie: No. Your perspective there is what I'm looking for and I appreciate it. Thank you.

I want to move on to some other questions around funding for our species at risk. You say the department is not in a position to measure what aspects of recovery plans it's providing funding for. So there's this idea that we don't know how effective the funding is and what the end results are. I look at the last budget and I think that about \$20 million is going to the Nature Conservancy, or somewhere around that. I'm not saying that the Nature Conservancy isn't doing good work, but it's concerning to me that we would be handing over \$20 million to any organization.

I know it's clear in black and white in your report, but can you tell us a bit more about how we don't know how effective that money is or what it's being used for, or if it's cheating the end goals? That's correct, isn't it?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: Thank you, Chair.

I've been an auditor for 31 years now, so I've looked at this issue in many programs. We were quite pleased to see the extent to which these programs' results were being measured. So by and large this is a good-news story, I think. For each of the five programs they understand what's happening, what projects are being funded, the results, and how much habitat is being protected. So they have all the individual pieces of a results picture. It's really a matter of understanding better. For example, with the piping plover, there are 80 different projects across those five programs that are supporting it.

It's really about pulling all of this together. That's what's really important for us. That then allows Environment Canada to understand, for that roughly \$73 million being spent each year, how close they are getting to what needs to be done to assist in implementing the recovery strategy, in this example, for the piping plover.

Ms. Megan Leslie: Are the goals actually being met with these projects? The projects are well tracked, but not the goals.

Mr. Neil Maxwell: Yes. That's a good way of summarizing it, Chair.

As to the \$20 million, I don't know much about that. Perhaps the government officials appearing afterward will help. I think that money's going through the natural areas conservation program.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Leslie. Your time is up.

Now to Mr. Sopuck for seven minutes.

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

The issue of targets relates to the issue of definition. For example, if a farmer wants to grow a tonne of wheat per acre, has a target of a tonne of wheat per acre, we know what a tonne of wheat is. So a biodiversity target, as I see the word throughout your report, depends on the definition of biodiversity. Can you define biodiversity for me, as succinctly as you can?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: Chair, thank you, that's a good question.

There's no single definition of biodiversity that we've found fits all situations. In the background document we provide, we talk about that from different perspectives. Sometimes it's defined in terms of restoring natural cycles. The problem there is defining what's a natural cycle. Biodiversity is often looked at—and I think this is probably a much more useful way of looking at it—from an ecological services perspective. Here I mean the services that are being provided by an ecosystem, either to us or to others.

We do know that there's no particular definition of biodiversity. That's an important discussion and it would be a very good question to ask of the officials who will appear after me, but I don't sense that's a major constraint on a day-to-day basis for the people who are actually putting these things in place.

• (1125)

Mr. Robert Sopuck: It's a huge constraint, simply because how can you have a target if you can't define it? You've confirmed for me yet again that these are very difficult to define. So by definition, the achieving of difficult to define targets is in and of itself extremely difficult.

What I saw in your report were a lot of comments about processes and plans and recovery strategies and so on, and very little about actual on-the-ground work. I happen to know a lot about the natural areas conservation program because I have a number of projects in my own constituency, and I even have part of my own land enrolled in the particular program. Also in the habitat stewardship program, I have a number of projects in my constituency. That's \$18 million a year. Of course, we also have the famous North American waterfowl management plan, which started in 1987 and is probably the largest conservation program in world history. We can see that on the chart you put in your report about the response of migratory birds, waterfowl in particular, to that particular approach.

Don't you think that actual on-the-ground work, where we talk about hectares of land being conserved and managed in an ecological fashion, is what is really important, as opposed to strategies and plans?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: It is absolutely important to understand those results. In that particular audit we were quite complimentary of Environment Canada.

I don't think it's an either/or. I think the plans and the clarity of targets are equally important. So I don't think it's an either/or.

Maybe I could respond to both of those questions by giving the example that I was going to say earlier. I don't believe the lack of a definition is making it difficult to achieve targets or leaving us in a situation where targets are just picked out of thin air.

The national parks have a fire cycle. They're trying to re-establish the natural cycle of fire and regeneration. Of course, we've worked quite actively as a society to suppress fire for a long time. That has left ecosystems in a situation where they are no longer functioning as they once did.

There were questions about Parks Canada and their targets, whether they are realistic, grounded in something. The panel in 2000 recommended that the historical fire cycle be re-established. They suggested 50%. Parks Canada reduced that target and aimed for 20%. We found that only a quarter of the parks are actually achieving that reduced target.

I cite that example because, if you talk to the fire experts in national parks, they fully agree, as I do, with the member's point. It's hard to know what we're aiming for in relation to natural cycles and biodiversity. They'll talk about the fact that even though they have tree rings of historical fire cycles, they don't know if first nations have affected those earlier fires or whether that was the natural way. So they don't know what they're trying to restore it to.

My point is that in that case, as in many other cases, we are far away from re-establishing the level of natural functioning of ecosystems. At some point, this will become important. But I don't think we're there yet.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: I strongly dispute your last statement, living next to a national park as I do. But let's leave that aside for now.

You said that species at risk are degrading. You are aware of the situation of the white pelican, the double-crested cormorant, and the peregrine falcon. These three species were on the list many years ago and have recovered. So broad statements like "all species at risk are degrading" don't help the situation. It's more important to be specific.

For example, I'll ask you if any species in Canada has gone extinct in the last 20 years? If one has, could you name it?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: I'll have to get back to you on that. There are cases of extirpations. Whether there is extinction everywhere on the globe—

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Extirpation is fine. Could you name a case?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: I'll have to get back to the committee on that.

I hope you don't believe that I am disagreeing with the general point that I hear you making. We have been very careful in this report to talk about the success stories. A brief mention was made before of water fowl. That is an important success story. We devoted probably three pages of our report to it. I've described that in the media as a remarkable story of how, with collaboration of governments, over 300 groups have been able to restore things.

• (1130)

Mr. Robert Sopuck: I was involved with implementing the North American waterfowl management plan in Manitoba many years ago. I wanted to point out that recognition should be given to the hunting community. It was the waterfowl hunters that first saw the threat to waterfowl, and they are the ones who stepped up to the plate with major resources to kick-start the thing. It's easy to come up with a list of all the partners, but it was the waterfowl hunting community and the conservation departments from the United States, Canada, and Mexico that were responsible for this.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sopuck. Your time is up.

We move now to Mr. McKay.

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and my thanks again to Mr. Maxwell and his colleagues for appearing today.

On page 3 of the first part of your report you say that the "Legislative requirements under the Species at Risk Act have not been met." What is the legal consequence of that?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: I'm going to ask my colleagues if there's something specifically embedded in SARA that I'm not familiar with.

Bruce?

Mr. Bruce Sloan (Principal, Sustainable Development Strategies, Audits and Studies, Office of the Auditor General of Canada): I don't believe there is a consequence in the act, although we can confirm that for the committee.

Hon. John McKay: This is a piece of legislation by the Parliament of Canada. You make the observation that they are 10 years behind and everybody shrugs their shoulders.

Mr. Bruce Sloan: I don't recall from reading the act whether there is a consequence, but we can confirm that to the committee.

Mr. Neil Maxwell: There are a number of legal tools the federal government can use, permitting and such, under SARA to achieve its objectives. I do not believe that there are any legal sanctions, if you will, on the government. That's not unusual in legislation of this sort. It's not as if something's not achieved and people go to jail.

Hon. John McKay: The problem then is that legislation just becomes aspirational goals and then the government of the day gets to decide whether it's going to fund this or not fund this.

The second question has to do with page 12, where you say, "The department has not set out what plans it intends to continue doing in connection with monitoring, promoting and facilitating national implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity." Again, what is the legal consequence of not implementing the convention?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: Mr. Chair, it is an international convention. There are no international sanctions in that convention, to my knowledge.

Hon. John McKay: Going to Mr. Sopuck's concern, you say, "Environment Canada's efforts on migratory bird conservation is centred primarily on waterfowl, with good results", etc., etc. Then you critique it, and then the department responds and says, "The Department agrees with all of the recommendations". Either something's wrong here or something's not wrong. If the department is agreeing that something is wrong, which is what you've identified here, I don't know how the government then turns around and says it is doing perfectly fine. Those two thoughts can't live in the same universe, the department agreeing and simultaneously the government saying it is meeting all of its targets and obligations.

The Chair: Is that a question?

Hon. John McKay: It's just an observation, sir.

I have a question with respect to Parks Canada. On page 24 you talk about a decline of 15% in resources, 23% in staff, and over a third in scientific staff. It's an immense challenge. I don't disagree with that. But did you actually disaggregate Environment Canada's budget to see whether the burden of meeting deficit targets fell on one particular aspect of Environment Canada's work or another?

• (1135)

Mr. Neil Maxwell: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In this instance, we're talking about Parks Canada's budget, separate from Environment Canada's, even though the same minister is responsible for both. We did not look to see how.... We really focused on the question of how they were doing on the conservation budget. Parks Canada has a number of other significant budgets. This is a very significant budget among its budgets, but only one of those. So we really just focused on the ecological integrity part of what they do, not the heritage sites and such.

Hon. John McKay: Did you actually do a review of the various budget components of both Parks Canada and Environment Canada?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: Mr. Chair, it was only on a selective basis. In this particular case, we looked at it because, as the member mentioned, we were concerned about the extent of the backlog of work to meet the commitments Parks Canada has made. We looked at it in this particular instance largely just to understand the extent of the challenges they were facing.

Hon. John McKay: Environment Canada's budget has essentially been flatlined for six years. What's Parks Canada's budget been over that six-year period?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: I'll ask Mr. Ferguson.

Mr. Andrew Ferguson (Principal, Sustainable Development Strategies, Audits and Studies, Office of the Auditor General of Canada): My recollection—and I'll get back to you with the precise budget—is that it's around \$600 million for the entire agency.

Hon. John McKay: And over the last six years, has it gone up, has it gone down, or has it gone sideways?

Mr. Andrew Ferguson: What we noted was, compared to the average of the last six years, it's gone down by 15%.

Hon. John McKay: So when you reference Parks Canada and 15%, are we taking 15% off \$600 million or should we add 15% to \$600 million to see how it's coming—

Mr. Andrew Ferguson: No, compared to the average budget over the last six years, it saw a 15% reduction from those numbers. So the budget today would be 15% less than the average of the previous six years, and I'll have to get back to you on what that average was for the last six years, but my understanding now is that it's around \$600 million.

Hon. John McKay: When we compare Parks Canada's budget with the roughly \$1 billion budget of Environment Canada, Environment Canada has essentially been flatlined for six years and Parks Canada is down by 15%. Do I understand that correctly?

Mr. Andrew Ferguson: I can't speak to the Environment Canada budget but I can say yes, it is down 15% at Parks Canada.

Mr. Neil Maxwell: In this report we focused on particular programs, so we didn't look at all the things that Environment Canada has done. So we haven't really done an analysis of that. The one that we are able to do, and most certainly will follow up on, is that we can get you specific numbers on Parks Canada. Of course, you will have a Parks Canada official here in the next hour who may have that and get back to you earlier than I would be able to.

Hon. John McKay: It is a bit of a—

The Chair: You have three seconds.

We're going to move on to the next round of five minutes. We're moving on to Mr. Choquette.

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Choquette (Drummond, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for joining us and for your excellent report on biodiversity.

My first question has to do with chapter 2 where you mention that Environment Canada is no longer a leader in determining the ecosystem status and trends.

Could you tell me which department will now take the leadership? Is that a problem or does it actually make things easier?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: Thank you.

Right now, no one is a leader in the field. Environment Canada decided to ignore the 2010 report, which was very important. In fact, it was the first report that described the status and trends of our ecosystems. The report was addressing a number of recommendations that we had made over several years.

We think the report plays a significant role in the proper handling of those issues and in the ability to make informed decisions.

Mr. François Choquette: Mr. Commissioner, has Environment Canada told you why no one took the initiative to react to the report?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: Not really. I will let the officials from Environment Canada explain those decisions.

• (1140)

Mr. François Choquette: I can't remember whether your recommendation in the report was that Environment Canada take the leadership again.

Mr. Neil Maxwell: We made a recommendation. I will explain a few things about that.

We noted that, although Environment Canada held consultations to set Canada's targets for 2020 in compliance with the international convention, it had not yet defined the actions needed to achieve those targets. As a result, we recommended that Environment Canada take the leadership required to carry out the process. Actually, 2020 is not very far away.

Mr. François Choquette: Thank you, Mr. Commissioner.

In terms of chapter 8, have the people from the department told you why the indicators and information in the 2010-2013 and 2013-2016 federal sustainable development strategies are not consistent or why they are the same?

Have the indicators changed from one strategy to another? Could you tell me why this decision was made and what are your recommendations?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: For the second strategy, I think Environment Canada changed the structure it uses to explain the targets. In my view, the changes are just part of the progression from the first strategy to the second strategy.

We feel it is important that the government, more specifically Environment Canada, indicate the extent of the progress made in achieving its targets. In that sense, I can say that Environment Canada listed the outcome for each target in the progress report included with the first strategy.

[English]

Ms. Megan Leslie: With the last 45 seconds, I'm going to jump in on the "Ecosystem Status and Trends Report". There's even a nickname for it: ESTR. This is an incredibly important document.

I thought your report said that Environment Canada was no longer the lead. Did you just say that we're just not doing the report any more?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: Thank you, Chair.

I should clarify. There is no lead other than Environment Canada. Environment Canada has decided—certainly at the time we did our report—that it will not proceed, unless it has changed that decision that it would not lead further efforts to—

Ms. Megan Leslie: That's what you meant by "lead". Okay.

Mr. Neil Maxwell: Yes, "lead" in that sense, Mr. Chair.

At the moment, the future of ESTR—and it is lovingly known as "Esther"—

Ms. Megan Leslie: Yes.

Mr. Neil Maxwell: —is up in the air.

Ms. Megan Leslie: Wow.

Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. Now that ESTR is finished, we'll move on to Mr. Woodworth.

Ms. Megan Leslie: ESTR *is* finished.

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

Just so I'm clear on the terminology, when you were speaking of ESTR, is that the 2010 baseline assessment of Canada's ecosystems? Is that what you mean by ESTR?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: Yes. I'll ask Jim for the official title. It's "Ecosystem Status and Trends", I believe.

Mr. James McKenzie (Principal, Sustainable Development Strategies, Audits and Studies, Office of the Auditor General of Canada): That's correct.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Was that the first-ever baseline assessment of Canada's ecosystems?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: Chair, that was the first effort to pull this together at a national level. There have certainly been reports on specific regions and particular species, but it's the first time this was all pulled together.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Was it a pretty comprehensive and almost historic type of effort?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: Mr. Chair, I would agree. I think it was very comprehensive. It was historic in the sense of the first time done.

One of the results it pointed out is that all the major types of ecosystems in Canada are in decline to some extent, some only in particular aspects—

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: One of the things you'll find with me, Mr. Maxwell, is that I have so many questions and so little time that I will try to phrase my questions in a way that will be susceptible to an easy and short answer.

I'll just say that I'm very proud to be part of the party from which the government was drawn that actually carried out that historic and very important initiative. I'm pretty certain that it's not going to be entirely forgotten for a long time.

Having said that, I'll also say thank you very much for your attendance here today. I like to do that.

I want to go back to the question of target setting, because I quite agree with you, Mr. Maxwell, that when there is an issue of urgency, targets become of paramount importance. But the issue of politically motivated targets has come up at this committee in relation to the question of setting aside a certain percentage of Canada's land mass, whether it's 17%, 20%, or 10%. I heard you say that these kinds of targets are scientifically supported.

I like auditors best when they avoid making sweeping statements and concentrate on specifics, so I would like to ask you if you have ever specifically heard of a scientifically supportable rationale for the conservation of a specific percentage of Canada's land mass. I've asked that question before in committee when we've had witnesses, and I haven't found one yet.

• (1145)

Mr. Neil Maxwell: Mr. Chair, I'm quite certain that over the years I've heard different scientists argue for targets higher than 17% land and 10% marine.

But for a specific answer to your question, I'll look quickly to my colleagues.

Do we have a specific answer to that?

Jim?

Mr. Andrew Ferguson: Only from our work last year on MPAs, we had some numbers. The 10% target actually agreed to internationally was a compromise target that could be reached internationally, but the science community had suggested that 33%—or a third—of the world's oceans should be protected.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: If there's a report that's reliable that suggests we need to conserve 33% of our land, I would like to have that sent to me—

Mr. Andrew Ferguson: It was the MPAs.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Pardon me?

Mr. Andrew Ferguson: Excuse me. This was with regard to marine protected areas.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: I'm sorry. I'm speaking about land mass. I hear nothing yet, but if you have something that justifies in a credible scientific way whether it's a 10%, 17%, or 20% target, I'd be grateful to receive it.

Let me say that in your comments under general observations, there was a statement that "most of the targets are not specific and key actions needed to achieve them have not been developed." Would I be safe in saying that a target without associated key actions is of very limited value?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: Yes, Chair, I would quite agree with that statement.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Thank you.

I'd like to ask some questions about the Federal Sustainable Development Act.

First of all, the act was first passed in 2008, and am I correct that within two years, from 2010 to 2013, the government presented the first-ever federal sustainable action plan on a government-wide basis?

Is all of what I just said correct?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: That's correct, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Woodworth, your time is up.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Oh, I'm not up.

The Chair: Yes, sorry, you actually are. Time flies when you're having fun.

Mr. Aubin, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Gentlemen, thank you for being here with us to celebrate my induction into the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development. I could not have hoped for better company.

When I was reading your report, my attention was drawn to the petition process, which I would like to discuss briefly.

Your report states that the environmental petitions process remains a unique way—unique is quite a strong adjective—for Canadian residents to obtain responses from federal ministers about their environmental concerns.

As Canadians, I and a number of other people often sign petitions because we feel the need to express ourselves, but we may not understand what it really means. Could you tell me what impact petitions can have on your work?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: Petitions are very useful in our daily work at the Office of the Auditor General because they show us how important those issues are to Canadians. We often use petitions as sources of information to determine which performance audits to conduct.

[*English*]

The Chair: Could I have order on this side, please?

Thank you.

•(1150)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Aubin: What should I then make of the fact that there were almost half as many petitions this year as compared to previous years? Is that because the message is not getting out there, because the people do not see the relevance of signing petitions? Do you have an explanation?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: Yes, indeed, we received only 12 petitions last year. Normally, we receive about 20 or 25 per year. We think that it is just a natural fluctuation in our system. Just like ecosystems, we have fluctuations too. There is no specific reason to explain the decrease in the number of petitions.

Mr. Robert Aubin: I also read that, this year, federal departments and agencies replied to 86% of the petitions in the required time. That may seem higher than the pass mark, but, in previous years, 100% of the petitions received a response in the required time.

How do you explain that decrease? Is it because you have fewer staff, fewer resources, or were the questions too complex?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: We received only 12 petitions this year. The 86% response rate just indicates that one or two of them were late. I do not think it represents anything systemic in the government.

Mr. Robert Aubin: It is still odd. In the past, when there were 25 petitions, the response rate was 100%. This year, with 12 petitions, the response rate drops to 86%. A light surely has to go on somewhere.

Could you give us an answer, both for my benefit, and through us, for all Canadians who sign petitions in the hope that they will be of value and will make a worthwhile contribution to the debate? Do you have an example of a petition that could have motivated the government to move forward on an environmental issue?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: When we reply to petitions, we explain the government's activities to Canadians. From time to time, the government makes a commitment as the result of a petition.

I will let Andrew comment.

Mr. Andrew Ferguson: A few years ago, we received a petition about nuclear facilities and the government's obligations, that is to say the insurance that the government had in place to cover those facilities. As a response to that petition, the government committed to review that insurance coverage. I think the review is still ongoing.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Aubin, your time is up.

We'll move now to Mr. Lunney for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Mr. James Lunney (Nanaimo—Alberni, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Again, thanks to our witnesses for being here today. I want to pick up chapter 7 and the criticisms in your report about Parks Canada.

Since 2006, we have expanded our parks footprint by some 30%. That is a historic expansion. There's the Nahanni National Park, Great Bear Rainforest, the eastern part of the Great Slave Lake, Ramparts River, Gwaii Haanas National Park and, as recently as early this year, Sable Island. That would be 10% of the second largest country on earth—and bigger than many of the countries of the world—now protected under the Parks Canada system.

In your report you mention that Parks Canada has only assessed 41% of the parks' ecosystems and that a third of those are in decline. I just want to follow up on that point. A third of 60% would mean that 20% are in decline. Could you just comment briefly on how many were status quo and how many had actually improved?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The math would be 30%. They've only assessed 60%, but it's reasonable to expect that if you find in that 60% there are 30% in decline, this is probably the case across the system.

As for the particular numbers, I'm going to ask my colleague, Mr. Ferguson, to talk about the other two categories. In some cases, my recollection is that there are certainly some cases in which they are improving, thanks to the efforts that Parks Canada has made to improve ecological integrity. Because of those efforts, there are ecosystems that are improving. Most of them are stable, and as we've said, a third of them are in decline.

• (1155)

Mr. Andrew Ferguson: Thank you.

Yes, as we report, I guess the inverse of our statistic is that 60% of the park ecosystems have been assessed, and there is a report produced by the agency that tells which of these ecosystems are stable, in decline, or have been—

Mr. James Lunney: Are you able to give us a number?

Mr. Andrew Ferguson: No, I'd have to get back to you on that. The agency is here today and may be able to provide you with that.

Mr. James Lunney: Okay, thank you for that.

I just want to move on in the same theme.

Despite our having embarked on the largest national parks restoration program in the history of national parks, you give us almost no real credit for the on-the-ground conservation, while the World Wildlife Federation gave us the Gift to the Earth award for the major results achieved. Why does your report virtually ignore that accomplishment?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: Mr. Chair, I want to be very clear on this point: we are quite concerned by the fact that Parks Canada has a backlog of work to do, but we're also extremely complimentary of what it's managed to do since the panel in 2000.

We've been in nine parks. We've been on the ground. We've seen what they've done. Parks Canada has done some impressive work to protect the ecosystems in Canada. Nothing that we have to say about the work that remains to be done should at all detract from that fact.

Mr. James Lunney: At least in terms of balance, when a lot of good work has been done, it's perhaps helpful to recognize it. For example, expanding the Nahanni legally gives protection to some 500 grizzlies. That would be a huge conservation gain and it seems to me that would be a significant ecological improvement toward the objectives we're looking at.

I want to go to another aspect here quickly. In terms of managing biodiversity, is it your understanding that the SARA actually applies to subspecies? Are subspecies of as much concern as species in general? Was that the intent of the act, to protect subspecies?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: Mr. Chair, I'm going to ask one of my colleagues. It's not an issue, frankly, that I've delved into extensively, so I'll ask my colleague.

Mr. James Lunney: Just before you do, let me give an example of what I'm leading to, from my own riding. We have a small bird called the vesper sparrow. It's a nice evening songbird on the prairies. It's a grassland bird. It's common across North America. They're common from Louisiana all the way up to northern Alberta, but they're not common on the coast. We have a shortage of grasslands on the coast. But they have a subspecies of this common sparrow on Vancouver Island. It's only found in one place. There are five nesting species, possibly ten. They're not sure if they're counting the same ones. They want to declare a critical habitat at the Nanaimo Airport. The south end has a parking lot and they want to declare it as critical habitat for this very unusual species. It's a common species, but it is a subspecies that's on the coast.

Is it your understanding that the intention of the act was to capture small numbers of animals that are actually very common in North America?

The Chair: Mr. Lunney, I want to give Mr. Maxwell time to respond. Your time is up.

Mr. Neil Maxwell: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll ask my colleagues if they can speak to that specific issue. Again, it's not something I've personally been engaged in.

Mr. James McKenzie: Mr. Chair, if I may, I would not necessarily be in a position to understand the original intention of the legislation when it was drafted, but my understanding is certainly that with respect to subspecies, there's that whole issue of diversity in species. My understanding is that one of the efforts is to ensure that type of diversity. So even though it may be a small population that's somewhat isolated, the overall intent is to try to maintain that diversity within ecosystems and within species.

I think that's my understanding of the general intention.

The Chair: Hopefully we can clarify that with our officials later.

Mr. Lunney, we're quite a bit over time.

We're going to give Mr. Choquette two and a half minutes to finish up.

[Translation]

Mr. François Choquette: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to have heard Mr. Lunney talk about the sage-grouse or the beluga. Maybe another time.

In chapter 4 of your audit, you mention that Environment Canada has made little progress to correct the weaknesses in its monitoring activities and that, in fact, its site monitoring is sporadic.

Why do you say that the site monitoring is sporadic? How does Environment Canada explain that?

• (1200)

Mr. Neil Maxwell: We used the word "sporadic" to indicate that there was no systematic monitoring, no monitoring at specific intervals. The department conducts its monitoring when staff is available at a site and when it is able to do so.

Mr. François Choquette: Do you mean that, if there are no employees at a site, no monitoring is done?

Mr. Neil Maxwell: A number of protected areas have a full-time employee, but not every one.

Mr. François Choquette: In other words, we really have a human resources problem here. We do not have the staff to do adequate monitoring.

Mr. Neil Maxwell: What we lack is scientific information. There are several ways to do monitoring. Often, it is done by groups of dedicated citizens.

[English]

Ms. Megan Leslie: With 30 seconds, I might just say thank you for clarifying the piece on ESTR because, really and truly, I didn't understand it by reading it. So you've been very helpful. Thanks very much.

The Chair: I want to add my thanks to our panel, Mr. Maxwell and your team, for being with us today. With that, we're going to declare a five-minute recess while we reconvene for the officials to join us.

The meeting is suspended.

- _____ (Pause) _____
-
- (1205)

The Chair: I'd like to call our meeting back to order.

We want to welcome to the table as witnesses: Chris Forbes, the assistant deputy minister of the strategic policy branch and regional directors general offices; Robert McLean, executive director of wildlife program policy; and from Parks Canada, Rob Prosper.

I understand, Mr. Forbes, you will have a seven- or eight-minute opening statement, and then Mr. Prosper will follow that for two or three minutes.

Proceed, Mr. Forbes.

Mr. Chris Forbes (Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy Branch and Regional Directors General Offices, Department of the Environment): Thank you, Chair.

We're pleased to be here today to speak to the committee on the programs raised in the commissioner's report.

I'm joined by my colleague, Bob McLean, who's the executive director of the Canadian Wildlife Service, and I also have another colleague, Tony Young, who's the director general of the sustainability directorate at Environment Canada.

[Translation]

We would first like to acknowledge the cooperation and engagement of the many professionals in the commissioner's office who conducted the audits. The department appreciates their work a great deal.

Several chapters of the Commissioner's report focus on Environment Canada's work related to biodiversity. The Commissioner made a number of findings and recommendations related to species at risk, migratory birds and protected areas programs. The department

acknowledges those findings, partially agrees with one and fully agrees with all the other recommendations and has developed an action plan to implement the recommendations. The department is already implementing those recommendations.

It is important to note the shared responsibility in Canada for conservation and biodiversity. Indeed, the federal government is accountable for migratory birds, aquatic species, federal protected areas and other biodiversity-related responsibilities. For their part, provinces and territories manage other species, their own protected areas, renewable and non-renewable resource development and, together with municipalities, land-use planning. These activities all have an impact on biodiversity and ecosystems in Canada.

[English]

In addition to government responsibilities, stakeholders and Canadians more generally have a role in conservation. Aboriginal communities, industry, conservation organizations, landowners and managers, and resource leaseholders are important partners, given that they make decisions and take actions related to land and resource use and management, decisions and actions that can and do affect biodiversity.

Environment Canada takes its leadership role on biodiversity seriously. In fulfilling this work, we work with other departments, other levels of government, and stakeholders. This partnership approach influences both the nature and the pace of our work.

Our active engagement with partners and stakeholders is an important factor in a number of the commissioner's findings. Often it's engagement, the need to consult and cooperate with Canadians, that determines how quickly key documents, such as species at risk recovery documents or protected area management plans, can be finalized.

[Translation]

As part of its national leadership role for biodiversity, including for the convention on biological diversity, Environment Canada is working with other departments, provinces, territories and others to finalize Canada's proposed 2020 biodiversity goals and targets and to identify key actions and initiatives to achieve the targets. Environment Canada is also developing and applying models that help to put a value on ecosystem services, the benefits that nature provides, in order to support decision-making, and working with partners to enhance our approach.

As overall federal lead for the Species at Risk Act, Environment Canada administers many aspects of the legislation and coordinates national implementation. The act's requirements for consultation and cooperation are extensive. We ensure meaningful consultation so that the documents benefit from the best available knowledge and are well supported. Environment Canada is making progress on recovery documents for the significant number of listed species for which we are responsible, and it is our intention, as recommended by the Commissioner, to post on the registry more details with respect to our plans for recovery planning.

When the act entered into force in 2003, 233 species were listed under it as at risk. By 2005, when the first recovery documents became due, this number had grown to 345 species, creating a significant workload that contributes to the number of recovery documents that are currently overdue.

Today, there are final or proposed recovery documents for 293 species. Documents are overdue for 196 species. Of all the recovery documents Environment Canada has posted on the act's public registry, more than half been posted in the last three years. This includes recovery documents for significant species such as the boreal caribou, which was the product of extensive comments—over 19,000 received.

And we are taking action to protect species at risk such as the September 17 announcement by Minister Aglukkaq of the government's intention to issue an emergency protection order for sage-grouse in the coming months. We will complement that order with stewardship actions and by working cooperatively with private landowners.

● (1210)

[English]

While recovery documents for listed species are under development, actions to support their survival and recovery are often already under way. Projects related to these species are eligible for funding from our habitat stewardship program, which since 2000 has invested \$127 million in over 2,100 on-the-ground conservation projects.

This investment has helped to legally protect almost 174,000 hectares of species at risk habitat in Canada. Many species that do not yet have a recovery document benefit from funding under this program. This allows us to take on-the-ground action to help protect species even before a final recovery strategy is posted.

The department continues to align the priorities for species at risk funding programs with key actions identified in recovery documents. Environment Canada has developed and is improving tools in order to better assess whether funded activities have contributed effectively to recovery priorities.

The Minister of the Environment has the responsibility for migratory birds under the Migratory Birds Convention Act. Habitat monitoring and information form an important component of the conservation of migratory birds. Environment Canada works with our partners across Canada and internationally to assess and monitor migratory bird populations and implement conservation programs.

Of note, and as was discussed in the previous session, the North American waterfowl management plan, coordinated in Canada by Environment Canada, is widely supported as an effective partnership-based model for conservation. By the spring of next year, all bird conservation region strategies will be final and publicly available. Nine are already online.

These strategies will provide guidance to industry on conservation priorities and recommended conservation actions for migratory birds, and will enable industry to develop their own best management practices. Indeed, two industry sectors have already developed drafts of such documents.

Another way in which we support biodiversity is by conserving habitat directly through our own networks of protected areas. Environment Canada is responsible for 54 national wildlife areas and 92 migratory bird sanctuaries. We are in the process of updating management plans for all the national wildlife areas. We expect this work to be completed by 2017. In addition, once plans are completed for all the wildlife areas, we will complete management plans for migratory bird sanctuaries that are located on federal land or for which we have primary responsibility.

I should note that in Nunavut, cooperatively with Inuit communities, we're in the process of setting up the last of nine area co-management committees, which will help to complete management plans for our protected areas there.

● (1215)

[Translation]

As you may know, Canada's second federal sustainable development strategy was tabled in Parliament on Monday, November 4. This new strategy further advances the government's objectives of making environmental decision-making more transparent and accountable through long-term goals, medium-term targets, and concrete actions in areas of importance to the government and to Canadians.

By providing a whole-of-government review of federal actions to achieve environmental sustainability; linking sustainable development with core federal planning and reporting processes; and providing effective measurement, monitoring and reporting systems, Canadians have the information they need to track the government's environmental progress.

Stakeholder input on the consultation draft of the strategy, including recommendations from the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, has played an important role in shaping the strategy. The final strategy very explicitly addresses the input that we received.

[English]

Many of the commissioner's specific recommendations related to the draft strategy have been addressed in the final version. I'll give you just a couple of examples. The final strategy makes targets in a number of cases more specific, measurable, and time-bound where possible, which will be reflected in improved clarity and measurability when it comes to reporting; includes greater detail in the government's approach to incorporating social and economic dimensions of environmental sustainability; recognizes the contributions of more federal departments and agencies; and includes a wider range of targets—all recommendations of the commissioner.

Mr. Chair, that ends my opening remarks. I'll turn it back over to you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Forbes.

We have a few minutes, Mr. Prosper.

Mr. Rob Prosper (Director General, Protected Area Establishment and Conservation, Parks Canada): Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today about the 2013 fall report of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development and specifically the chapter on ecological integrity in Canada's national parks.

[English]

I'd like to thank the Office of the Auditor General, especially Neil Maxwell and Andrew Ferguson and their team, for the report and their recommendations that will allow us to continue to improve the management of our national parks.

In beginning, I would state the following: The national parks of Canada are hereby dedicated to the people of Canada for their benefit, education and enjoyment, subject to this Act and the regulations, and the parks shall be maintained and made use of so as to leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.

The spirit of these words, often referred to as the dedication clause of the Canada National Parks Act, has remained unchanged since they were first written in 1930.

Unaltered, they are enshrined in legislation and have guided Parks Canada for almost a century because they stand the test of time.

[Translation]

That is our mandate. That whole complete sentence. The mandate that Parks Canada delivers is an integrated mandate with three core elements that must work together. Protecting ecosystems, engaging Canadians, and encouraging them to connect personally to our natural treasures all contribute to maintaining or restoring ecological integrity.

[English]

In fact, our ecological integrity work is designed not only to ensure that traditional knowledge and our best science support sound decision-making, but also to inspire Canadians and to contribute to their visitor experience.

I make these remarks to set the stage for the findings and recommendations made by the audit, as well as our responses.

Let me jump to the chase. The commissioner concludes that "Parks Canada is fulfilling its key responsibilities for maintaining or restoring ecological integrity in Canada's national parks" and has "developed a solid framework of policies, directives, and guidelines for fulfilling the Agency's key responsibilities". These are statements of which we are understandably proud.

To understand this statement, one must understand the four key foundational elements of an ecological integrity program. Of this, the commissioner is in agreement with the need to have a solid understanding of the condition of park ecosystems; the need to identify and communicate ecological priorities for each park; the

need to take restoration actions that result in tangible, measurable conservation gains; and the need to ensure that there are no significant environmental impacts of planned activities in national parks.

Not surprisingly, it is within these four elements that the legislative obligations of the agency lie.

With respect to the requirement to report on the state of parks, Parks Canada regularly tables in Parliament a report on the state of protected heritage areas that assesses the priority ecosystems in national parks.

In accordance with our legislation and in response to the recommendation from the commissioner in 2005, Parks Canada undertook an unprecedented effort to complete 93% of the required national park management plans by 2010. In the plans that this audit reviewed, they were found to "contain the required elements" and "include management objectives that specified how ecological integrity would be maintained or restored".

As part of the obligation to maintain or restore ecological integrity, the commissioner indicated that the "Agency had carried out significant work in every area examined". In particular, the agency has undertaken the most intensive ecological restoration effort in its history.

With respect to the obligations under the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act, the commissioner stated that "Parks Canada routinely considered the impacts of ecological integrity when approving and implementing visitor activities and capital development projects". In his audit, the commissioner highlighted the fact that "Parks Canada is recognized as a world leader in developing guidance on ecological integrity". Still, the audit leaves the impression that Parks Canada is struggling to protect Canada's park ecosystems and that we are at risk of falling further behind.

I have worked in Parks Canada for 34 years, in national parks from Newfoundland to the Northwest Territories, in the field of resource conservation. I can tell you that what we are doing now in managing for ecological integrity could not even have been imagined in 1980 or even in the late 1990s.

• (1220)

Consider the following. We are scientifically assessing the condition of 102 key park ecosystems. We are the only country in the G8 that is reporting on the state of ecological integrity in our national park system. We are leading the world in restoration science and putting it into practice at a scale never before seen in the agency's 100-year history. We have ecologists as well as dedicated science and technical positions at every park, supported by a national team of senior scientists. We are actively using fire to achieve ecological gains while protecting the public and have managed fires that would cover an area twice the size of Prince Edward Island. In addition to science, Parks Canada is recognized internationally as a leader in building respectful, trusting relationships with aboriginal people that includes the active use of traditional knowledge in ecological decision-making.

I would not characterize this as struggling. I would characterize this as international leadership.

We recognize that there is always more work to do. Parks Canada fully intends to build on its proud history as the world's first national parks agency and continue to meet our conservation priorities, as informed by the report's findings and its recommendations.

As we move forward with our conservation priorities across the country, visitors are interacting with scientists, aboriginal people are sharing their wisdom, and new media are linking young people to our national parks. Some of these great examples are showcased in the third volume of our action-on-the-ground program, which you received earlier. I think you all have a copy. This provides a synopsis of some of the work we have done over the last number of years.

Thank you.

The Chair: My apologies for rushing both of you. We wanted to give our committee members a chance to ask some questions.

We are going to proceed with Mr. Woodworth from the government side.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Thank you very much, gentlemen, for your attendance here today.

I want to ask some questions about the federal sustainable development strategy, on which the present government introduced legislation in 2008. The government produced the first strategy in 2010, which is just now being renewed in 2013.

My understanding is that, with those actions, the present government has put Canada on the leading edge globally of government-wide, cross-government sustainable strategies. Would you agree with that?

Mr. Chris Forbes: I would certainly agree that we have moved forward a lot. We have improved the reporting on sustainable development strategies throughout the federal government in a unified way that was not done prior to the federal sustainable strategy.

It's hard to compare across countries, but we're certainly one of the leading countries internationally in providing that kind of information.

• (1225)

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Thank you.

I understand too that the 2010-13 strategy in fact created government-wide targets for greening government operations. Is that correct?

Mr. Chris Forbes: Yes.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Is that the first time Canada has ever done that under any government?

Mr. Chris Forbes: At the federal level, yes, it is.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: I understand there have been some positive results from that. For example, I understand that Industry Canada had a target of reducing its greenhouse gas emissions by 6.8%. But actually, in the 2011-12 fiscal year, it achieved decreases in greenhouse gas emissions of about 27%. Is that correct?

Mr. Tony Young (Director General, Sustainability Directorate Strategic Policy Branch, Department of the Environment): Yes, I would have to get back to you to verify the numbers, but there has been a lot of success in that area.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: I probably should tell you the trick. I'm reading this directly out of the Auditor General's report.

I should ask you if those results will be made available to all departments, so that other departments can emulate the methods and tremendous achievements that were obtained in Industry Canada.

Mr. Tony Young: I should say that in federal sustainable development, probably the Department of Public Works and Government Services leads the way in green government operations. It has, in partnership with Environment Canada, a fairly extensive interdepartmental consultation and advisory process for how departments can achieve their targets.

The short answer is yes, there is a process to inform others.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Good.

The Auditor General also reports that the Treasury Board Secretariat reduced its paper consumption by approximately 20% between the 2011-12 fiscal year and the 2012-13 fiscal year. Can we have some reasonable assurance that the methods and the tremendous results achieved in that regard are going to be shared across government under the framework set up by the government in the federal sustainable development strategy?

Mr. Tony Young: Yes, we can. There is, as I said, an ongoing interdepartmental process for identification of best practices and objectives.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: That's very good.

I notice also that the Auditor General reports that Human Resources and Skills Development reduced the number of printers in its department by over 4,000. Those are the kinds of things that have been generated by our federal sustainable development strategy, which I hope will be spread across all departments.

I just want to ask you to expand a little bit more on the consultation process that has been described in the final 2013-2016 strategy in response to the commissioner's comments in that regard.

What sort of public consultation and transparency is there in the final strategy?

Mr. Chris Forbes: The draft strategy was published last February and was out for a 120-day consultation period. We sent copies to this committee and others and to national aboriginal organizations, environmental NGOs, and a wide range of provincial and territorial governments. Over the course of the consultation period, we received, I think, probably in the tens of thousands of website visits. We ended up with 54 written submissions, and that includes the commissioner's comments, which he shared with us in June.

In the final strategy, which was published earlier this week, we've laid out—and I think this was one of the comments of the commissioner—a little more clearly what changes we've made in response to what we've heard from people.

We've tried to be transparent not only in consulting but also in reporting back on what we heard.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Could you give one or two examples of that?

Mr. Chris Forbes: Tony can add more, but for example, the commissioner did ask us for more precision in some of the targets we use. We got this comment from him in June, and we went back over the summer with our partner departments and worked on targets to see where we could add more detail to those targets, more precision. As an example of one we changed based on those discussions, there's a target on outdoor air pollutants, which had a high-level statement about objectives for air pollutants. We've made it a bit more precise, to link it to the air quality management system that's under way with the provinces, and put a timeframe on the objective for the target.

• (1230)

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: That's good. I'm glad to know you've been responding vigorously to the commissioner's recommendations.

Do I have any more time?

The Chair: You have about 40 seconds.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: I think 40 seconds are not enough time for me to clear my throat.

Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. We're going to move, then, to Madame Freeman.

Go ahead, Madame Freeman.

Ms. Mylène Freeman (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, NDP): Thank you.

Well, I'm very glad to be here. As the members of the committee know, I'm brand new to this file. It's lovely to be able to question department officials from the beginning and maybe get some information.

I'm going to start with parks, Mr. Prosper.

I'm really proud, as a Canadian, of our national parks. I don't want to ever suggest the contrary. But we're going to talk about what the commissioner did, so there are going to be some critical questions.

But that being said, they create 33,000 jobs in neighbouring communities and related industries, and every dollar spent by the federal government brings back \$6. Is that correct?

Mr. Rob Prosper: Yes, that's correct.

Ms. Mylène Freeman: All right, that's great.

So I think we should be proud of Parks Canada and we should be supporting Parks Canada.

[*Translation*]

The Commissioner rightly said that “despite Parks Canada's significant efforts in many areas, the agency is struggling to protect ecosystems in Canada's national parks”. He added: “the agency has yet to assess the condition of 41% of the national parks' ecosystems, and a third of those it has assessed are in decline”.

Given those comments, why has Parks Canada still not yet assessed 41% of its parks? What is the schedule for correcting this delay?

[*English*]

Mr. Rob Prosper: Thank you very much for the question.

Thank you, Chair.

The way I would respond to that question is that, in fact, if Parks Canada had a fully populated monitoring program in place, it would be measuring or assessing the condition of 120 ecosystems. We have assessed the condition of 102 of those ecosystems. Of those, 94 ecosystems are either in fair or good condition. Of the 102 ecosystems, there are 21 that we've identified as declining. They're declining in a context where Parks Canada actually has the abilities to make a difference. So in those declining ecosystems, this is where we are targeting our ecological restoration efforts.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Mylène Freeman: The resources have been significantly reduced. Does that have an effect on the number of assessments that can be done? Are the present resources enough to react to the reduction, as you have just told me they are?

[*English*]

Mr. Rob Prosper: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for the question.

I think it's important for the committee to understand that Parks Canada's ecological integrity monitoring program has been evolving over the course of the last number of years from primarily a development program to an implementation program.

For example, in our ecological monitoring program we had to develop scientifically credible measures and indicators in all these ecosystems. That took a certain type of capacity. We have now moved into an implementation phase where our focus is on making tangible conservation gains on the ground. Of course, that takes a slightly different organizational set-up to accomplish.

As for the recommendations the Auditor General's office made on what they would like to see as priorities, we agree with those priorities. We agree with completing the implementation of our monitoring program, for example. Parks Canada feels it's got the right organization linked to the task at hand now.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Mylène Freeman: The Commissioner even said that there is no plan to combat the deterioration of 34% of the ecosystems in the parks.

How can you believe that you will be able to put plans into action? Are plans being established? Why is there a delay there too?

• (1235)

[*English*]

Mr. Rob Prosper: Again, I have a very similar answer to the question. We have 120 ecosystems that we are assessing at this point. A fully populated program has us assessing 120 ecosystems.

We feel we have the right organization to undertake that. We are in transition from development to implementation, so it is taking us some time. I don't want to give the impression that it's fully developed at this point. There is still work to do, and we think we are equipped to do it.

Ms. Mylène Freeman: I'll then ask specifically about the following. Parks Canada responded to the commissioner's recommendation to perform a capacity analysis in light of recent resource reductions by stating that it had already ensured that the capacity within the new organizational model for the resource conservation function was aligned to meet Parks Canada's conservation priorities.

So how did the agency perform its analysis to ensure its capacity was sufficient?

Mr. Rob Prosper: Sorry, I didn't quite answer your question the first time. I'll do so now.

We recognized in advance the fact that we were going through this transition into an implementation phase. So we did a review of the resource conservation function and looked at every park to identify what we needed in terms of capacity to fulfill the priority ecological integrity actions that we wanted to take. So we developed organizational models that ensured we had ecologists, the science technicians, and geomatics specialists present at every park so that the base capacity exists. In addition to that, we ensured that we had a team of senior scientists in a variety of different disciplines, like the veterinary discipline in restoration and in environmental assessment, to make sure we had senior science capacity available to support those field-level scientists.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Madam Freeman.

We are moving now to Mr. Lunney for seven minutes, please.

Mr. James Lunney: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here with us today for this important discussion.

I want to follow up with the parks assessment as well. I felt the commissioner's report leaned a little bit on the negative side and failed to acknowledge a lot of accomplishments that Parks Canada has made.

I'm glad to see in your report that you highlighted some of the positive comments that he made, including that "The Agency had carried out significant work in every area examined" and that the "Agency has undertaken the most intensive ecological restoration effort in its history."

I think that in recognizing you're dealing with a huge expansion in national park terrain, there are capacity issues that have to be addressed.

I'm also highlighting your points here about scientifically assessing the condition of 102 ecosystems; that we're the only country in the G-8 that actually reports on the ecological integrity of our parks system; and that we are leading the world in restoration science and putting it into practice.

I just want to comment on that because I feel, as I said, the report was perhaps unnecessarily negative. Of course, there is a lot more that could be done. There is a gap in knowledge because of the expansion.

On the west coast, I have one of our premier parks, the Pacific Rim National Park, and somewhere in your remarks I heard

something about technological information and technology that you're using to help reach out to a new generation of Canadians. The new Kwisis Interpretive Centre on Long Beach is amazing in the way it shows the traditional knowledge of aboriginal people. Some people felt that the anatomical display was a little too anatomically correct, but that was first-nations directed. Of course, we've made some modest modifications to that. But there are the dune restorations that have been going on in the park. I see tremendous work happening right on the ground that we were able to participate in.

I want to ask you to comment on the habitat stewardship program, the aboriginal fund for species at risk, and the over 3,000 projects in the past 14 years. Can you identify some of the accomplishments that are happening through these great investments?

Mr. Robert McLean (Executive Director, Wildlife Program Policy, Department of the Environment): Thank you.

We've invested a significant amount of funding through the habitat stewardship program and the aboriginal fund for species at risk. We have 2,400 projects on the ground through the first program, and another nearly 800 projects through the aboriginal fund for species at risk.

Examples of the projects include addressing invasive alien species. There's a unique habitat type in Ontario called an alvar community. Through the funding, people are addressing and removing the species at risk in those areas. So, too, a first nation in Ontario is removing the invasive Scotch pine to address the needs of a species at risk plant.

Significantly, I think there have been a couple of landscape-level management plans that have been produced through the funding. One relates to the threatened woodland caribou. It's a landscape-level plan to manage that threatened species in Manitoba. A second example is the endangered Peary caribou in northern communities. So there's a landscape-level plan to provide the habitat and other needs of those species.

I could talk at length about the number of projects that are happening, but there are literally thousands of projects that are making a meaningful difference for those species at risk.

● (1240)

Mr. James Lunney: That's across the country.

Mr. Robert McLean: Yes.

Mr. James Lunney: Thank you for that.

I actually didn't mean to cut Parks Canada out of the discussion there. I was hoping you'd have a comment on the very successful work that you're doing in the parks.

Mr. Rob Prosper: Yes, I do.

Because you mentioned the stewardship program, I handed it over to my colleague, but you're absolutely right that we are doing some amazing work on species at risk. In fact, Parks Canada is the lead for 76 species, and we have 97% of our recovery strategies posted. So we are making excellent progress. We've now moved into the action planning process, which is the next step in the SARA cycle.

Just as an example, we've reintroduced black-footed ferrets into grasslands. This is a species that was not only extirpated, but was also thought to be extinct. We worked with a huge number of partners, including partners in the U.S. who found a very small remnant population in, I believe, Colorado. We've worked with a number of partners to reintroduce that species into grasslands, and we now have a breeding population of black-footed ferrets in grasslands.

Mr. James Lunney: That's great.

The other thing I wanted to comment on is the use of wildfire, because for years we suppressed fires. We had a nasty experience in British Columbia recently in Kelowna, an urban setting, not related to the park. But if we suppress all fires, we put systems at risk.

I notice that you've done some very successful work in using wildfires. It certainly was the tradition on Vancouver Island. I've heard stories about the first nations moving down island and that they used to set fires behind them to clear the brush and open things up for the next season.

Could you please comment on the use of fire?

Mr. Rob Prosper: Yes, we have a very active fire-management program, and I think in terms of the utilization of fire to make ecological gains, we're probably leading in the world in that area. We have a number of areas where we're putting fire back onto the landscape in order to create the natural habitat. Part of ecological integrity is making sure that the processes are in place on the ground, that those natural processes continue. We're doing that in parks across the country that have fire-dependent ecosystems.

Mr. James Lunney: That's great.

I saw something to do with the bison in northern Saskatchewan, which is pretty significant and important.

Thank you for that.

The Chair: You have 25 seconds.

Mr. McKay.

Hon. John McKay: You don't mind allocating his 25 seconds to me?

The Chair: Is there unanimous consent?

Hon. John McKay: Thank you for coming again.

My first question is directed to Mr. Prosper. You say that you're quite proud of some of the statements the commissioner made. But shortly thereafter he goes on to say:

However, the Agency has been slow to implement systems for monitoring and reporting on ecological integrity. It has failed to meet many deadlines and targets, and information for decision making is often incomplete or has not been produced.

He gives examples, etc.

Then the next paragraph talks about your resources being decreased by 15%, that you're 23% down in your staff, and a third down on your scientists.

I'm not quite sure how these statements all live in the same universe, because it seems to me that the government has made it very difficult for you to achieve what you need to achieve.

Finally, the commissioner says at the end: The Agency could fall further behind in its efforts to maintaining or restore ecological integrity....

Your response is that you agree, and then you qualify your agreement.

Am I to assume that your budgetary challenges have led to the difficulties the commissioner has identified?

• (1245)

Mr. Rob Prosper: Thank you, Chair.

In response to that, I would say, as I've mentioned in answer to questions from one of your colleagues, that we have moved into an implementation phase and we have the organization that's linked directly to those priorities. I indicated that we've actually made very good progress on the implementation of our monitoring program, that we have 102 ecosystems that we are measuring now.

Hon. John McKay: Excuse me, but what does that actually mean? If you've lost 20% of your staff and 30% of your scientists, and you're moving into "implementation stage", how do you do more with less? Most people do less with less.

Mr. Rob Prosper: It's easy to get caught up in the actual numbers, and in fact, when I'm talking about having the organization now to undertake that work, it's not just about numbers. For example, historically we had park wardens who had responsibilities across a variety of functions. They were responsible for law enforcement and public safety, and they did resource management work.

In terms of the reorganization, we have created for the first time a group of science technicians that are in the scientific classification that are actually dedicated to work in resource conservation. So although there's the loss in numbers, there's a change in terms of what those positions do and the skill sets they have.

Hon. John McKay: So instead of having scientists, you have science technicians. Instead of having park wardens, you have whatever they used to do.

Essentially you're cutting functions. That's what it boils down to. You can't lose \$90 million off your budget and expect to carry on doing whatever it was you were doing.

Is that still a fair statement?

Mr. Rob Prosper: Probably a fair statement is that in this type of work we set priorities, and we have an organization that's designed to deal with those priorities.

Is that everything? Would we like to do more? Sure, but we are focused on our priorities.

Hon. John McKay: The reality is that you suffered a huge budget cut here. In the science area, you're dropping from a scientist to a science technician. Fine, but you're certainly not going to be able to carry on the functions that you've carried on before.

Let me direct my second question to Mr. Forbes. The commissioner says that overall trends in Canada's major ecosystems are deteriorating. Our forest varies from healthy to requiring concern and deteriorating. Our lakes and rivers require concern and are deteriorating. Our wetlands require concern and they're deteriorating. Our marine ecosystems are healthy and are improving in some areas, but are impaired and deteriorating in others. Our coastal ecosystems, while healthy in some areas, are impaired in others and deteriorating across the board. It goes on and on.

It paints a pretty unhappy picture. Your budget has been flatlining for six years. You're just under \$1 billion. It's not as if the stress on the ecosystems across the board is diminishing; it's increasing by virtue of population, by virtue of greenhouse gas emissions, etc.

Ironically, throughout the report, you agree with virtually every observation that the commissioner makes. Again, something has to give here. Either you get budgetary support to do what you need to do, or we all fold our tents and say the environment is at risk.

Mr. Chris Forbes: I think the point Mr. Prosper made is that we get the budgets and we try to set priorities and meet our objectives within those budgets. We try to do things more efficiently, if we can find ways to do things more efficiently. We have a series of departmental objectives. We go through our report on plans and look at our planned spending and how we plan to achieve our objectives.

We try to achieve those objectives within the resources that we have. We look at ways of being effective and efficient, and not sacrificing program delivery or program objectives.

I don't know if you want to add anything to that or not, Bob.

• (1250)

Mr. Robert McLean: Thank you, Chris.

The ecosystem stresses that you described, that the commissioner described, in fact fall to no single department or agency or one level of government to address, if we're going to successfully deal with those as a country.

I think it comes back to how we come to grips with national priorities. That, to me, emphasizes the importance of something like the biodiversity goals and targets. We have four goals with 19 targets. It's up to Canadians—the federal departments, provincial governments, industry, and environmental organizations—to identify activities that can contribute to making progress against those targets. It's a collective responsibility.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McKay. We'll move on to Ms. Leslie.

Ms. Megan Leslie: Thanks, everyone, for being here. It's a great opportunity to ask questions.

The emergency protection order for sage grouse was raised in your opening comments, Mr. Forbes. I have to say every time the minister talks about it, I think I'm going to have a stroke.

Because you're here, I want to ask a question. You say that the EPO is coming in the next few months. Can you give us an indication of when or how that's happening.

Mr. Robert McLean: Thank you for your question.

Unfortunately, we aren't in a position to give you a timeline.

Ms. Megan Leslie: Mr. Prosper, I want to talk about Sable Island National Park. We are talking about some pretty serious cutbacks in your department.

When Rouge Valley was announced, it was announced along with a sizable chunk of money to help create the park. When Sable Island was announced—we just passed the legislation recently—there was nothing like that. I wonder what the plans are here, especially for the off-island visitor centre.

Can you give us an update on that? Are any funds forthcoming to actually set up this park?

Mr. Rob Prosper: Unfortunately, I'm not equipped to provide you with that answer. I'll see if I can provide it after the fact. But we do actually have an organization now in place for Sable Island. We've staffed the organization and they're operational.

Ms. Megan Leslie: That's a bit of an update. I'd love it if you could follow-up with us. Thank you.

I just have an addendum to that. What can you tell us about the management plan? Where is the management plan at? Probably it's also at the very beginning?

Mr. Rob Prosper: Again I'll have to get back to you on that.

Ms. Megan Leslie: Don't worry. Again, I'd love it if you could follow-up.

I have a question for Mr. Forbes and your team. When we're looking at the overall recommendation or the overall findings of the commissioner's report about not meeting these targets and deadlines, I asked him—you were here listening—what he thought the hold-up was. Was it that the targets were unachievable? Was it resources? What was it? What's the best answer you can give me in terms of why the audit has come up with these results?

Mr. Robert McLean: Thank you.

There are several reasons why we're not meeting deadlines associated with the recovery strategies under species at risk, our management plans for our protected areas, or the bird conservation region strategies. I think the most common reason across those three program areas relates to the importance of collaboration and consultation and the cooperation requirements. For example, the Species at Risk Act requires us to cooperate within the federal government, with the other federal departments, with wildlife management boards, with aboriginal communities, and any other affected person. We're required to consult with any affected land owner or other affected person.

For Environment Canada, we have two-thirds of the species that require recovery documents. The bulk of those species for us—and it's a little bit unique compared to the other two—are focused on those non-federal lands. That increases the importance of the engagement, which can actually take a fair bit of time.

I wouldn't mind sharing an example that's exceptional, but I think it can illustrate to the committee why we have a challenge. We completed the boreal caribou recovery strategy and we had two rounds of consultations with aboriginal communities. We reached out to 271 aboriginal communities. We went and received comments from 161 of those communities. That took two years to do.

In the second round of consultation, there were not quite the same numbers: 265 aboriginal communities based on what we'd learned in the first go-round and 87 communities participated. We received 42 aboriginal traditional knowledge summary reports.

We also conducted our own science. We have about 600 pages of scientific assessment to complete that recovery strategy. We have nearly 1,000 pages of aboriginal traditional knowledge. That took \$3.5 million and as I say about three and a half years to complete. So we have a legal duty to consult compared to the two-year limit provided in SARA for the completion of a recovery strategy for that species.

• (1255)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Ms. Leslie.

Ms. Megan Leslie: That's it? Wow.

The Chair: That is it. We have one more question from Mr. Sopuck and then we'll adjourn after that.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Thank you very much.

First of all, Mr. McLean, I just want to say that I found the report that CWS put out, "The State of Canada's Birds 2012", to be an immensely useful report. It was short on hyperbole and long on objectivity and good analysis. So could you pass on to the staff how helpful that report actually is? It's a great piece of work.

In terms of Environment Canada and Parks Canada, when I hear testimony and see the people that you always consult with, one group that is always left out is the rural communities or the neighbours of national parks. So that's just a little point that I'd like you to consider in other reports.

The term "ecosystem stability" is used all the time. I know it's very difficult to determine what ecosystem stability is, given that it's changing all the time. Ecosystems change on a constant basis. You can talk about it within national parks. How do you determine what your targets are for landscape level processes that you want to see in place?

Mr. Rob Prosper: I think probably the simplest answer is that in true layman terms ecological integrity for us means the bits are there: the species; the populations; and the natural processes are there. We work towards identifying those types of ecosystems that require

certain processes and we do analysis on those processes to get an idea of what the cycle is. For example, in firewood, it's the fire return cycle. Then we look at how we put that back on the landscape in a way that results in conservation gains but at the same time results in making sure that we can keep infrastructure and the public safe.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: But again, for some ecosystems the natural trend is toward fewer species. As the forest ages, species don't quite move out, but new species take over and there are often fewer. Do you want to freeze an ecosystem in place and force all those long-term processes?

Mr. Rob Prosper: Certainly not in circumstances where it's because there's been a removal of natural fire on the ecosystem that creates an old stand. We do the fire management work that we do to increase diversity by creating a more diverse habitat.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Regarding the management of land inside national parks, I was very interested in this particular report, "Action on the Ground". When I first moved to the Riding Mountain National Park area back in the late seventies, the modus operandi was to leave everything alone, to keep people out, to not do anything in there.

I'm very pleased by some of the projects that I saw in your report, like restoring the natural flows of streams, taking out culverts that block fish and putting in new culverts. They're even getting rid of the rats that have moved into some of the parks. I'm talking about the four-legged kind. I want to be clear on that.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Is active management of landscapes and ecosystems in national parks becoming the new normal for your department?

• (1300)

Mr. Rob Prosper: Absolutely. I think the last time I was in front of the committee I talked about the fact that the perception of Parks Canada is that we create parks and throw away the key. That's not at all the case any more. We are very much involved in restoration activities and active management. As I mentioned several times already, we are undertaking what are probably the largest restoration actions in our history.

The Chair: I know we're not quite at your five-minute mark, but that clock is about three or four minutes slow and many of us have a one o'clock meeting in Centre Block. So with that, I'm going to cut you off there.

Thanks again to our officials for being with us today, and thanks to our committee members.

The meeting is adjourned.

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