



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 117

Monday, August 26, 2024

Chair: Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia



Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development

Monday, August 26, 2024

• (1200)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.)): Good afternoon to the committee members and the witnesses joining us today.

The list of meeting participants has changed a great deal because of substitutions. Mr. Simard is replacing Ms. Pauzé. Mr. Boulerice, who is attending the meeting via video conference, is replacing Ms. Collins. Ms. Shanahan, who is also attending via video conference, is replacing Mr. Longfield. Ms. Koutrakis, also via video conference, is replacing Mr. Ali. Mr. Lauzon, who is attending the meeting in person, is replacing Ms. Taylor Roy. Mr. Martel, who is also here in person, is replacing Mr. Kram. Finally, Mr. Gourde is replacing Mr. Mazier. That is the composition of today's meeting.

Before we begin, I simply want to remind everyone around the table to pay attention to the equipment to prevent acoustic incidents. We do not want to cause any injuries to our magnificent interpreters. In other words, if you do not have the floor, turn off your microphone. If you have to put down your earpiece for any reason, please place it on the middle of the sticker for this purpose, which you will find on the table. Also, do not tap the microphone. If we follow these measures, everything should run smoothly.

Without further ado, let me introduce the witnesses we are receiving for the first hour of the meeting. We have Mr. Steeve St-Gelais, president of Boisaco. He is joined by Mr. André Gilbert, general manager of Boisaco. We also have the pleasure of welcoming Ms. Lise Boulianne, the mayor of the Municipalité de Sacré-Coeur.

I always start with the person whose name is at the top of the list. I presume we are starting with Mr. St-Gelais.

Mr. St-Gelais, you have five minutes.

Mr. Mario Simard (Jonquière, BQ): I think it would be better if Ms. Boulianne spoke first.

The Chair: I am open to that.

Ms. Boulianne, the floor is yours.

Ms. Lise Boulianne (Mayor, Municipalité de Sacré-Coeur): Good afternoon.

Ladies and gentlemen of the committee, today I am going to tell you about Sacré-Coeur, of course. Our municipality was built on forestry and has survived on forestry since it was founded. The people of our municipality have forestry in their DNA. Sacré-Coeur is

part of the La Haute-Côte-Nord municipality, which is considered one of the most devitalized in Quebec.

For 40 years, Boisaco has been the economic driver of our village and the entire region. The job losses in the wake of the plant closure would affect nearly 70% of our population, not to mention the impact on the entire region. It is nearly impossible to anticipate or foresee all the devastating consequences of the federal government's current disastrous decision. Can you imagine an entire population waking up one morning completely uncertain about the future? People are calling this a disaster for our municipality. What will become of our families? What will become of our children? What will be the psychological consequences?

For decades, the community of Sacré-Coeur has used initiative, co-operation, dynamism and solidarity to ensure its development and that is what we are doing again today to show you our commitment to a community that believes in its development and relies and will continue to rely on the forestry industry.

Our young and not so young people have invested in a promising future, taking an educational path that would ensure this future that they believed in. To that end, they registered either at a professional training centre to take forestry harvesting courses, or at the CEGEP to become forestry technicians, for example, or at the university to become professional foresters. For each of these journeys, these jobs are just one example of the opportunities. All of that training is going to be swept away. More than 600 workers believed and still believe in the sustainable development of our forests, and the animal ecosystem and the forestry sector cohabitating through concerted efforts by various stakeholders.

For our municipality, the Boisaco group is an important player. It contributes to our economic, cultural, tourism and social development through significant investment in the community, whether for our municipality, for various not-for-profit organizations or even for the surrounding municipalities.

How can a government believe in the survival of some 225 caribou, according to the proposed order, without worrying about the survival of a village, our village, our entire community? Has Mr. Guilbeault given any serious thought to the proposed solution? Has he thought about the consequences this order will have on our populations?

I have a flyer with me today that you can consult to get a better understanding of our community. It is certainly not the most recent, but it shows how dynamic our community is and how much its development means to its residents. Sacré-Coeur is what it is today because of the forestry industry's presence back home since 1870.

Thank you.

• (1205)

The Chair: Thank you, Mayor Boulianne.

We will now move on to Mr. St-Gelais.

Mr. Steeve St-Gelais (President, Boisaco Inc.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ladies and gentlemen of the committee, we are pleased to finally have the chance to officially speak to this proposed order and we thank you for this opportunity.

For our workers, our community members and our communities in Haute-Côte-Nord, a terrible countdown started from the moment this order was announced on June 18. Since the announcement, our lives have been on hold. Our joie de vivre has been replaced with anxiety, worry and concern.

Our community has lived through tough times and poverty before. Between 1982 and 1985, after three successive failed attempts to operate the wood-processing facilities in Sacré-Coeur, many locals suffered hardships. Many were forced to turn to employment insurance, social assistance or other similar sources of assistance that chip away at human dignity. Obviously, our community was the theatre of social problems, bankruptcies, mental distress, separations, divorces and an increased use of substances such as alcohol and drugs.

Fortunately, courage and determination remained alive and well despite everything. Let me explain.

Following the third failure and subsequent bankruptcy in 1982, the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce repossessed the assets in collateral. The only offer it received was to dismantle the facilities. The people of our community rejected that fate and refused to give up. They stood in solidarity and banded together. They did not hesitate to block the roads for days, even weeks on end. That is how they made themselves heard and were able to put in an offer of purchase based on an original, unedited collective ownership model involving two workers' co-operatives, namely COFOR and UNISACO, as well as an investment firm held by community members called Investra. In 1985, roughly 600 workers and community members gambled everything on setting up this collective ownership model. Today, 40 years later, more than 1,100 member workers and community investors participate in the collective ownership of the Boisaco group.

It is important to understand that the mission of the Boisaco group is to act as a driver of sustainable and responsible development to ensure the social, economic, environmental and cultural vitality of our community. In keeping with that mission, over the years seven primary, secondary and tertiary processing companies joined the Boisaco group ecosystem: Sacopan, Ripco, Bersaco, Granulco, Valibois, Forrestco and Les Bois du Fjord. All of this is owned collectively.

La Haute-Côte-Nord is our community. It is a region that consolidates roughly 10,500 people and is one of the most disadvantaged municipalities in Quebec. It goes without saying that all of our strengths are important, that we must protect them and continue to develop new ones.

It is important to know that the forest management practised in Quebec earns internationally recognized certifications and that Quebec's forestry system is among the strictest and most robust in the world. What is more, several auditors from around the world made this observation when they came to audit us. It is important to us to contribute to the sustainable and responsible development of our forests and to provide some of the most ecologically sound products around that Canadians need, including for building their homes.

The forest is our past, our present and our future. It is our way of life. This has been part of our culture for multiple generations and we are proud of it.

• (1210)

To us, work is a right that allows people to live in dignity, support their family and have a sense of accomplishment. If the order is adopted, 600 direct jobs will disappear, leading to the loss of more than \$200 million in annual spinoffs for our community. It is unthinkable. The impact this will have on people has to be taken into account. This order must not be adopted.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. St-Gelais.

We will now start the first round of questions from committee members.

Mr. Martel will start the ball rolling.

Mr. Richard Martel (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for being here today. I am pleased to see them.

My first question is for Mr. St-Gelais or Mr. Gilbert.

We hold public meetings. The people in my riding think that the caribou are a threatened species. I would like to know something: do you agree that this is about a threatened species or do you have a different opinion?

Mr. Steeve St-Gelais: Mr. Martel, let's talk about the facts.

The fact is that there is only one subspecies of caribou in Quebec and that is the woodland caribou. There are three ecotypes of this subspecies: the migratory caribou, which is found further north; the boreal caribou, which is found in the forest; and the mountain caribou, which are found in mountainous regions. These ecotypes have been defined and classified by biologists according to the environment or location in which the caribou live. Such is the reality of the only subspecies that exists in Quebec. It bears repeating because it is important to understand that.

For the boreal caribou, the one that lives in the forest, it is important to look at the different census information and data that have been collected since 2013. I am thinking about the ones included in the boreal caribou recovery plan, the data published by the Gélinas commission and the data from the report produced in 2022 by the Équipe de rétablissement du caribou forestier du Québec, the recovery team. This data indicates a relative stability in the boreal caribou ecotype between 2013 and 2023. Again, I am talking about the boreal caribou ecotype.

I would like to mention another key aspect regarding the boreal caribou ecotype. The last census helped shed light on the fact that 80% of individuals counted are in protected areas that are already dedicated to their protection, or in the northern part of the northern limit where there is no forestry harvest or forest management intervention.

The picture of the boreal caribou ecotype is much more nuanced. On the one hand, there is the fact that there is only one subspecies in Quebec. On the other hand, there is the situation of the boreal caribou ecotype. The enumeration of the entire subspecies helps put into perspective the fact that the subspecies is not threatened in Quebec.

• (1215)

Mr. Richard Martel: Mr. St-Gelais, apparently there have been consultations and you took part in the process. Have you had the chance to speak to the matter? Have you been able to express what you are saying today?

Mr. Steeve St-Gelais: Mr. Martel, are you talking about the federal consultations?

Mr. Richard Martel: Yes.

Mr. Steeve St-Gelais: Okay.

During the first technical meeting, we were told that the order had been prepared and that essentially no real considerable changes are possible when it comes to the areas concerned. This showed us that there was no possible angle for engaging in a discussion. What is more, when this was presented to us, we were told that the order had been made in the spirit of striking a balance between protection and the repercussions to the community. It became very clear to us that, unfortunately, that was not the case because it was not possible to obtain any answers regarding the repercussions to the allowable cut. What is more, we understood that we could not in any way play a key role. It became very clear that there was nothing we could do to change things.

Mr. Richard Martel: Mr. Gilbert, the order is being made to address an emergency. What do you have to say about that?

Mr. André Gilbert (General Manager, Boisaco Inc.): In fact, the boreal caribou is an ecotype of the woodland caribou subspecies. There are 180,000 in Quebec. Its population is growing. Where is the emergency?

The boreal caribou ecotype has been coping with disturbances likely for over 30 years. In the sector that concerns us, the one that has consequences to us, the Pipmuacan sector, the boreal caribou have already been coping with 80% disturbance for over 30 years.

As far as the populations in the Pipmuacan sector are concerned, a census in 1999 indicated that there are 135 individuals. Another census in 2012 showed that there were 298. The last inventory in 2020, which was a baseline inventory by the way, showed that there were 225. What conclusions can we draw from that? It is hard to draw any major conclusions, but we do not get a sense of urgency.

There are concerns having to do with the rates of recruitment in the population, in other words the number of fawns per 100 females. Caribou experts and biologists who make this observation say that we need to be extremely careful when it comes to these numbers and how they are calculated because the females tend to run into the woods when they hear helicopters during the census taking. That is why a calculation is used to extrapolate the number of females. There is the risk of having a biased sample. Scientists who study the caribou tell us to be careful when it comes to this data.

• (1220)

The Chair: Okay, thank you. We have to stop there because Mr. Martel's speaking time is up.

We will now turn to Mrs. Chatel.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel (Pontiac, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for coming to meet with us. I am also very happy to have an elected member here with us today. Welcome, everyone.

This is 2024, there is no denying that all governments need to work together. We cannot build an economy out of thin air. The economy is built on the resources that the land gives us and on ecology. I come from a rural riding where we have excellent forestry companies. Back home, we work together. Back home, we work with the provincial member of the national assembly, with the local officials, with the reeve of the municipality of La Vallée-de-la-Gatineau, as well as with the reeve of the municipality of Pontiac. Together we come up with solutions to our problems. It is only by working together that we will succeed.

I am sorry, but we do not have time for playing politics. It is time for every level of government, the provincial, federal and municipal governments as well as the community and businesses to work together on finding solutions. I believe that when we work together, solutions will come.

The caribou need to be protected. That is not up for debate. When a species becomes extinct, that means others are at risk. Human beings are also a species. We all live together. Environments need to be protected. We need to protect the economy and the environment; they go hand in hand.

I also think that we humans have the right to live in dignity, have work and develop our regional economy. Forestry companies have a tremendous responsibility to guarantee prosperity, not only for today, but also for the future. You are responsible for ensuring our regional economy or that of Sacré-Coeur not only for today, but for our children too, or they will leave our communities.

I would like to know what you expect from the governments. Do you expect them to sit down and work with you on coming up with solutions?

Mr. Steeve St-Gelais: Thank you for your question, Mrs. Chatel.

I will touch only on the information and facts you just presented to us. By the way, if you go to the Government of Quebec website you will find everything I told you just now. There is only one sub-species of caribou in Quebec and that is the woodland caribou. There are three ecotypes, but it is the same caribou everywhere. The takeaway is that it is important to change the perception that the species is threatened. The species is not threatened. As a society, we might want to pay particular attention to the boreal caribou ecotype. That is acceptable. However, the species is not threatened in Quebec and I think it is important to understand that. For any solution we might want to offer, it is important to put it into context at all times.

What is more, as you said earlier, Mrs. Chatel, humans are part of the ecosystem and have to be taken into account. There are plenty of other things that can be considered, but we have to look at the big picture, take the blinders off, if we want to come up with successful solutions.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: I have a lot of questions and not a lot of time.

Since 2016, Quebec has been saying that there has been a decline and that it is implementing a strategy. Does that strategy exist?

Mr. Steeve St-Gelais: Mrs. Chatel, for our part, we have been working intensively on this file for four years. Four years ago, or even two or three years ago, the provincial government was faced with situations that could have been catastrophic. We had to work hard to raise awareness and our hard work seems to have paid off in the past six months. There was talk of ensuring that things are done differently and that efforts would be made to weigh every intervention.

I would like to mention something that was done in our region. There is a protected area—

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: I am sorry to interrupt, but I also have questions for the mayor.

We need to have a strategy as soon as possible. The Province of Quebec has a role to play.

I invite you to submit your responses in writing if they were not complete.

Mayor, welcome.

Did you participate in the federal consultations on this order?

• (1225)

Ms. Lise Boulianne: I am currently working with Boisaco. I did not participate in the consultations, but I am working to ensure my municipality's survival. Our municipality has 1,760 inhabitants. A minority relies on agriculture and tourism, while 70% of the population relies on the forestry, as I was saying earlier.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: As I was saying, we have to work together. I invite you to share your concerns during the consultations and not

just through the industry. I invite you to share the voice of your community directly. At least that is how it works around here.

Ms. Lise Boulianne: That is what I am trying to do, Mrs. Chatel.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Thank you very much.

Were you also consulted by the Quebec government on this?

Ms. Lise Boulianne: Yes, we took part in consultations about two years ago.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Do you have any requests for the federal and provincial elected members?

Ms. Lise Boulianne: I would ask them to sit down with our forestry companies and work together. There are people back home who are able to come up with solutions for our governments. As I was saying, it is important to work together.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: I agree with you.

Thank you.

The Chair: Your speaking time is up, Mrs. Chatel.

Now it is Mr. Simard's turn.

Mr. Mario Simard: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Boulianne, Mr. St-Gelais and Mr. Gilbert, I just want to say from the outset that I think you are brave. We have been talking about the anxiety that this situation is causing for you. I am well aware of that.

Mayor Boulianne, you say that 70% of the population of Sacré-Coeur relies, let's be real, on Boisaco. That is not nothing.

We hope the worst will not happen, that this order will not be applied. That being said, people have concerns. Are some of the dreaded effects already being felt in your community?

Ms. Lise Boulianne: This morning I would not say that we are brave so much as determined.

Yes, there has been an impact. I have already talked to the people from Boisaco. What we are seeing in our municipality right now is that there are next to no applications for building or renovation permits. The number of applications is in free fall. People are fearful and protecting their assets. That is all they can do.

Mr. Mario Simard: It is not a stretch to say that there are people in Sacré-Cœur who believe that applying this order would spell the end of their municipality. I do not want to belabour this, but that is what they believe.

Ms. Lise Boulianne: We have to face the facts: Boisaco closing its doors would be devastating.

Mr. Mario Simard: Thank you.

I have been interested in the forestry industry for a long time. We are often told that there are players in this industry who use questionable practices or do nothing more than produce basic products such as two-by-fours. Anyway, the good thing about Boisaco is that it has decided to focus on added value. That comes up all the time when I talk to people in the forestry sector. They told us that you had exceptional practices. Congratulations, Mr. St-Gelais. The order is even more distressing when it applies to one of the good actors in the forestry sector.

I would like to talk about the objective of protecting the ecotype. Ecotype protection cannot be done without forest management. We are aware of the different problems related to the spruce budworm and the fires. If there is no forest management and we put the forest under a glass dome, do you think that will protect the ecotype?

Mr. Gilbert can probably answer that question.

Mr. Steve St-Gelais: Yes, I will ask Mr. Gilbert to answer that question.

Mr. André Gilbert: That is an excellent question.

Let's compare the forest managers, the professional foresters of Quebec, to a general contractor who builds homes. The latter has to consider everything as a whole, deal with plumbers or electricians, in other words experts in their field. Similarly, professional foresters have to consider what large fauna biologists have to say about caribou, in this case the boreal caribou ecotype. That is essential.

However, as we know, pursuant to the legislation, professional foresters have exclusive domain over management plans in Quebec. Professional foresters are trained to incorporate every aspect of the forest, namely the environment, hydrology, botany, and biology of large fauna, of course, and all the other relevant aspects such as forest fires, insect outbreaks and forest renewal.

Currently in Canada and Quebec, we are experiencing extremely intense forest fires that are set to increase in frequency in the future. Forest management is an important response for forest fire abatement. It has been demonstrated that when a forest is managed, fires are less intense and not as widespread because of the access that is created to fight the fires. In my career, I have fought many forest fires. This helps us to prevent the fires from spreading. It is a way of renewing the forest.

I do not want to give a lesson in forestry, but there is something else that is important to consider and know. If we look only at the issue of habitat and put a glass dome over the forest, as you say, Mr. Simard, then we will no longer be able to intervene and manage the forest. That is not going to stop the forest fires or the insect outbreaks like the spruce budworm outbreak. By the way, back home, on the north shore, millions of cubic metres of wood have been affected by that type of insect. In the past decade or more, 80% of the wood harvested was affected by the spruce budworm. Otherwise, it would be a total loss. If the wood affected by the fires or by the insect outbreaks is not recovered, then it inevitably decomposes. Deer, including the boreal caribou and caribou ecotype, avoid windthrow areas.

After a fire, regeneration can take 25 to 30 years. The forest does not come back because it was not recovered or reforested. Forest

management is a response to climate change, but it also helps recreate habitat more quickly for the caribou during natural disasters. Natural disasters are not going to go away. They existed 1,000 years ago, 25 years ago, and they will continue to exist, even intensify, in the future.

Forest management is the cornerstone of any plan. What is more, it is the reason we say that the caribou population is influenced by many factors. A small number of the boreal caribou ecotype lives in the forest. It is very dispersed. Yes, it will be influenced by anthropic disturbances, but it will also be influenced by the climate. Recent studies conducted in western Canada clearly show that climate change had more of an impact than human disturbances.

• (1230)

The Chair: Thank you.

It is now Mr. Boulerice's turn.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I am extremely pleased to be here with you today.

I thank the guests from the first group of witnesses. This is the first meeting on a truly important study on the future of the boreal caribou, which is an ecotype of a subspecies found only in Quebec. I truly thank them. This is an extremely important topic that affects a host of aspects, including regional development and the survival of certain municipalities, as we heard. It is also a matter of good jobs in the forestry sector and the future of our young people.

At the NDP, we are deeply concerned about achieving truly sustainable development that would ensure a future for the young people in the regions concerned, whether Haute-Côte-Nord, the Gaspésie or even Charlevoix. What is more, we want to be responsible when it comes to threatened or endangered species. This also applies to subspecies, from what I understand.

We cannot rely on fine speeches and great discussions like the ones we saw in Montreal, when we hosted the entire planet at the United Nations COP15. We need to take an approach that is based on science and facts.

I am pleased to have the chance to hear all these testimonies this afternoon. They illustrate how complex this issue is with all its variable factors. Human or industrial activity is one of the factors that can influence the future of a species or a subspecies, but there are other factors, including climate change, that Mr. Gilbert spoke about. Certain insects and certain disasters can also have consequences.

We want to be able to save our municipalities and our villages and provide good jobs to our young people, but we do not want to be responsible for the disappearance of a globally unique subspecies. Around the world we are seeing the accelerated disappearance of living species. Some scientists are even talking about ecological collapse. Species are not only disappearing, but those that are still around have fewer and fewer individuals. Some say that 60% to 75% of individuals or bird species or land species are disappearing.

We have to find a balance. Sometimes it can be hard to achieve, but it is essential to be able to ensure both aspects, especially as elected members or parliamentarians.

In 2016, the Government of Quebec recognized—

• (1235)

Ms. Lise Boulianne: Is there going to be a question?

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Yes, of course I will ask you a question.

The Chair: Ms. Boulianne, I know it is taking a while, but this is the member's speaking time. He can use it as he sees fit. That being said, I know Mr. Boulerice well and I presume he will have a question for you at the end of all this.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Of course, Mr. Chair.

In 2016, the Government of Quebec recognized the need to develop a strategy for protecting the boreal caribou and the mountainous caribou. Thereafter, the Commission indépendante sur les caribous forestiers et montagnards submitted 35 recommendations to the department, including the first one as follows:

The Commission recommends that the [department] swiftly proceed to the development and implementation of a boreal caribou protection and recovery strategy that builds on existing expertise and the recommendations stemming from this consultation. In the meantime, existing administrative protection measures should be implemented to preserve the most appropriate sectors, including by imposing moratoriums to protect old-growth forests.

I will turn to Mr. Gilbert.

First, do you agree with this recommendation, that there needs to be a caribou protection and recovery strategy? We are talking about a need.

Second, what sort of administrative protective measures would be best and the most acceptable in your view, for your co-operative and for the industry?

Mr. André Gilbert: Thank you for your question.

First, in your preamble, you alluded to the fact that the species could disappear, which is false. The woodland caribou subspecies, found in Quebec, has 180,000 individuals and that number is growing. The order addresses only the boreal caribou ecotype, and even certain populations of that ecotype in particular have been selected to be protected for reasons that we will not get into here.

A protection strategy is definitely needed. It is very clear that the order addresses just one of a multitude of factors that influence the boreal caribou ecotype, namely the habitat. The idea was that putting the boreal caribou habitat under a glass dome would help achieve a certain result, but that is totally false. The boreal caribou ecotype is influenced by a host of factors, including climate change,

forest management, of course, and predation. Obviously predators are the primary cause of death in the boreal caribou ecotype. There is also subsistence hunting and poaching, of course. These are things that can be controlled. However, there is currently no measure, not in the order or anywhere else, that addresses these factors. It should be noted that these factors fall under provincial jurisdiction, not federal.

The only way to come up with a plan that works is to address all the factors, especially the most significant ones, including predation.

The Chair: Thank you.

That ends the first round of questions. We will now move on to the second round, where each speaker will have five minutes. The members of the Bloc Québécois and the NDP will have two and half minutes.

It is Mr. Martel's turn once again. He will go first.

Mr. Richard Martel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We are here today to talk about the threat the order poses. I hear you talking about management and predation and it makes me wonder: What is the point of this order other than to kill the forestry industry?

Mr. Steeve St-Gelais: That is a good question, Mr. Martel.

Essentially, the order is worded with a rather unilateral vision. It does not take into account all of the other factors. All we can say is that this order will take us down the wrong path.

I would like to come back to something we talked about earlier regarding solutions. As I was saying, we have worked very hard to understand the provincial government's challenges. There is finally some awareness of this, but I do want to note that the measures were announced only in May. It was announced that the 5,000-square kilometre protected area would be doubled in size to 10,000 square kilometres. That represents 20 times the size of the Island of Montreal. That is not nothing. It is rather considerable, but some seem to think that it is nothing. This raises a question for us and we think it is a shame. We might say that there is a blind will to protect the habitat, that that is the only thing that counts and that the other repercussions are being minimized. Our communities are directly affected and we are going to continue to intervene to keep our organization alive, by using the same determination of those who revitalized our community 40 years ago.

• (1240)

Mr. Richard Martel: If the order is applied, Boisaco cannot survive. Is that correct, Mayor Boulianne?

Ms. Lise Boulianne: Indeed, if the order is applied as currently worded, the survival of Boisaco will be at risk.

Mr. Richard Martel: That is not to mention the other questions that have been raised.

Ms. Lise Boulianne: There are all the other aspects I raised earlier. What will our young people and not so young people live from? They went to school and were trained to work in the forestry industry back home. It is all for naught.

Mr. Richard Martel: If Boisaco closes its doors, what will become of Sacré-Cœur?

Ms. Lise Boulianne: Sacré-Cœur will pretty much become a ghost town.

Mr. Richard Martel: Mr. Gilbert, let us talk about climate change. I believe you sent a letter in which you talked about that, but you did not receive a response, is that correct?

Mr. André Gilbert: No. So far I have written seven letters to the Prime Minister and to Mr. Guilbeault and we have not received a response. We did not receive acknowledgement of receipt until after the sixth letter.

The issue of climate change that you raise is extremely important. As I was saying earlier, research in western Canada is starting to indicate that climate change is a more significant disturbance factor for the boreal caribou ecotype. We should be putting more and more of our attention on addressing this phenomenon.

It has been shown that species are migrating north at a speed of 45 km per decade. The scientific community is unanimous on this. I am thinking about something Claude Villeneuve, researcher emeritus at Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, said just last year. Unfortunately, he is no longer with us, but there are recordings of him on this topic. He said that moose and deer were migrating north and that their predator, the wolf, was migrating with them. According to him, that is an inevitable consequence of climate change. The moose populations have increased almost fivefold in Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean and in sectors near Pipmuacan over the past 20 years.

All of this indicates that there is a movement we will not be able to stop easily. Claude Villeneuve himself said that we will not really be able to have any slowing impact on climate change for 300 years. Those are not my words, they're his. In the short term, there is no use in thinking that a habitat protection measure that destroys all forest management activity around a region is going to help the caribou. That is magical thinking. It is impossible.

Mr. Richard Martel: How much time do I have left?

The Chair: You have roughly 10 seconds left.

Mr. Richard Martel: I was going to talk about predation. We hear that wolves are under constant threat. I read an article about what happened in western Canada and—

Mr. André Gilbert: Indeed, an experiment was done in western Canada and it is important to talk about it. People there worked on the topic of wolves and, in two years, they helped increase the population of the boreal caribou ecotype by 52% without destroying the forestry economy or forest management.

Mr. Richard Martel: That is good what you are saying there.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now move on to Mr. Lauzon.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon (Argenteuil—La Petite-Nation, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses, including the mayor of Sacré-Coeur, for being here today.

I represent a rural region where the forestry is very important. One of the largest municipalities in my riding is suffering the impact of the Fortress plant closure, which you may be aware of. I attended round table discussions on the matter. Since I come from this community, I am familiar with forestry-related issues. The pressure felt in the forestry industry is not new.

As you know, mayor, when you are elected at the municipal level, you are close to your constituents. People rely on industry to earn a living. Some villages have been negatively impacted by the industry. I am thinking of Abitibi-Témiscamingue, for example, where the locals came together, bought back the plant and managed to restart it, under certain conditions.

Since 1989, I have been getting the sense that the climate situation is also putting some pressure on the forestry. This can also cause certain illnesses. You mentioned it and it was very interesting. We also have to deal with forest fires.

Today we have another challenge to add to all the layers of challenges we have faced so far. No matter how much we champion the forestry, we are confronted with this industry's impact on the caribou, which is endangered.

As a government member, I am proud to represent the forestry and rural life and to defend the interests of small communities. I was a municipal councillor and local citizens and local services are important to me.

As a government, we need to make decisions by holding consultations and relying on professionals. We are in the middle of that process and you are part of it. We are here for that. If we did not want to hear from you, you would not be here today. We are here to listen to you. It is your turn to speak.

Earlier, you talked to us about a document proving that the caribou is not threatened on your territory. I do not have that document, but I would be happy to have it and read it. I would like you to officially table it with the committee so that members can read it. This would help advance the consultation, which continues until September 15.

As you know, Ms. Boulianne, the concept of consultation is important in small municipalities, but it is just as important at the federal level.

The model that was chosen for holding consultations is an independent commission that gathers expert recommendations. Boisaco had the time to participate in this consultation. As for you, Ms. Boulianne, you did not have time to take part, but you are relying on Boisaco for that. My question is therefore for the people at Boisaco.

As a government we need to be responsible. In almost every file, the opposition parties call on the government to hold an independent commission. In this case, we held an independent commission. That being said, do you think that this commission on caribou is independent? If not, how could we do better next time?

• (1245)

Mr. Steeve St-Gelais: Mr. Lauzon, are you talking about the current commission?

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: Yes, I am talking about the consultation that is being held until September 15.

Mr. Steeve St-Gelais: Okay.

Let us be clear, the current commission is being held because the system was under pressure. It is rather unfortunate to want to move forward under the threat of an order. Again, during the first technical meeting we were invited to, we were told that this order was made with a view to striking a balance between protecting the animal and the repercussions to the people in the community. That is exactly what we were told. Then—

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: I am sorry to interrupt you, Mr. St-Gelais, but the consultations were extended until September 15 and we are continuing to consult people because we are acting in good faith. We are listening to you. We are there.

Mr. Steeve St-Gelais: Mr. Lauzon, we were told that the order that was presented could not really be amended. What difference does a consultation make in that case? The impact of this order on the locals was absolutely not taken into account. At the end of the day, we are being told that the order will not change much, but we are still being asked to contribute to the consultation. It makes no sense. You can appreciate that we are moving in the wrong direction, unfortunately.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: You are therefore telling this committee that based on the information you had, I am not sure if you received it orally or in writing, this is a botched consultation, that there is no point in it, because it is a foregone conclusion. You may already know the direction of the final result, but I am a federally elected member and I am not even aware of the result of the consultations. I still have faith in the consultants and the experts. I do not know the result yet but you do, according to what you are saying.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lauzon.

I will now give the floor to Mr. Simard for two and half minutes.

Mr. Mario Simard: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would ask the witnesses to provide very short answers.

Ms. Boulianne, our goal today is to have an influence on the minister. In one minute, if you had a message to send to Mr. Guilbeault, what would it be?

• (1250)

Ms. Lise Boulianne: Earlier, in response to the question on the consultation, there was confusion on my part. Yes, we are actively participating in this consultation. All of my constituents have received a personal message inviting them to participate in this consultation.

The message I want to convey today is that if the order is applied as currently worded, I wonder where our municipality will go. I think it will no longer need a mayor to manage the municipality, since there will no longer be anything to manage.

Mr. Mario Simard: That is very clear. Thank you.

Mr. St-Gelais, you can elaborate on your response to Mr. Lauzon, if you like.

However, I would like to talk to you about the disturbance rates. There is talk of a 35% disturbance rate. If we consider the forest

fires and the spruce budworm, the disturbance rate in the sector of interest would already be at least 58%.

Could you clarify that?

Mr. Steeve St-Gelais: I will ask Mr. Gilbert to provide more details on that.

Mr. André Gilbert: I would like to correct the record: The disturbance rate in the Pipmuacan sector is currently 80%. That is based on calculations made using federal methodology.

For our part, we have taken into account the objectives of the order and we recalculated with our experts to determine what would happen if the order were applied. At the end of the day, if we dismantled every avenue we could and allowed the activities permitted under the order, we come up with a disturbance rate of 49%, while the goal of the order is 35%. If the disturbance rate is 35%, there is a 60% chance that the population will hold. However, if the disturbance rate is 49%, that is no longer the case.

Based on how the order was made, it takes only the habitat into account. In my opinion, this demonstrates a lack of knowledge of the territory where the forest is managed. This is an exercise in futility. It is a road to nowhere. We are going to destroy economies, villages and lives for nothing.

Mr. Mario Simard: Mr. St-Gelais, you thought that you did not have much influence over the government's decision during the consultation. That is the gist of the conversation you had with Mr. Lauzon.

I would like you to elaborate on that.

The Chair: I will ask you to be brief, Mr. St-Gelais.

Mr. Steeve St-Gelais: From the first meeting, we were informed that the order was drafted and not much about it could be changed, no matter the disastrous consequences. That did not leave us with much hope. We did continue to express ourselves in every way possible, of course.

The Chair: Thank you.

I will now give the floor to Mr. Boulerice.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to start by saying how much I appreciate the history of Boisaco and the people in the community who took a stand, took matters into their own hands and set up a work co-op and collective ownership. As a member of the NDP, that certainly resonates with me. I'm truly touched by that story. I think it could serve as a model for several other industries and workplaces in general.

I'm kind of torn because I'm hearing contradictory information. I understand the Boisaco rep, who says we can't put a glass dome over the habitat. That's not the solution; it wouldn't fix anything. Still, there are challenges facing a species that seems to be at risk, threatened or, at the very least, vulnerable in many ways.

In the spirit of seeking solutions, what do you think could be done to improve the current situation that would be acceptable to you? I don't think we can sit back and say, "We don't need to change anything. Let's just maintain the status quo and do nothing." What do you think could be done that would be a step in the right direction and be acceptable to your workers?

Mr. Steve St-Gelais: We need to approach this in an informed way, Mr. Boulgerice.

Basically, what we've always suggested is that the solution calls for consensus and needs to take all the factors into account. One way or another, predation control definitely has to be part of a protection strategy. The strategy can be adjusted from time to time. There are lots of things we can do. We've suggested a number of solutions to the Quebec government. This has to be done properly, and it can't be rushed. Many stakeholders are involved, including first nations. There are many stakeholders, and everyone has to work together. That's what we mean when we say there has to be consensus.

You can't steamroller anything through. You need to create the opportunity to come up with good solutions that will have a meaningful impact on the subspecies in Quebec, especially the boreal caribou ecotype. This is the truth, and I really want to set the record straight. There is only one subspecies in Quebec, and it's the boreal caribou ecotype that we're concerned about. That said, the caribou subspecies in Quebec is in no way in danger of going extinct. That's an important point.

• (1255)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Martel, it's your turn.

Mr. Richard Martel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Firstly, the order is catastrophic for regions and communities. That's clear from our discussions today. If the order is issued, some people will lose their jobs and many will have a hard time securing food and shelter. That's the threat right now.

Here's what I want to know. Have all the necessary measures been taken?

Mr. Steve St-Gelais: What kind of measures are you talking about, exactly?

Mr. Richard Martel: Have all the necessary measures been taken prior to issuing an order?

Mr. Steve St-Gelais: The provincial government made an announcement recently, and we know talks are under way to work on solutions. We have put solutions forward. The provincial government is analyzing the situation and looking for other possible solutions. It's crucial to take the time to come up with solutions that take all the facts and issues into account. That's how you go about finding a solution. You have to take the time to make an informed decision. You can't rush into things by issuing an order that, unfortunately, doesn't take into account any of the other repercussions.

Mr. Richard Martel: Thank you.

I have no more questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Martel.

Mrs. Shanahan, you're going to wrap up the discussion with the first panel. You have five minutes.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to verify something. Have the witnesses been asked to provide the documents they mentioned while answering questions from my colleagues, Mr. Lauzon and Ms. Chatel? Apparently these documents contain data showing that caribou numbers are not declining.

The Chair: You want the witnesses to send us documents indicating that the species is not in decline, is that right?

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Yes, I'm talking about the documents the witnesses mentioned.

The Chair: I don't believe the witnesses have them on hand, but I invite them to send us those documents.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Perfect. Of course, as my colleagues have already said, it's very important to work collaboratively and to have all the facts before us.

My first question is for the Boisaco representatives.

We recognize that your company plays a leadership role in the economic development and prosperity of regional communities. However, like any business, you need certainty when it comes to your resources and your market.

Is the lack of concrete policies to address the significant decline of the caribou population in Quebec a challenge for you, and does that contribute to the regulatory uncertainty facing your industry?

Mr. Steve St-Gelais: Mrs. Shanahan, uncertainty is always a bad thing, obviously.

As I was saying, over the past four years, we've worked very hard to ensure that the provincial government understands the issues and takes measured, informed action. We've gotten that point across, but it's still looking for solutions. However, when the order was announced, that knocked us back to square one, or worse. Now that there's the possibility of an enforceable order, we're even more worried, so, yes, this order introduces uncertainty.

The repercussions are already being felt, I can tell you. This is likely to be a problem, so some contractors are thinking about starting to look elsewhere. Some of our partner companies' clients—

• (1300)

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Sorry to interrupt you, Mr. St-Gelais.

We do know the Quebec government has been talking about implementing a strategy since 2016. Regardless, we're here to collaborate. Would you like governments to set aside ideology about jurisdiction so they can find a solution that strikes a balance between caribou conservation and regional economic development? As everyone knows, these are shared responsibilities.

Do you recognize that the province does have an important role to play on this issue?

Mr. Steve St-Gelais: Ms. Shanahan, what we're saying is that this order must be set aside. This whole thing has to stop.

Then, we have to keep working together. We're not here to play politics. We have lots of things to work on in addition to this. We need to figure out how to get everyone working together so we can find promising solutions that will protect the boreal caribou ecotype without having an impact on the industry. That's exactly where we're hoping to go. To get there, however, we need to get rid of the looming threat, the order that has screwed up everything we've been working on and is dragging us back to square one.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you very much, Mr. St-Gelais.

I'm done, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

That brings us to the end of our first panel. I'd like to thank—

Mr. Mario Simard: Mr. Chair, if I may, I'd like add something that I feel is essential.

I would like the Boisaco representatives to make it clear that, if the order comes into force, Boisaco will lose 300,000 cubic metres of wood, which is 60% of its current volume. Worse still, if the company loses just 20% of its current volume, it will lose 80% of its sales. I want that on the record. I would like Boisaco's representatives to confirm that this is true.

The Chair: Okay. I would invite the Boisaco representatives to submit a written document containing such data, if they have it.

With that, we'll have to end it there.

I would like to thank the witnesses for being here and for their very eloquent and clear testimony.

We'll take a short break and start up again in a few minutes.

• (1300) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1305)

The Chair: We're back.

I'd like to welcome Chief Ghislain Picard. We're glad to have him with us.

We have a second witness, Alain Bédard, who is appearing by video conference, but who is currently having some technical difficulties, which we'll try to resolve.

We'll start with you, Chief Picard. You have the floor for five minutes.

• (1310)

Chief Ghislain Picard (Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador): Good afternoon, everyone.

[*Witness spoke in Innu.*]

[*Translation*]

Let me begin by acknowledging that this meeting is taking place on the unceded traditional territory of the Anishinabe Nation. I'd like to thank the Anishinabe Nation, because we're meeting today for an important discussion that has implications for them and others.

Mr. Chair, honourable members of this committee, let me introduce myself. My name is Ghislain Picard of the Innu Nation and the community of Pessamit. I am the Chief of the Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador.

Our organization is made up of the 43 first nations communities of Quebec and Labrador. Its mission is to ensure that their rights on a wide range of important issues are upheld.

I'd like to start by thanking you for inviting me to testify today about the age-old cultural and spiritual relationship that first nations have with the caribou, which we call *atik*^u in the Innu language. I will also speak to our support for Minister Guilbeault's move to issue an emergency order under the Species at Risk Act.

Caribou are at the heart of first nations identity, culture and way of life. We are not only stakeholders in the management of the territory and its resources, we are also rights holders, and we demand to be consulted in decision-making processes related to our territories.

As I said, first nations are rights holders. They have both treaty rights and aboriginal rights. As you know, these rights were formalized in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which was endorsed by the Government of Canada through the adoption of Bill C-15, An Act respecting the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Quebec has so far refused to adopt provincial legislation that would endorse the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and oblige Quebec to adapt its legislative framework to the declaration's fundamental principles.

We are sensitive to the socio-economic issues connected to caribou protection, particularly with regard to forestry jobs and the survival of the municipalities that depend on them. Despite these concerns, we and many others agree that taking action for the caribou, an umbrella species essential to biodiversity and the health of our ecosystems, is urgent. That's why we affirm our support for Minister Guilbeault's actions, which stem directly from his legal obligation to recommend an emergency decree when he believes the species is facing imminent threats to its survival or recovery.

In our humble opinion, there's no justification for placing the blame on Minister Guilbeault and playing the interference card by asserting that the preservation of the species falls under Quebec's jurisdiction. Indeed, we're in this precarious situation today because of the Quebec government's failure to act on this matter.

Since 2019, the Quebec government has been postponing, for no good reason, the publication of a comprehensive strategy that would contribute to the survival of all caribou herds in Quebec. Last June, the Quebec Superior Court even ruled that the Quebec government had failed in its constitutional obligation to the Essipit Innu and Pekuakamiulnuatsh First Nations by failing to consult them before developing this strategy. The same judgment also calls out Quebec's inaction and stresses the urgent need to act, calling the status of the caribou in Quebec and its habitat on Nitassinan deplorable.

Quebec's first nations care deeply about the caribou's survival. They have been working for many years to preserve it via political action, participation in various policy committees and consensus-building groups, and community-led initiatives in the field.

The Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador even went so far as to submit a brief outlining our concerns and recommendations to the independent commission set up by Quebec in 2022.

- (1315)

Even so, the Quebec government is bent on excluding first nations from any caribou-related decisions. In light of its refusal to co-operate, first nations have asked the federal government to intervene, which it is legally obligated to do. Minister Guilbeault was the only one to take our concerns and proposed solutions seriously, and that's why we support his recommendation to the Governor in Council to issue an emergency order to protect the caribou.

In conclusion, we believe that significant measures must be taken to ensure the caribou's survival, and we urge you all to endorse measures related to the emergency order, a process that stems from the Minister of Environment and Climate Change's legal obligation to act. Measures and discussions relating to the fate of the caribou must transcend political partisanship. In fact, the same principle should apply when it comes to indigenous issues in general.

It's also important to set the record straight about the disinformation campaign going on in Quebec. Our actions must be based on reliable data for which there is scientific consensus. We must act quickly not only for the caribou, but to ensure that our children, future generations, can also understand the importance of this iconic species and benefit from the priceless ecosystem services provided by forests and their biodiversity.

I would of course like to acknowledge the presence of Mr. Alain Bédard, general director of the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Sustainable Development Institute, who is attending the meeting with me today.

The Chair: Thank you, Chief Ghislain Picard.

I believe Mr. Bédard's technical difficulties have not been resolved.

Mr. Bédard, please feel free to send any comments in writing about the discussion we are about to have. Committee members are free to ask you questions, but, unfortunately, if the system isn't working, you can only answer yes or no, or indicate agreement or disagreement. Once again, feel free to send us your comments in writing about what participants say in the next few minutes.

We'll now go to questions.

Mr. Deltell, you have the floor.

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

Good afternoon, colleagues.

Chief Ghislain Picard, it's very nice to see you again here in Otawa. We're practically neighbours, since your association's head offices are in Wendake. I was very fortunate to be born near Wendake 60 years ago and to have spent the last 60 years of my life there. I have a very close relationship with the Wendat and the first nations, and I'm very proud of that. Mr. Picard, welcome to the Parliament of Canada.

Mr. Chair, I'd like to tell you a bit about Wendake, since I have represented its people with honour and dignity for the past 16 years. Wendake is an inspiration to all first nations. It stands on its own two feet, it's proud of its heritage and it's very self-sufficient economically.

More than 400 non-indigenous people work in Wendake. A number of successful businesses that sell their products across Canada are based in Wendake, and many of them work with wood. Some examples are Christian Picard's canoes, the handcrafted snowshoes of Raquettes and Artisanat Gros-Louis—I have a pair myself—Raquettes GV and Prémontex, a business founded by the Siouï family almost 40 years ago. Prémontex has about 50 employees who specialize in building stairs, among other things, and they work with wood.

My point is, it's possible to ensure economic vitality while ensuring the vitality of all earthly creatures.

Mr. Picard, you started off by saying that caribou are very important to first nations. Can you tell us more about that?

Chief Ghislain Picard: Earlier, I emphasized the importance of the caribou. I just want to point out that our world is very inclusive. There are humans, of course, but there's also everything around them, all the plants and animals. I think it's important to remember that. We like to emphasize that at every opportunity.

That said, the caribou is of special importance to us. That's true for the Innu, and it's also true for the Cree nations. I'm sure people in Yukon would say so as well. At the same time, we're well aware—as the leaders of these nations remind us—that things are precarious. Caribou herds are in a precarious position. By their actions, our nations have shown that they are also proactive. We understand the fragile balance between economic survival, in general, and vulnerable ecosystems.

Two years ago, in January and February, the Cree and Innu nations joined forces. They agreed to come together over their concerns and enter into an agreement. The agreement allows harvesting, because caribou is also extremely important in terms of subsistence hunting, and it also provides for conservation of the species. I believe this demonstrates that our nations are just as capable of making their own decisions about policies aimed at protecting the species, regardless of the role played by the other two levels of government.

That means it's extremely important to consider the close bond between the caribou and our nations. Nevertheless, there are somewhat more contemporary issues that challenge us as well. For example, one Innu nation community recently decided to refrain from hunting for a period of five years, I believe, so the caribou herds can achieve a much less concerning state than what we see today.

• (1320)

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Mr. Picard, I'm going to ask a question, and you can answer it later if you don't have time to provide an answer, but I'd like you to think about it.

Earlier, people from Boisaco and the municipality of Sacré-Cœur told us about what happened in British Columbia and Alberta. They managed to increase the size of the caribou herd in just two years by allowing more wolf hunting.

Is that something worth considering?

Chief Ghislain Picard: Briefly, your question highlights the fact that, if there is no space to talk about the problem, solutions and potential solutions fizzle out.

I purposely mentioned the Superior Court decision in the case of two of our communities where Quebec did not fully carry out its duty to consult our communities and their leaders. That is essentially what I want to point out here. If proper space for discussion isn't available, discussions will be meaningless.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. van Koeverden.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden (Milton, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also want to thank the witnesses for sharing their views with us as part of their testimony today.

I recognize that caribou issues are happening pretty far from my riding of Milton. However, Milton is on the traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people, the Huron-Wendat and the Mississaugas of the Credit. We are also very close to the Six Nations Confederacy. Nevertheless, as parliamentary secretary, I have a responsibility to support the government's work in this area.

In earlier testimony, we heard that caribou populations are not declining, but are in fact growing.

Chief Ghislain Picard, based on your experience and observations, do you believe that the boreal caribou populations are in good health and that their numbers are increasing?

Do science and research support the claim that caribou herds are healthy and that the situation is improving?

• (1325)

Chief Ghislain Picard: One thing the Government of Quebec did that we supported was set up an advisory committee whose mandate was to look into this matter.

In general, we agreed with the findings of that committee, which were presented in a report published in the late summer of 2022. It's a scientific landmark, and, in light of the information we've been receiving over the past year, there are undoubtedly assertions that deserve the support of the scientific community. It's unfortunate that my colleague, Mr. Bédard, can't participate fully in the discussion, because the science part of this is more in the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Sustainable Development Institute's wheelhouse.

That said, at the risk of repeating myself, I'll reiterate some of what I said to Mr. Deltell earlier. If we can't create a space to talk about it, the discussions end up happening in isolation and don't allow for longer-term collaboration in seeking solutions.

We believe that all the parties concerned by the fragility of the species could have been brought to the same table to have these discussions, while also soliciting input from the scientific community, of course.

I think your question points to a possibility, and that possibility still exists.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Thank you for your answer, Chief Ghislain Picard.

Mr. Bédard, can you give us a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down to indicate where caribou populations have been going over the past 10 years?

The Chair: Mr. Bédard, we'll give it a try and see if the sound quality is good enough for the interpreters. Otherwise, I may have to cut you off.

Mr. Alain Bédard (General Director, First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Sustainable Development Institute): Okay.

I can go over the history of the caribou issue. The species was listed under the Species at Risk Act, under the Act Respecting Threatened or Vulnerable Species—

The Chair: Excuse me, but there is no interpretation because the sound quality isn't good enough. Unfortunately, you'll have to send us your comments in writing, Mr. Bédard. Your comments will inform our report.

I'm sorry, but we have to consider our interpreters.

Mr. van Koeverden, you have the floor for 30 seconds.

• (1330)

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: My last question is for Chief Ghislain Picard.

Chief Picard, is it fair and reasonable for the provincial government to take more than eight years to come up with a plan to support, protect and ensure the preservation of caribou species?

The Chair: Please be brief, Chief Picard. Do you think eight years is enough time to come up with a plan?

Is that your question, Mr. van Koeverden?

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Yes, thank you.

Chief Ghislain Picard: Thank you very much for the question.

I think eight years is way too long. The situation is certainly precarious, and urgent action is needed. I said that twice during my presentation a little earlier.

Members of our organization have said this a number of times outside the work of the committee. We even said it to the advisory committee I referred to a little earlier. In that sense, our recommendations are very specific.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Simard, you have the floor.

Mr. Mario Simard: Thank you for being with us, Chief Picard.

You said earlier that there was no justification for playing the interference card. I understand what you're saying. We may not see eye to eye on this, but I've always had a great deal of admiration for the first nations that defend their territorial occupation tooth and nail, and all that entails, much like the Government of Quebec does.

I want to ask you this question anyway. You won a favourable judgment from the Superior Court of Quebec, and now the government has an obligation to consult with you.

Based on discussions you may have with the Government of Quebec during consultations, could your support for the order potentially change?

Chief Ghislain Picard: Chief Gilbert Dominique, whom you will be hearing from a little later today, will no doubt be able to provide you with a more fulsome answer than mine on this subject. It's really the Essipit Innu and Pekuakamiunuatsh first nations that are the subject of this Quebec Superior Court decision.

All we want to do is work together, especially on this file. It's way more than just the communities of Essipit and Mashteuiatsh. The communities are asking us to intervene.

I'd like to point out that the Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador is responsible for promoting unifying principles among the various nations and for advancing certain issues that are more urgent than others. One of those issues is the caribou, so we're moving forward with a position that allows us to reflect the diversity represented by 10 nations dispersed over 40-plus communities.

In light of the Superior Court's decision, we have indicated our interest in meeting with a number of Quebec government ministers that are involved by virtue of the principle of consultation. We're waiting to hear back from the Government of Quebec. In that regard, we've always said that it's important for the consultation process to take place sooner rather than later. In this case, the ball is really in the Government of Quebec's court.

If we have a framework and a space for discussion that's not likely to make what we want secondary to conditions put forward solely by the Government of Quebec, we can certainly bring political will to the table.

Mr. Mario Simard: Thank you for that.

I liked what you had to say about unifying principles. However, media coverage of caribou protection and the discussions I have had with some people about it lead me to believe that there is no consensus, or that it is difficult to reach one, on this issue. I have to be honest with you about that.

We've been working on this issue for three or four years now, and we've met with people. It's really tough to reach a consensus or a position that works for the majority of stakeholders, from people in the forest industry to those in favour of protecting biodiversity. Personally, I think the two can go hand in hand.

There's one thing I'd like to know, though. Is there a majority view among all the different indigenous communities that you could share with us?

I'm not trying to polarize the issue. I'm aware of what some Boisaco employees have told the media, and they have a different take on the situation.

What's the consensus view among first nations?

• (1335)

Chief Ghislain Picard: I'll try to answer your question with a brief aside. I'm also aware that public meetings were held in around Sacré-Cœur and Forestville, near where I live. To be honest, I think some of the things people said were worrisome and counterproductive considering the goal.

Having said that, I think it's very important to emphasize that the right conditions need to be in place for a proactive and constructive discussion about the current situation. At the risk of repeating myself, I would add that, as long as the Government of Quebec is willing to listen to us, I think the will on our side is there.

That is more or less the comparison I would make, without necessarily talking about what the Government of Quebec has done or not done. Minister Guilbeault, who represents the federal government, reached out to first nations from the very beginning and said he intended to listen to them. I think that what's clear here is that the Government of Quebec is taking actions that could lead us in the wrong direction.

If we had proper space to engage in a meaningful discussion, I'm sure first nations would embrace such an opportunity.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Boulerice, you have the floor.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would also like to thank the witnesses for being with us.

Chief Picard, it's always a pleasure to listen to you. I'm very honoured to ask you a few questions today.

Mr. Bédard, I wish I could have heard what you have to say. I may ask you some questions that you can answer in writing afterwards.

Chief Picard, you mentioned something at the outset that I would like to pick up on. You talked about the role that caribou play in the culture of some indigenous communities or nations in terms of lifestyle and identity.

A balanced ecosystem is one thing, but what does the caribou symbolize for the nations you represent? I'd like to hear a little bit more about that.

Chief Ghislain Picard: In my conclusion, I talked about the caribou's iconic role in our cultures. I was actually there when the Innu and Cree nations met for the first time, in February 2023, at Matimekush, near the old town of Schefferville. The discussion focused on the caribou, which people were most concerned about. I think that's why it was so easy for these two nations to join forces and adopt measures that would allow for harvesting based on conservation principles as well as subsistence hunting by our community members.

That said, the caribou, like the bear, plays an important role. In fact, I'd say that many societies around the world have a spiritual connection to the bear, one that has manifested in many ways. For the Innu, Cree, Atikamekw and Anishinabe communities, the caribou has always been a powerful presence in both stories and subsistence hunting.

The environment is a challenge we all face, ourselves included. We are fully prepared to co-operate to address the prospect of a radical decline that will make the caribou population even more vulnerable.

• (1340)

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you very much.

It's important to hear what you have to say and your point of view on the knowledge and ancestral rights of the indigenous communities you represent. It shows that reconciliation needs to be more than just a platitude or cliché. We can't place all the responsi-

bility for protecting biodiversity on Brazil, Costa Rica or Kenya, either. We also have a role to play when there are real, proven threats.

With regard to the consultation process and the Quebec government's role in that, it said in 2016 that a strategy to protect the caribou was necessary. On June 21, eight years later, the Quebec Superior Court noted that the Government of Quebec didn't carry out proper consultation with the indigenous communities concerned, which I find very disturbing. Let's keep that in mind.

What do you think the federal government's role and responsibility should be in this context, particularly with regard to the Species at Risk Act?

Chief Ghislain Picard: I just want to say that the caribou issue has been a primary concern for us for a long time, including during those years. Secondly, I would note that a former Quebec premier said at the time that he wasn't prepared to sacrifice jobs for a few caribou. That's alarming, as you say, and I agree with you.

That said, it's our duty to create a space for discussion that's specifically designed for what we mean by "consultation". That's what I was alluding to earlier. I say this because, obviously, each level of government, including the federal government, has its own definition. For me, the fact that the federal environment minister, Mr. Guilbeault, consulted First Nations was extremely well received.

I believe we've had at least three meetings that have enabled our communities to better understand the purpose of the order and to express their concerns more clearly.

In contrast, the Quebec government didn't consult us as much. Moreover, the latter has put off announcing a strategy for reasons that we feel are not valid.

If they were as determined as they claim to take positive action despite the obstacles, they could have set up a process to create a space for all stakeholders, including the forest industry, to talk about the caribou issue. Instead, we're all being targeted by a disinformation campaign, which obviously doesn't help anyone.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll move on to the second round of questions.

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

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

Mr. Picard, what do you think of what happened about 15 years ago in British Columbia and Alberta? People were allowed to hunt wolves, which prey on caribou, and that led to a 52% increase in the size of the caribou herd in two years.

Do you think that's a solution worth considering?

Chief Ghislain Picard: It may be a solution, and it's something stakeholders are talking about. I mentioned an Innu community that adopted a local policy to give caribou herds a chance to grow. I'm sure that Innu community will share its decision with other communities.

All we're doing on our end is what I would call on-the-ground monitoring. We're trying to identify the solutions that we think can succeed.

• (1345)

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Given that the western caribou herds grew because people were allowed to hunt wolves, which are predators, I imagine that could serve as inspiration to many people here.

Isn't that right?

Chief Ghislain Picard: I'm from Pessamit, which is near the Pipmuacan reservoir, where there was a local initiative to make it a protected area. People I know who live there told me there were lots of concerns about the local wolf population, so that's clearly something we need to talk about.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Okay, so there's already a conversation happening about that.

Mr. Picard, do you know if there are first nations members working in the wood industry who would be directly affected by this order?

Chief Ghislain Picard: I know some of the people would be affected. I think it's up to community leaders to have those conversations, and I know those conversations are happening.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: What would you say to first nations members whose jobs are threatened by the Liberal order?

Chief Ghislain Picard: You'd have to ask the leaders of those communities. I think we have—

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Mr. Picard, you're the chief of the Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador. What do you have to say to members of those first nations?

Chief Ghislain Picard: I'm not a chief of chiefs, sir.

As I said, my job is to put forward principles around which we have achieved consensus. There is consensus around the delicate balance between economic issues and conservation issues. That's what I'm here to talk about.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: You're the chief of the Quebec first nations. Earlier, this committee heard testimony from the mayor of Sacré-Cœur, Lise Boulianne. She said that if, God forbid, this Liberal order ever comes into force, her town will become a ghost town.

What would you say to her?

Chief Ghislain Picard: People used to say the same thing about certain communities in connection with Kruger, which is no longer in the picture, but those communities are still thriving now.

That's the point I wanted to make when I said that we're all on the receiving end of disinformation campaigns, and that makes it hard to make a decision that's in everyone's best interest.

That's also the challenge we all face now.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Earlier, the Boisaco people said that jobs could be lost and that job losses resulting from such an order would undermine human dignity.

Do you agree with those comments?

Chief Ghislain Picard: Our human dignity has been undermined for several decades because we cannot participate in decision-making, as is the case here.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: In this case, first nations people are at risk of losing their jobs, a mayor says her community is going to become a ghost town, and people say that losing a job undermines human dignity.

That is the reality of it, Mr. Picard.

Chief Ghislain Picard: The reality is also that people are making claims today that are not supported by science.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: What claims are people making today?

Chief Ghislain Picard: I want to talk about job loss. Someone said 2,000 jobs. Is that really true?

The Government of Quebec is not part of the discussion, even though this situation is of paramount importance to many communities, including ours. That's what we're trying to make people understand.

Wouldn't it benefit the Government of Quebec to play its role to the fullest degree? That's what we're saying today.

We're certainly not opposed to engaging in a meaningful discussion on this issue if given the opportunity.

• (1350)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Chatel, you have the floor.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Picard, this is a fascinating discussion. Thank you very much for your testimony.

Mr. Chair, we're not just talking about caribou today. We're also talking about biodiversity and species at risk. One of my constituents asked me why it's so important to talk about caribou and diversity. It's important because biodiversity supports us, just as it supports our economy. By preserving and protecting caribou, we protect our health, our economy, and our well-being now and in the future. If we don't protect it, the entire environment will deteriorate. We're part of that environment, though, and so is our economy. That's why we're talking about caribou.

Mr. Picard, thank you also for talking about disinformation. Some people are fearmongering while we are looking for a solution to protect our environment, the environment on which our economy depends, and to give us and our children human dignity.

With respect to the disinformation you mentioned earlier, a forestry company representative told us earlier that it's not true the boreal caribou are in danger.

You talked about an independent commission that looked at the issue and actually published a report. There's also the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada, an independent committee made up of experts in biology and wildlife from academia, the public service, non-governmental organizations and the private sector.

Scientific voices have already been raised. We've been hearing them for years, not just this year. People have been talking about this species at risk since 2004. The reason the alarm is blaring now is that we haven't been listening to them since 2004.

In 2022, an independent commission asked the Government of Quebec to present a plan, a strategy to protect the caribou. The federal government has been asking for this for years.

What was the outcome of that?

Chief Ghislain Picard: The answer is quite simple. In my opinion, the ball is really in the Government of Quebec's court. At least two of the recommendations had to do with first nations. The first reads as follows:

The commission recommends that the government's strategy take into account the particular value that first nations attach to caribou, the traditional knowledge they hold, and the aboriginal rights that may be affected.

The second reads as follows:

In addition, the Commission recommends that the government initiate a formal discussion with these communities as soon as possible, in a nation-to-nation process, with a view to fulfilling its constitutional obligation to consult and accommodate.

These recommendations were made in 2022.

I would also draw your attention to the Superior Court of Quebec's decision last June, which concluded that the Government of Quebec had not followed up on these recommendations.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: I have a point of clarification. If I understand correctly, you had to go to court to be consulted.

Is that correct?

Chief Ghislain Picard: Unfortunately, when the political process fails, despite first nations acting in good faith, they are often forced to take their case to court as a last resort.

I'll digress. The Supreme Court handed down a decision last February in response to a challenge by the Government of Quebec, which claimed that the federal government was intervening in its jurisdiction in relation to federal Bill C-92, which affects our children, youth and families.

In that case, the Supreme Court ruled in our favour. That's now part of the history of the relationship between governments and first nations over the past 50 years, and probably longer than that.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: When an emergency order is issued, that's because there's really an emergency. I think that's what the federal government is seeing. It tried to talk to and work with the Province of Quebec to come up with a plan.

In your opinion, are we at this point because of a lack of leadership on the provincial side?

• (1355)

The Chair: Give a short answer, please, Chief Picard.

Chief Ghislain Picard: That is very clearly the case.

The Chair: That's pretty clear, thank you.

Mr. Simard, you now have the floor.

Mr. Mario Simard: Mr. Picard, I'd like to pick up on what you said earlier about Kruger closing up shop. A friend told me that she had to move because of that.

I could go on and on about plant closures. For example, the Conso plant in the small municipality of La Baie, in Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean. That closure became a case study at the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, where they began to study the consequences of that type of closure. The consequence is moribund communities, which is pretty serious.

I don't doubt that the impact on the Haute-Côte-Nord could be catastrophic, but I don't want to focus only on that. I would have liked to ask Mr. Bédard a question, but perhaps he can send us his comments in writing.

Earlier, the Boisaco people told us in their testimony that, without forest management and with the combined effects of forest fires and spruce budworm, the ecosystem could become less suited to supporting boreal caribou.

I would like your comments on that, Mr. Bédard. Would it be possible to send us an answer in writing?

Mr. Alain Bédard: Yes, I can send you an answer in writing.

The Chair: Great.

Mr. Mario Simard: Thank you.

Chief Picard, you stressed that your role is to build consensus within your community. I'll be frank with you. I don't want to be pushy, but I'd like to know if steps have been taken to gather input from people who are likely to lose their jobs in connection with caribou protection.

I know that some indigenous businesses will also be affected. Simply put, the forestry sector is a chain. As soon as you break a link in the chain, there are consequences. For example, Boisaco will no longer be able to produce the wood chips that other types of companies use. This cascade of consequences can affect several companies, including, inevitably, indigenous businesses.

Do you have any information about that for us?

The Chair: Please keep your answer brief, Chief Picard.

Mr. Boulerice has questions for you, too, and you can answer Mr. Simard's question during Mr. Boulerice's time, if Mr. Simard is okay with that.

Mr. Mario Simard: My questions are more relevant than Mr. Boulerice's, but that's okay with me.

The Chair: I won't comment on that, Mr. Simard.

Mr. Picard, please answer briefly. As I said, you'll have other opportunities to expand on your answer.

Chief Ghislain Picard: I could reiterate examples that show how communities are successfully managing that delicate balance between conservation, protection and the economy.

I'll be in one of our communities later this week for a major announcement about forestry.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Picard.

Mr. Boulerice, you have the floor.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I just want to take a second to object to Mr. Simard's opinion about my remarks.

• (1400)

Mr. Mario Simard: I'm truly sorry.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: For families, having a job and a salary is about dignity and territorial occupation. There can be no economy without an environment. It's a truism, but I think it's important to remember that we have a responsibility in this regard.

Mr. Picard, earlier, you mentioned some recommendations made by an independent commission in 2022. Here's one of them, recommendation 9:

Accept the proposal to create the Pimpuakan protected area put forward by the Conseil des Innus de Pessamit, make it an indigenous-led protected area under the Natural Heritage Conservation Act, initiate discussions with this community with a view to entrusting it with the management and monitoring of the area and provide technical and financial assistance to that end.

I'd like to hear your thoughts on that.

What's been done since then? Has there been any progress? Has anything been created?

Chief Ghislain Picard: I would say that we always face administrative delays when projects come from our community.

I remember back in 2020, when the community of Pessamit told me they had submitted a project for a protected area in the Pimpuakan sector. It took several months for the Quebec government to respond. It was radio silence for months.

I think communities are welcoming the intentions expressed by the Government of Quebec and all the measures that have been taken to meet its commitment to increase protected areas in Quebec, but communities still need to be much more than stakeholders.

This area in particular has seen a breakdown in the relationship between certain leaders and the Government of Quebec. This brings me back to the Superior Court decision. Time is running out for the caribou, which means time is also running out for there to be a real definition, a common definition of the government's duty to consult.

The Chair: Thank you.

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

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Mr. Picard, the current situation really comes down to a fundamental issue. There has to be a way to balance wildlife conservation and the preservation of jobs.

As everyone knows, you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs. However, I'll repeat the question I asked you earlier. What message do you really want to send to people who risk losing their jobs?

Chief Ghislain Picard: The only constructive and responsible message is to get people around the same table.

Take the Essipit community, for example. From what I've been told, they're quite willing to engage in those discussions, but when it happens through the media, it's tough. When the conditions have not been agreed upon by all the parties, it's extremely difficult.

I have read reports of public meetings held at Boisaco's initiative in Haute-Côte-Nord municipalities, including Sacré-Coeur and Forestville. Some of those reports are extremely concerning, and I wonder whether the conditions warrant a discussion. From our perspective, we'd certainly like to encourage that, as long as the parties agree on the conditions that need to be put in place.

On the issue of consensus, we've been trying to evolve in line with the broad principles of land and resource development for 12 years now. One of the four major themes that have emerged is conservation, which we consider to be essential and indisputable.

As long as there's room for discussion, I don't see why we'd refuse to engage in such a discussion.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: We spoke earlier about wolf hunting. I'm bringing it up again, Mr. Picard, because I think it could be a solution. I know nothing is easy in life, but this is a concrete solution. An example where it actually worked was cited. There was a 52% increase in the caribou herd in two years. That's hard to beat in terms of effectiveness.

You mentioned earlier the opinion of people in your community. Did they make a similar hypothesis? Would you be willing to promote this idea to governments and propose a concrete and natural solution? It would respect both jobs and wildlife, because it would allow wildlife to restore itself naturally.

Chief Ghislain Picard: I'd have a hard time not promoting it, as long as this solution is validated by the people who hold the traditional knowledge in our communities.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Will you speak with them about it?

Chief Ghislain Picard: I think the minutes of today's meeting will certainly contribute to those discussions back home.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: I knew we'd find common ground.

Thank you, Mr. Picard.

The Chair: Mr. Lauzon, go ahead.

• (1405)

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Chief Picard, for being here today to answer our questions.

You talked about the forestry sector. You also spoke to us about disinformation. Over the years, we've come to understand the importance of adopting good sustainable practices in the industry. I lived through the closures of Canadian International Paper, Avenor, Canadian Pacific Forest Products, Temisko, Tembec and, in my riding, the Fortress mill. I come from that environment, and I can tell you that changes have occurred over the years.

The matter before us, however, is completely different. Past situations were more about the economic situation, the digital shift, the declining use of paper and falling demand for printing. Today, we are talking about protecting caribou, and there is disinformation. Can you talk to us a bit about that?

Chief Ghislain Picard: We're talking more about caribou because of the well-documented fragile state of their population. The scientific community has recognized this fact.

That said, the forestry industry has a significant and obvious impact on all ecosystems, but we need to talk more about that.

You mentioned the forestry company Tembec. From what I've heard, the relationship between that company and first nations communities, an Anishinabe community in this case, was always positive, particularly in the Témiscamingue region.

I talked a bit about an announcement that will be made later this week. It has to do with the cogeneration industry and, in this case, an Atikamekw community that, of course, also depends economically on the forestry industry and is successfully—

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: The idea is to use forest residues, biomass and by-products, especially those from hardwoods, where there is a good capacity—

Chief Ghislain Picard: Yes, exactly.

Some communities have managed to find solutions to maintain this extremely delicate balance between the economy and resource conservation. This illustrates that whenever our communities are called upon to contribute, especially in the area of traditional knowledge, our communities are always willing to discuss the issue.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: Over the years, the industry has been able to turn on a dime, so to speak, to reorganize. We need only think of the current energy transition affecting the oil sector and encouraging the electrification of vehicles. This is happening in a number of areas.

It's a good idea to talk about new avenues, such as cogeneration, to create new products. Do you really think this is the way forward?

Chief Ghislain Picard: I would invite you to check out the National Geographic cover that declares that the future will be indigenous. As long as we're given the opportunity to do so, our nations will most certainly be able to make a significant contribution in the future. However, we have to be given the opportunity to do so.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: You've mentioned the importance of relying on sound scientific data several times.

During consultations, were you able to present or consult any documents that you considered satisfactory in terms of reliable data on the ecosystem surrounding the caribou?

Chief Ghislain Picard: You spoke earlier about the challenge we all face, specifically turning on a dime. Basically, we have to do it more often than we'd like. We have to meet this challenge every day. I am thinking in particular of the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Sustainable Development Institute. Once again, it's unfortunate that Mr. Bédard wasn't able to join us for this discussion.

On the issue of consultations, we receive a large number of requests, often with just a few days' notice. Our duty, and our obligation on behalf of the communities we represent, is to present the most reliable data possible, to the best of our ability. However, it's important to understand that our capacity is extremely limited. We are not always on a level playing field when it comes to comparing the opinions of our scientists with those of the government, in this case the Government of Quebec.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: I invite you and your colleague to send us any documents that could support the committee's study.

Thank you.

• (1410)

The Chair: Thank you, Chief Picard, for being here.

Mr. Bédard, we apologize for the technical problems we encountered. As you can see, there is a lot of interest in your point of view. If you could send us your comments in writing, as I said earlier, that will inform our report and influence our conclusions.

We're going to take a short break before starting the last hour of this meeting.

• (1410)

(Pause)

• (1415)

The Chair: We will now resume the meeting.

For this part of the meeting, we have with us Louis Pelletier, chief forester, from the Office of the Chief Forester of Quebec.

We also have Frédéric Verreault, the executive director of corporate development at Chantiers Chibougamau.

We are also pleased to welcome Jean-François Samray, president and CEO of the Quebec Forest Industry Council.

Finally, we have Chief Gilbert Dominique, from the Pekuakamiulnuatsh Takuhikan organization, who is joining us by video conference.

Mr. Pelletier, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Louis Pelletier (Chief Forester, Bureau du forestier en chef Québec): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, committee members and distinguished guests.

I'd like to say a few words about the Chief Forester's mandate.

This position was created in 2005 and is governed by the Sustainable Forest Development Act. The key elements of our mission are to determine the allowable cut of Quebec's public forest, of course, to inform decision makers through our analytical work, and to keep the public informed about the state of publicly owned forests.

An allowable cut is the maximum annual volume that can be harvested by species on public land, while ensuring forest renewal and evolution, based on sustainable management objectives. Once the determination has been made, the Chief Forester submits it to the minister, who is responsible for wood allocation and forest planning.

We also have a mandate to advise the minister on various issues or topics, such as the direction and planning of forest research, activities to optimize forest management strategies, and any issue that we feel requires government attention or action. In fact, that's why we've provided the minister with advice on the impact of the proposed federal order-in-council on woodland caribou and on Quebec's forestry potential.

The minister may also entrust us with any forestry mandate and request our opinion on any forestry issue, whether it concerns private or public forests.

There is an important aspect the committee should be aware of. From a sustainable development perspective, the Chief Forester performs the duties entrusted to him with the independence granted to him by this Act.

That independence is expressed in a number of ways: his retainers, his own strategic plan and a separate website from that of the Ministry. In addition, we manage our own communications, produce our own reports and render our decisions without interference. We also have investigative powers, meaning we are vested with the powers and immunity set out in the Act respecting commissions of inquiry.

When the emergency decree was presented, following the federal government's announcement of the draft emergency decree to protect the three caribou populations of Val-d'Or, Charlevoix and Pimpuacan, respectively, we undertook, on our own initiative, our impact analyses of forestry opportunities. Our analyses focused on territories known as "provisional zones". These areas have been demarcated by the federal government. In these provisional zones, no forestry activity is permitted, nor any harvesting or silvicultural work.

Since there is no forestry activity, we used the same method as when we do an impact analysis for strict protected areas. No adjustments were made to existing silvicultural strategies. In the absence of information on their continued application, the Quebec government's woodland and montane caribou recovery plans for 2024–2028 have been maintained in the analysis and the territory outside the provisional zones. This information is included in the documents I submitted to the commission.

Our impact analysis also enabled us to note that accessibility to certain territories could be compromised, as some of them are almost entirely surrounded by provisional zones. This situation could therefore result in landlocked areas and additional repercussions, i.e., reduced forestry potential.

I'd like to emphasize another point. Zones of interest have not been evaluated on our side because, as part of the consultation, provisional zones can stretch into zones of interest. We only do this when the contours are known and public. If restrictive modalities in areas of interest and around provisional zones were to add up in terms of reduced harvesting or reduced silviculture, of course the repercussions would be different.

In the provisional zones, the analysis covered 1.6 million hectares. Of this 1.6 million hectares, 1.2 million hectares contributes to forestry potential, i.e., these hectares are eligible for harvesting and silviculture.

• (1420)

This affects four regions: Abitibi-Témiscamingue for the Val-d'Or herd, Capitale-Nationale and Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean for the Charlevoix herd, and Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean and Côte-Nord for the Pimpuacan herd. As for the impact on forestry potential, in Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean, we're talking about a decrease of 562,000 cubic metres...

The Chair: Mr. Pelletier, your time is up, but I'll give you 15 more seconds to finish. Then you can take questions.

Mr. Louis Pelletier: I will do so with pleasure. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

A decrease of 562,000 cubic metres is forecast for Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean, 133,000 cubic metres for the Capitale-Nationale region, 246,000 cubic metres for Abitibi-Témiscamingue and 453,000 cubic metres for Côte-Nord.

In closing, I'd like to add that, as I mentioned, there are still some unknown elements, including the forest management terms and conditions in the zones of interest and the final outline of the provisional zones, which will be known at a later date. This could have repercussions. The results of our impact analysis could therefore change.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Verreault, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Frédéric Verreault (Executive Director, Corporate Development, Chantiers Chibougamau): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Members of Parliament, Chief Dominique, fellow witnesses, good morning.

Thank you for taking the time to focus on the very important issue of the woodland caribou, whose recovery we strongly desire, but also on the effects on companies like ours, on our communities and, more broadly, on the population of Quebec and Canada.

Chantiers Chibougamau is a family business founded in 1961. Our organization is made up of 1,500 men and women. Our job is to cut down trees and process them into building materials, kraft pulp and renewable energy, thereby decarbonizing infrastructure and construction and replacing single-use plastics. That's why we get up in the morning and work in the forest to process forest resources.

These 1,500 men and women collectively earn \$150 million annually. A few dozen forest engineers and biologists are included in this number. They contribute to enhancing the competence that guides what we do and how we do it. They abide by codes of ethics and professional conduct, and they demonstrate our unquestionable commitment to issues as sensitive and complex as woodland caribou.

We've been talking about woodland caribou for 15 or 20 years. We document the subject, we undertake actions, we add them up, we revise them and we raise them when the need to do so is demonstrated. Regrettably, when the discussion reaches the public, it is too often polarized on the basis of a rather simplistic paradigm that lacks sensitivity to our contemporary reality. Indeed, forest industry jobs are pitted against caribou and biodiversity, whereas the two go hand in hand.

If our own practices, at Chibougamau, La Sarre, Landrienne, Béarn and Lebel-sur-Quévillon, aren't adequate when it comes to fighting climate change and protecting biodiversity, our customers won't want our materials. We have a corporate social responsibility, which is becoming a collective responsibility, of course, as your work on the subject has demonstrated.

We welcome the work done by your committee last week, which broadened the focus on the implementation of the decree as presented today. Issues surrounding the forest's life cycle are fundamental. When customers call us to buy our solid wood beams and columns, the first thing they ask about is our products' carbon footprint. It is therefore essential to look at these issues and the impact of implementing the decree on protecting the woodland caribou.

I also want to talk about the impact of our products on people. Kraft pulp from the Lebel-sur-Quévillon mill, which depends in particular on the trees that may or may not be available in the Val-d'Or sector, feeds processing operations nearby, in Gatineau, to make the sanitary paper needed by the population. It also feeds operations in central Ontario to produce sanitary paper products that are delivered to hospitals. The production of this fibre therefore has a domino effect that goes far beyond our company and our communities, and it's the most pragmatic and environmentally friendly response to meeting people's needs that we're now discussing, along with the implementation of such measures.

Headlines are often sensational. They suggest that the more we restrict the processing of trees and access to forest land by forestry companies, the better our conscience will be when it comes to biodiversity. I'm going to take the liberty of dwelling in a concrete and applied way on the facts relating to the Val-d'Or herd, which, let's not forget, has gone from around 55 individuals half a century ago to 9 today. Is this a cause for celebration? Not at all, it represents a failure. The 9 individuals of the Val-d'Or herd live on a territory of 14 hectares, which represents 25% of the surface area of Montreal's Olympic Park.

In Quebec, there's a protected area project that, on its own, calls for the removal of 43,000 hectares of forest from processing around the Val-d'Or herd enclosure. Since 2013, there has therefore been a moratorium covering these 43,000 hectares, and we are scrupulously respecting it. This number represents 1.2 times the surface area of the city of Montreal, while the 9 individuals of the Val-d'Or herd live, let's recall, on a territory that corresponds to a quarter of the surface area of Olympic Park.

Today, the proposed decree aims to remove 297,000 hectares of forest from processing. So, for the 9 individuals who live on a territory equivalent to 25% of the Olympic Park's surface area, the decree proposes to withdraw from processing an area eight times larger than that of the city of Montreal. We subscribe to the need to act, but that clearly gives rise to important questions.

• (1425)

What would the compensation costs be if we withdrew processing activities from certain areas?

We could reinvest elsewhere to generate this material and meet needs in the best possible way. How much would that cost?

What would the timeline be?

I think these are very important aspects to consider in terms of what is being discussed today.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Samray, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Jean-François Samray (President and Chief Executive Officer, Québec Forest Industry Council): Since time is short, I'll simply say hello and thank you to all. Kwe, Chief Dominique.

We have provided the clerk with three briefs that we feel are essential, which are intended to introduce you to the Quebec Forest Industry Council or QFIC. As you'll see, in addition to being the voice of the industry, it's also the overall impact on the industry. You'll also see the extent to which the forest industry contributes to the economic vitality and support of the Canadian and Quebec social safety net.

Let me get straight to the point.

I want to be clear about QFIC's position on protecting the caribou, which is shared by its members. We are and always have been in favour of protecting the caribou. However, a federal decree is not the solution. This decree is nothing more than a ban on management and harvesting, a glass dome aimed solely at the forestry industry, while carefully avoiding to inform recreation and tourism enthusiasts that no one will maintain forestry or multi-user roads to get to resorts and outdoor activity sites.

To ignore the various factors impacting caribou and single out just one, without considering the socio-economic risks that future decisions could represent, is deplorable. Unfortunately, that is the path taken by the government with its decree. The decree is far from being the solution. What's needed to protect caribou, but also biodiversity, are concrete restoration measures, adapted silvicultural approaches, active management of predators and alternative prey, monitoring of caribou populations, protective enclosures, bumping, if necessary, as well as greater involvement of land occupants, particularly members of Indigenous communities and the forest industry.

Forestry management is an integral part of the solution. Recent fires in major national parks demonstrate this. Jasper National Park serves as a reminder. In our view, we must stop pitting forestry against biodiversity protection. What's needed is a pragmatic balance. We believe that it is not only possible to reconcile protection, biodiversity and forestry, but that it is imperative to do so.

Mr. Seto mentioned that the federal decree only targets 4% of the territory accessible to industry, and that this is negligible. By the same logic, one might also say that the 1998 ice storm was not a serious event, since it affected only 2% of Quebec's territory. You'll agree with me that it's not so much the affected surface area that matters, but rather its position on the territory, its strategic importance and the number of people and activities affected.

This decree defines provisional zones, zones of interest and buffer zones. In the zone of interest alone, nearly 12,000 square kilometres, generating 1.4 million cubic metres per year, are frozen for industry. One important aspect has been completely overlooked by analysts. I feel sorry for the minister, because it's a fundamental aspect. There are certain forest certification holders who have now seen the maps and won't be able to go into the affected areas, whether it's the very strict perimeter or the much broader one, because it could irk certain customers and call their forest certification into question.

According to the forestry regime in place, these mills will have to get their volume from the auction system. This will greatly increase demand, in a system that is already short on supply following the 2023 fires. The measures already taken by the federal government are having an impact on the industry's competitiveness.

The price will therefore be pushed up and, at the end of the year, this price will be reflected throughout Quebec. There's only one equation. All Quebec mills are going to pay more for their wood, because there's a scarcity and because the bids are in. The price will go up for everyone. Does the decree affect only a few nearby mills? The answer is no. As of today, the decree affects the entire Quebec forest industry.

That's where we stand today. For us, for the industry, it is essential to ensure that a solution can be found. That means finding a way through. For us, that requires a dialogue, a forum in which industry and governments are present. The decree cites section 80 of the Act, but is silent on section 64, which provides for compensation for affected individuals and companies.

• (1430)

The people and companies affected are all those involved in the value chain. We're talking about 130,000 families and billions of dollars in revenue.

I'd be happy to discuss this further with everyone. From our perspective, what's needed is a forum that brings together the federal and provincial governments, First Nations and industry.

The Chair: Chief Dominique, you have the floor.

Chief Gilbert Dominique (Pekuakamiulnuatsh Takuhikan): Good afternoon, everyone.

My name is Gilbert Dominique, and I'm Chief of the Pekuakamiulnuatsh First Nation.

Our traditional territory, which we call Nitassinan in our language, covers an area of just over 112,000 square kilometres, including the entire watershed of the Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean region. Three caribou populations have been identified in our traditional territory: Charlevoix, Témiscamie and Pipmuacan. We hold Aboriginal rights and title to Nitassinan, where the current allowable cut is approximately 7 million cubic metres. We are therefore deeply affected by the whole logging issue.

We wish to share our concerns regarding the protection of caribou in Quebec. Immediate and urgent action is the only way to restore the balance that must exist to protect the *atik*, i.e., the caribou, and its habitat. You have a legal obligation to act, and our First Nation intends to pursue the necessary steps to ensure that this matter is dealt with swiftly and with all due seriousness.

Quebec has never, other than through lip service, demonstrated its interest in protecting the caribou. We believe that firm, serious and immediate measures are required pending the implementation of the Quebec strategy.

The caribou is intimately linked to the occupation and use of the Nitassinan territory by the members of my First Nation. It is the basis of our culture and way of life. It has sustained us for centuries. The gradual decline in populations has a direct impact on the preservation of our culture and the practice of *ilnu-aitun*, our traditional activities.

In 2003, we were collectively forced to stop hunting caribou. The effects go far beyond the simple harvest for food. It has consequences for the very transmission of knowledge and our language, *shashish nelueun*, which are part of our distinctive culture and are also on the brink of extinction, alongside this species. If the caribou and its habitat were to disappear despite this effort by our First Nation, part of the Pekuakamiulnuatsh identity would disappear with them.

I hereby call upon the representatives of the Canadian government to take the appropriate measures to ensure that the protection of woodland caribou is fully respected at all levels of government. I also invite the Committee to consider the Quebec Superior Court ruling on the failure to consult on the *atik*^u protection strategy. This judgment was handed down on June 21, following an action brought by our First Nation and the community of Essipit. Although not related to the draft decree, it deals with the same pressing issue: the protection of the caribou. The decision and decree are also the consequence of the Quebec government's inaction. In her decision, Justice Marie Cossette stated:

Not only has their right to consultation been violated, but meanwhile, the situation of the caribou continues to deteriorate, and the government is still unable to tell the Court when the proposed protection strategy will be disclosed. As a result, their ancestral rights and title are under even greater threat, given the central role played by the caribou, whose condition continues to decline.

Quebec's attitude to the caribou issue is dishonourable and irresponsible towards future generations. A responsible government must seek a balance between protecting the territory, its fauna and flora, and, of course, socio-economic development.

Given the reality on the ground, it must be concluded that reducing allowable cut is inevitable. We believe that reducing allowable cut can be viable by focusing more on tertiary processing and innovation. Protecting the *atik*^u does not have to be synonymous with killing economic development and jobs in our regions. We are sensitive to the economic realities of the forestry sector. However, we must cease being in denial and recognize the true situation through an objective and scientific lens.

As highlighted in the report of the Independent Commission on Woodland and Mountain Caribou, the problems experienced by the *atik*^u indicate that Quebec has gone too far in harvesting the forest resource and that it is important to review forest management so that it is truly sustainable, while ensuring the protection of biodiversity.

• (1435)

In that sense, the governments of Quebec and Canada have a duty to propose measures to mitigate the impact on forest communities and to help them through this inevitable transition.

Our teams are currently analyzing the decree in connection with the ongoing consultation. We can already see that the Témiscamie herd is not covered by the decree, which is of great concern to us, since it is in a vulnerable state and also at risk of disappearing, particularly south of the northern boundary.

We are also prepared to forward any documents that might be relevant and help you make your decision.

Finally, faced with this situation, you are obliged to act, in compliance with the Species at Risk Act, by implementing the adoption of an emergency decree, particularly in the Nitassinan territory, to protect the caribou from current threats to its survival. We demand it—

• (1440)

The Chair: Thank you, Chief. We'd like to leave some time for questions.

In fact, we are a little behind schedule, so I'll reduce the speaking time to five minutes for the first round of questions, and to four minutes for the second round.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: So there will only be two rounds of questions.

The Chair: That's right.

Mr. Gourde, you have the first turn.

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lévis—Lotbinière, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here. This truly is quite important.

We are all gathered here before a radical, job-destroying decree. This is being presented to us by an incompetent, ideological Liberal government that is forcing us to submit to this. I say incompetent because it will destroy policies that were put in place under the former Conservative government. The period between 2006 and 2015 were dark days in the forestry sector. That former government appointed two strong men to the position of Minister responsible for the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec: Jean-Pierre Blackburn and Denis Lebel. In this capacity, their priority was to implement initiatives in all Quebec forestry regions to strengthen primary processing, develop secondary and tertiary processing, and push technology forward. These two men achieved a great deal for the forest industry, but now this decree will destroy all the work done by the former Conservative government, of which I was a member. I was there, I worked with these men and I'm very proud of them.

You spoke earlier about caribou herds that are relatively small or concentrated, consisting of 9 individuals in one place or 200 individuals elsewhere, for example. I'm a farmer, and we used to say that if you wanted to ensure the future of a herd, you had to introduce a young bull and bring in new blood, because inbreeding in herds causes disease. A forestry engineer I know, who works in your region, told me that the caribou were sick, that they were weak and that the mortality rate among young individuals was staggering due to a lack of genetic diversity.

Would it be simpler to set up a program to look for caribou in other regions, i.e., caribou that don't come from the same genetic line? That would strengthen the next fawns and perhaps solve part of the problem as to the future of the herds.

We're shutting down an industry, laying people off, putting people in trouble, all without solving the root of the problem. Could the problem be that these caribou lack not food, but rather genetic diversity?

Would it be possible to set up such a program? The question is for anyone who wants to answer it.

Mr. Jean-François Samray: I think that nature dictates a limit to the number of times individuals can be cousins. That's a fact.

Now, two of these three herds are in enclosures. As far as these two herds are concerned, I think, as we've heard from all the witnesses, that there is a way of taking the time to sit down, all together, to come up with a solution. In the case of the third herd, I think, given the population, that there's still time to do the same. It must be said that if you lose one or the other of the elements in question, you can't win. You need both. It's important for the industry and, from what I've heard so far, it's important for everyone.

Mr. Frédéric Verreault: From our point of view, the key does indeed lie in breeding and reintroduction, which are the scientific parameters that can enable a population to recover. In the case of the Val-d'Or herd, we've been hoping for four years to breed and reintroduce new individuals so that we can think about recovery.

That's where we have to go back to the objectives. Do we want to maintain the species and see it flourish? Do we want to maintain each of the herds if, biologically or scientifically, we've lost the battle because, collectively, we've made mistakes? Do we want to keep each individual alive? That's the fundamental question we need to ask ourselves: what do we want to achieve? Then, means like the ones you mention—breeding and reintroduction—can provide adequate answers.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: I'd like to come back to the Economic Development Agency for the Regions of Quebec.

The former Conservative government was very proactive in the forestry sector. It made it a priority. Do you feel that, since 2015, the Agency still has the forest industry in your regions as a priority, or has there been a gradual breakdown? We've lost track somewhat, as we're no longer in government. We will soon be back in power however; it's just a matter of time.

Has the Government of Canada supported the forestry industry since 2015?

Mr. Jean-François Samray: I think there are some initiatives aimed at research and raising awareness about the use of wood in the construction sector, to move from primary processing to secondary and tertiary processing. In any case, one thing remains fundamental: for tertiary processing to be possible, you first have to harvest the wood. However, it's in the Investments in Forest Industry Transformation (ITIF) program, which you've heard a lot about, that credits have shrunk. This is the environment in which we operate. There are many approaches to calculating carbon footprints. That said, to get the benefits of these initiatives, you're going to need wood. If there's no wood, there's not much.

• (1445)

The Chair: Thank you.

Your time is nearly up, Mr. Gourde.

Ms. Chatel, you have the floor.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to welcome our witnesses.

I think we all agree that we are also a part of biodiversity. I'd like to thank Mr. Verreault for mentioning that. We have to be able to protect ourselves, the species and the environment that supports us, because, as someone said, you can't have an economy without an environment. We must make the required efforts.

I was looking at the chronology of events. In 2000, an independent species monitoring committee designated the boreal caribou as a threatened and vulnerable species. The Quebec government established this same designation in 2005. In 2016, the Quebec government committed to implementing a protection strategy for boreal and mountain caribou, but we're still waiting for it. Uncertainty is not good. In business, you want certainty.

As the government has said, if Quebec were taking the steps it has committed to undertake, we wouldn't need a decree. We don't want a decree either. We also stated publicly that we would take into account all the points of view expressed during the consultations.

We're talking about reforming the forestry regime to achieve a balance between ecology and economy. We need ecology. In my region, foresters understand quite well that we must protect our forests if we want to have a prosperous forest industry.

What are the proposed solutions to achieve this balance?

Mr. Jean-François Samray: As we said at the outset, Quebec's forestry regime is no longer doing the job. It's under tremendous pressure. It's incredibly rigid. There's only one transposal equation. The regime therefore has to change.

We need to change the regime, but we need to take the time to do it right. As Chief Dominique mentioned, the message the court is sending to the government is that it must take the time to hurry up. That's the situation we're in.

The industry is hurting too. As we mentioned, next year all Quebec companies will be affected by the decree. It hasn't come into force yet, but the mere fact that it's been published, along with maps, will hurt competitiveness for all Quebec companies.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: As I understand it, now is the time to act, to work together and come up with proactive solutions. I agree with that.

I don't have much time left, but I'd like Chief Dominique to tell us a little more about exactly what the caribou means to Indigenous peoples. I have two Indigenous communities in my riding. We always hear that it's important to think about the seventh generation when making policy. Sustainability and sustainable development are an intrinsic part of Indigenous culture.

Chief Gilbert Dominique: Yes, absolutely. The caribou is undeniably emblematic of our culture. Our culture is intimately linked to it. The caribou is present in our way of life, beyond providing food. The teachings we offer our generations are important, because we're also passing on the language as well as our values and principles.

If we collectively choose not to protect the caribou, a large swath of our culture will inevitably disappear, unfortunately. For us, this is unacceptable.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Although caribou hunting is important to Indigenous culture, you've taken steps to stop hunting them in order to support their restoration, haven't you?

• (1450)

Chief Gilbert Dominique: Absolutely. Even in the early 1990s, our elders were already telling us that things weren't going well, so we restricted caribou hunting. It was banned in 2003, but it had been restricted for about ten years before that.

Of course, we called on governments to get involved. Collectively, our great challenge is to ensure the survival and protection of the caribou, but we have to look at the issue in a fairly general way and rely on concerted action. Unfortunately, First Nations are never invited to the table to provide their contribution and collaboration. We have to take legal action to finally get the recognition that we need to be involved in these exercises, because we also have solutions to offer.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Simard now has the floor.

Mr. Mario Simard: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to hear more about something I think is very important: the cumulative effect. Mr. Verreault and Mr. Samray alluded to it in their opening remarks.

Withdrawing certain forestry capacities has an impact across the entire industry, which is along the lines of what you said, because the wood chips used for other types of activities won't be available.

Could you tell us more about the cumulative effect?

Mr. Frédéric Verreault: The cumulative effect also serves to highlight many initiatives that have already been taken, in the spirit of what was raised by the speaker who preceded you. In the case of Assinica Park, for example, did we wait for a decree or a plan from the Quebec government? The answer is no. A park was established over ten years ago, and this project alone subtracted 140,000 cubic metres of timber from allowable cuts, the equivalent of the measures in the decree concerning the Val-d'Or herd. It's working, since the caribou population has grown from 500 to 800 in the space of 10 years. Obviously, these measures are already having an effect on the quantity of available wood.

In the northern sector of La Sarre, in the indirect perimeter of Val-d'Or, our company took the initiative of subtracting areas from industrial activity. That had an impact corresponding to 30,000 cubic metres of wood, and the caribou population is doing well in this sector. This work was carried out in conjunction with CPAWS, the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, First Nations and Ontario neighbours.

Nature abhors a vacuum, and there are many extremely credible and principled initiatives in place. There are indeed conservation measures, and they vary. In this case, as far as the application of the decree in the Val-d'Or area is concerned, activities related to mining, energy, ATVs and cottages can all be maintained, but the focus is on the forest industry. In other words, the decree acts not as a glass bell, but rather as a sieve. The focus is on wood processing, and yet, that is inactive.

Thus, all these measures overlap and add up. Invariably, if the decree is implemented as currently formulated, it will prevent the construction of tens of thousands of homes. In the case of Abitibi-Témiscamingue, the wood processed in the Val-d'Or area is shipped to Toronto every week, where it is used to build houses. The collateral effect is major, indeed. All you have to do is add up all the measures—those put in place over a decade ago, those already in place and the Quebec government's interim measures—to understand that we're not standing idly by in the face of the declining caribou population. Many credible things are being done today.

Mr. Mario Simard: So, without wanting to put words in your mouth, what I understand is that achieving the government's carbon neutrality objectives might be imperiled by the loss of forestry capacity.

Mr. Samray, I'd also like to hear you talk about the possible economic effects, if we take this cumulative effect into account and look at what might happen on the auction side. As we know, the forestry sector already has to deal with very high U.S. tariffs, forest fires and spruce budworm infestations.

Mr. Jean-François Samray: I will be brief, Mr. Chair.

Firstly, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, or IPCC, has been telling us in its past six reports—for as long as it has been publishing them, in fact—that humanity must do three things simultaneously. We must transition energy sources away from fossil fuels, protect biodiversity and decarbonize the construction sector through greater use of wood. Not just one of these things, but all of them simultaneously. Wood is therefore fundamental to achieving carbon reduction targets.

Secondly, it's fundamental to realize that the current system, which is linked to the forestry regime, no longer makes sense. It's a process that will take time, because on January 1st, 2025, the price of wood for any company sourcing from forest land will skyrocket, due to the square kilometers of forest removed from forest management by the decree. Everyone will rush to auction, which already has no wood, due to fires and other measures taken.

I would also remind you that, since the forestry regime came into effect, 70,000 square kilometers of forest have been subtracted from forest management for biodiversity protection, largely for caribou. So, there's not much wood left.

• (1455)

The Chair: You barely have 15 seconds left, Mr. Simard.

Chief Gilbert Dominique: I would like to speak for about 30 seconds, to address the cumulative effect.

Mr. Mario Simard: Go ahead, Chief Dominique.

Chief Gilbert Dominique: We're seeing the effect of industry and the economy, of course, but we mustn't forget the effects of land development, which certainly don't help the caribou. There's a whole range of factors.

Inevitably, when you develop the territory, you create gaps. Together, we can see that the caribou is also weakened by the cumulative effect caused by development.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Boulerice, you have the floor.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I quite liked the end of Mr. Samray's answer. He mentioned the IPCC's recommendations, particularly on the use of wood for decarbonization. That is something the Committee should also bear in mind.

I'd like to ask Mr. Pelletier a question.

Earlier today, we talked about managing caribou predators as one of the possible ways to promote the restoration of caribou herds. However, the example of British Columbia was given, where predator management, including wolf management, was a short-term solution and incomplete in itself, since it had to be combined, in the medium term, with caribou habitat restoration.

Mr. Pelletier, how do you see this, as a forestry specialist?

Mr. Louis Pelletier: Good afternoon.

Thank you for the question.

As you mentioned, I am a forestry specialist. However, I'm not a specialist in biology, the animal world or the caribou. So I won't be able to answer your question, unfortunately.

The Chief Forester's strength lies in further developing forestry over time. Our work takes into account the forests we have today and, based on growth curves and forest stands over time, we are able to project the forests of the future. Therein lies the strength of the Chief Forester.

When we create recovery plans or scenarios, we are able, thanks to our team's expertise, to see how the forest regenerates and evolves over time, and then determine whether or not this habitat can be suitable for caribou. It's an expertise that we have, and one that enables us to inform decision makers in the province of Quebec and the public.

So I can't answer your question, but I can tell you that we have tools. Depending on the strategies or projects that require study, our expertise enables us to provide guidance to decision makers.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you for all your hard work, Mr. Pelletier, and thank you to your entire team.

I will now turn to Chief Dominique.

Since the Committee began its work, it's been mentioned here and there that the Quebec government promised a strategy in 2016 and that eight years had already gone by. You were forced to go to court, and the Superior Court agreed with you, saying that you had been improperly consulted, as an Indigenous nation and as a community with ancestral rights and a particular, intimate and cultural relationship with the caribou.

In your remarks, Chief Dominique, you said that this required immediate and urgent action.

We get the impression that the Quebec government has been dragging its feet since 2016, which is eight years ago. What immediate and urgent measures should be taken, specifically?

• (1500)

Chief Gilbert Dominique: As far as our sector and the Témiscamie herd are concerned, strategically speaking, we see that protecting the forest massifs in the short term is certainly an important avenue to pursue, to allow the strategy that will be implemented to evolve.

There are certainly things that could be implemented and measures that could be applied, but, what's important is to make decisions swiftly, together with the Quebec government, the First Nations, of course, and the federal government. The latter could be a key player.

There's no denying it: the worst thing that's happened over the past 20 years is inaction. If responsible decisions had been made some 20 years ago, caribou survival would likely be less problematic right now.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Martel, you have the floor.

Mr. Richard Martel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Pelletier or Mr. Samray, I'd like to ask two questions. I'd like to come back to what was said earlier.

It's not scientific, it's mathematical: a drop in allowable cuts means job losses.

Do we have too many protected areas in Quebec? Do our calculation methods differ from those of other countries?

Mr. Louis Pelletier: Not only are protected areas the responsibility of Canada's Department of the Environment and Climate Change, which consults with other departments, but when the government makes a decision regarding land protection, it is officially communicated to the Chief Forester, and then we integrate it and adjust allowable cuts, if required. The aim is to ensure the sustainability of the resource by avoiding overcutting. So I can't tell you whether there are too many or too few protected areas.

As part of our work, in Quebec, in the recovery plans that have been in effect since 2013, there are nearly 2.8 million hectares of protected areas, which are broken down by region in the documents I've provided. This has been maintained for the 2023-2028 period.

In addition, south of the northern limit of attributable forests, there are 2.8 million hectares of protected areas for woodland caribou. These are findings and facts that we incorporate into our work when decision makers take measures.

Mr. Richard Martel: In your opinion, are we cultivating enough forest to meet the challenges of climate change?

Mr. Louis Pelletier: You should ask a forest manager. We can always improve our work and reinvest in our forests to improve their productive capacity and resilience to climate change. But it's also a societal choice. How much money do we want to invest in our public forests?

There are other challenges in Quebec, but I'm not a politician. When we dedicate funding for silvicultural strategies, we do so on the basis of our government's societal choices.

Mr. Richard Martel: Thank you.

Mr. Jean-François Samray: The point just raised is fundamental. Whether we're talking about the decree or day-to-day practices, money is fundamental. It takes money to maintain roads, to restore production, to pay compensation for forest fires and to do the work. Then there's the federal decree. It's just a glass bell, but it will have effects, and it will take money to eliminate them.

By proposing this decree, the federal government is telling Quebec to do the work in its stead and then print money to pay off the debt.

We need everyone to work together, but we have to understand that this won't happen without repercussions. We have to work together to reduce those, because section 64 of the Species at Risk Act exists, and it's going to cost money.

Mr. Richard Martel: Thank you, Mr. Samray.

I'm done, Mr. Chair.

• (1505)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Lauzon, you have the floor for four minutes.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My thanks to the witnesses for joining us.

Chief Dominique, you told us that the elders had sent clear signals several years ago about the disappearance of the caribou.

Right now, on what basis should we take action? Have you documented that information? Do you have any expert reports that back up your urgent call to action to protect the caribou?

Chief Gilbert Dominique: Yes, we have gone over the expert reports. We've shared with you some of the studies we've done in partnership with leading scientists and, of course, with our local teams. That information is available to you.

Our elders have seen this first-hand as they travel through their traditional and family territories. As you say, they saw that there

were going to be problems and that the development of the area was probably a determining factor in the entire problem.

That information was passed on to us by the territory's users.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: You also forwarded these documents to the Government of Quebec during its consultations, which you took part in. Is that correct?

Chief Gilbert Dominique: That's correct. We forwarded all the information collected to the federal government and the Government of Quebec.

In the case of Quebec, we concluded that the government had no intention of making a decision in this regard and that its strategy was to drag things out. That's why we went to court. We felt it made no sense. We cannot stand idly by while the caribou are at risk of extinction. We went to court to argue our case, and I think we won. However, there is still a lot of work to be done.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: We agree that the best way to do this is to work with provinces, territories, indigenous peoples and even municipalities. We heard from witnesses from some municipalities who told us that there were socio-economic effects.

The best solution is to bring everyone together to make good decisions together. Do you agree with that?

Chief Gilbert Dominique: Yes, I absolutely agree.

Stop shunning first nations that also have rights to their land and make us part of the decision-making. That way, we would at least give ourselves every opportunity to find measures that might be very useful.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: Mr. Pelletier, you tipped us off a bit when you mentioned landlocked areas.

Do you have any recommendations to make to open up these areas by providing compensation for land in order to make the most of forestry opportunities?

The Chair: Time is running out, unfortunately, so keep your answer short.

Mr. Louis Pelletier: I am not the one drawing the lines; the federal government is. That's what we've seen on the maps.

The Chair: That's a good answer.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: Are you able to make recommendations, yes or no?

Mr. Louis Pelletier: My work is governed by the Quebec government's legislation.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Simard, you have the floor for two minutes.

Mr. Mario Simard: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chief Dominique, I know that the threat to the caribou directly affects the transmission of your traditional knowledge, which is important to you.

I would like to hear your comments on the transmission of your traditional knowledge and on what the caribou means to you.

Chief Gilbert Dominique: As I said earlier, beyond the food issue, the transmission of our knowledge will definitely be affected. In a roundabout way, it will inevitably have an effect on our principles, our values and our language in particular, because some practices will probably disappear. This will result in a huge loss of language skills.

The judge clearly stated that, if the species were to disappear, it would have a direct impact on our aboriginal rights, which include our aboriginal title.

• (1510)

Mr. Mario Simard: Thank you, Chief Dominique.

Mr. Verreault and Mr. Samray, I know that there is a calculation method per cubic metre of carbon sequestration. Based on Mr. Pelletier's figure of 1.4 million cubic metres, could you tell the committee what that represents in terms of carbon sequestration and construction, since we are experiencing a housing crisis?

Mr. Jean-François Samray: That will be very easy. We commit to doing that.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to Mr. Boulerice for two minutes.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Samray, I have a simple question. Earlier, you mentioned the possibility of compensation as a way through. If there were a government decision, an emergency order that would have a negative economic impact on some communities, would the compensation make it possible to delay and make that negative impact more acceptable?

Mr. Jean-François Samray: I would say again that the devil is in the details. It will apply to all people with jobs directly or indirectly related to the industry. The costs will be astronomical, as will the loss of revenue for the government. There will necessarily be repercussions on the Quebec and Canadian social safety net. That's clear.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you, Mr. Samray.

Chief Gilbert Dominique, I have a better understanding of how aboriginal rights could be threatened if the species or subspecies were to disappear. In a previous answer, you said that you worked with experts, scientists and highly reputable people. Would you be able to send the committee the documents related to the scientific data and figures to inform our discussion and our later recommendations?

Chief Gilbert Dominique: Absolutely. We will do that sometime today. We will get you the studies and analyses I was talking about earlier, that scientists including Martin-Hugues St-Laurent and Jacinthe Gosselin worked on with our first nation. You'll probably have all that today.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Excellent, thank you.

The Chair: That's great.

Mr. Deltell, you have the floor.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Based on everything that has been said so far, it seems that it is hard to strike a balance—and this is very subjective—between protecting caribou and protecting the industry.

Mr. Samray and Mr. Verreault, what would be the first recommendation to put forward to find a balance that would be satisfactory to all parties, as far as possible?

Mr. Jean-François Samray: The first thing to do would be to repeal the proposed order because it has a direct impact on the industry's competitiveness in terms of prices paid at auction. That would be the very first thing. Second, we need to bring all the parties to the table to build a solution together.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Mr. Verreault, what would you say?

Mr. Frédéric Verreault: As you'll understand, I am going to focus on the Val-d'Or herd, which is adjacent to where we operate. In this case, we frankly don't understand the purpose of the Abitibi component of the order. There is already a protected area that is a few thousand times larger than the occupied enclosure.

In that sense, we should come back to the table and recognize what is being done. The facts are unequivocal: We have taken firm and credible action to provide an extremely robust response to the protection of boreal caribou. Now we need to go back to scientific and biological common sense, breeding and reintroduction of the species. We need to get on with it.

• (1515)

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Thank you, gentlemen.

Mr. Chair, I understand there's a bit of an uproar about the time we have left. I'll turn it over to you, then.

The Chair: Okay. There is one question left to complete the second and final round.

Mr. Lauzon, you have the floor.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: Mr. Verreault, you've often mentioned that you've focused on protecting caribou for 15 to 20 years. I'm also impressed by the way you say your industry has transformed. Over the years, you have evolved to keep pace with socio-economic and environmental changes, as well as forest fires. You've dealt with all of that.

The kraft pulp market is in decline, as you know. Many industries have experienced a drop in demand for fine paper and newsprint. Please don't tell me that demand for newsprint, which is essentially made from kraft pulp, is increasing.

We're talking about threatened species and you say there are nine individuals left in the herd. Don't you think an emergency measure should be taken immediately?

Mr. Frédéric Verreault: It is extremely important to remember that the major global agencies are predicting an annual increase of 2% to 3% in kraft pulp consumption over the next 30 years. It is first and foremost an ingredient in absolutely essential products such as diapers, facial tissue, toilet paper, paper towels and, most importantly, food packaging, where it replaces single-use plastics.

Incidentally, the demand for kraft pulp is increasing. In September of each year, when we close all our sales for the following year, we actually turn down buyers. We have quality kraft pulp that comes—

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: Let me remind you that I am talking about the kraft pulp used for fine paper and newsprint. I did not mention toilet paper or packaging.

Mr. Frédéric Verreault: I am talking about consolidated kraft pulp for all uses.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: However, the message is not about kraft pulp. The message is that you have been able to adapt each time things progress. Would it not be a good idea now to take steps to protect your nine individuals?

Mr. Frédéric Verreault: The nine individuals from the Val-d'Or herd are undeniable proof that the situation is critical. It may even be too late to fix the problem, and it may be time to do a post-mortem instead.

That said, to give you an idea of the scope and importance of the situation, we are talking today about nine individuals and a reserve of 43,000 hectares of land where there is no forestry activity. An area larger than the city of Montreal is now exempt from industrial activity in response to this critical situation. We're responding to that.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: It's not up to me to assess whether the caribou have enough space in your forest. We rely on the scientists, studies that have been done, technical data, the consultations we are conducting and those conducted by the Government of Quebec. As a politician, what else could I rely on?

Mr. Frédéric Verreault: We certainly recognize the challenge that legislators, members of Parliament and ministers have in relying on science and solid evidence.

From a factual and pragmatic standpoint, for this population of nine, the order would expand the conservation area from Val-d'Or to Rouyn-Noranda, which is over 100 kilometres. We take into account the science, and we have scientists on our teams.

Clearly, we have to separate the factual, pragmatic and documented aspects from the scientific opinions in order to start taking action for this vulnerable herd in Val-d'Or.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: We have 20 seconds, and Mr. Samray wanted to get in on the debate.

Mr. Jean-François Samray: Yes. I just want to add that we also have to listen to the science: the biological science, the social science and the economic science. These are the three poles of sustainable development.

The people who do biological studies do not do economic studies. The Commission indépendante sur les caribous forestiers et montagnards, set up by the Government of Quebec, said from the outset that it was not interested in dealing with the economic aspect. As a result, the report will contain no economic component whatsoever.

You, however, as members of the committee and elected representatives of the Canadian people, must necessarily take this into account, because that's also what governing is about: collecting taxes and optimizing the welfare of the nation.

● (1520)

The Chair: Yes, we're aware of what governance is.

Thank you to the witnesses, and thank you to Chief Gilbert Dominique for joining us remotely. It was a good meeting, long but quite enlightening.

Again, thank you, and we'll see you on Friday.

The meeting is adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the Copyright Act. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the Copyright Act.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <https://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la Loi sur le droit d'auteur. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre des communes.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la Loi sur le droit d'auteur.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante :
<https://www.noscommunes.ca>