

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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MENTAL HEALTH

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, this year, the Minister of Social Development held a closed-door meeting on mental health. Following this meeting, the minister suggested in the media that the main problem was that people with mental health issues really did not know where to go to find services. Is that the main conclusion of this closed-door meeting? If not, where could we find a report on this meeting or any recommendations that followed?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am very happy to stand this morning and address the member opposite's, the leader's, question. This round table became a reality simply because many communities were feeling a great deal of stress, especially when it comes to the reality of suicide. I called together some people who could assist me in understanding mental health because the Minister of Health had invited me to this table to help work collaboratively on taking on the challenge of suicide.

At this meeting, we had a very good discussion. I made it very clear that it would not be the one and only meeting. There will be a minimum of two follow-ups, and the first follow-up will be coming in December. We will be making it very clear as to what we have discovered. In fact, our biggest discovery was that we do not have the urgent care needed—that the communities need—to respond in a very timely manner to those who are feeling great difficulty in their lives. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Madam Minister. We have a concrete suggestion to help people with mental health issues, which the minister could perhaps accept. Later today, we will move a motion to create a position in order to have someone who could really speak on behalf of people with mental health issues.

We urge the government to create a position of mental health advocate with the status of legislative officer. This person could be an impartial and independent voice for people with mental health issues and caregivers. Would the Premier be in favour of such a motion, yes or no?

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[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, we are looking forward to that debate later on today. I understand exactly where the opposition is trying to go with this. Do I think that another legislative officer is necessary? I do not. I do not think that we need that.

What we need is to have our community resources on the ground and responding to the urgent need that people find themselves in, so we are pulling the communities together. I have been in discussions weekly with different organizations in Moncton, Fredericton, and Saint John and with the members of the opposition who have ever approached me. I am very happy to have those conversations because mental illness is something that we all need to strive to work together to help fix.

This is something we can do something about, Mr. Speaker. I firmly believe that. I believe my colleague the Minister of Health, I believe my colleagues here on this side of the House, and I believe every single one of us wants to make sure that we have services available to those who need them when they need them. We will work and strive to deliver that, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, we think this problem extends far beyond a person with mental health issues who cannot understand what to ask for when calling the office of the Department of Social Development.

We suspect there are gaps in services and a lack of resources in some areas. A new approach is necessary. The minister seems to be saying she has all the resources and all the programs she needs to tackle the growing mental health problems affecting New Brunswickers. Forgive us for thinking she is looking at the problem through rose-coloured glasses. Why not have an independent voice for people and families struggling with mental health issues?

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Respectfully, no, Mr. Speaker. In fact, we have found that the real need is urgent care. That is where the biggest gap lies, particularly toward the prevention of suicide. We are going to be having our next round table to discuss where the urgent care resources can be put. Accessibility is so important, Mr. Speaker. We need to know that people can access care and not be waiting six or eight weeks to see someone.

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We also know that we have huge resources in our counselling therapists. We have huge resources in our NGOs that are in the community, and we need to start pulling all those resources together in a very timely fashion to ensure that this service is delivered. We very much want to enhance what we have, and there are many ways to enhance it through communication but also through expanding the services that we have to people in our community.

[Translation]

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, does the minister think there is a lack of money in the system? What is not working? We see the problem growing at an incredible rate. I am not asking these questions this morning because things happened in my family.

Is there sufficient communication between the Department of Social Development and the Department of Health in this regard? The way I see it—I talk to a lot of people with mental health issues who come to my office—it is difficult to put all the services together. As I said in my first question, people do not really know who to talk to. When they talk to someone...

I do not know if there is a lack of services when it comes to hospitals or the people directly caring for those with mental health issues. I would like to know what the minister thinks about communication between her department and the Department of Health. Is it sufficient?

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): I believe that we are growing our communication and collaboration every single day. My colleagues and I believe that mental health not only reaches the scope of Social Development... I mean Health. Social Development plays a big part in mental health services. We spend from \$20 million to \$25 million per year on mental health services. Public Safety and Justice need to be part of that equation, as does the educational system with its ISD program.

Not only do Social Development and Health need to collaborate, but we also need the collaboration of all our departments in order to tackle this in a very holistic way and to deliver stronger services on a very timely basis. That is the goal here. Urgent care is where we need to focus. Right now, when someone is at the low end of mental health issues, I think we have some things in place. At the high end, when people get into the hospital, we have some safety nets there. It is when someone is in crisis at a moment in time. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. C. Chiasson (Victoria-La-Vallée, Deputy Speaker, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mental health certainly is an important issue.

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Mr. Speaker, earlier this year, the President of the New Brunswick Teachers' Association, much like his predecessor, said that New Brunswick classrooms are facing a crisis. The shortage of educational assistants is not the only problem. We are on short guidance counselors, behaviour mentors, and, critically, psychologists.

With the minister's heavy-handed dealings with the districts, they are not getting increases in their budgets to meet their needs. Sometimes, districts have to decide between hiring a psychologist or an educational assistant or even doing repairs, Mr. Speaker. We do not think that is right. Will the minister commit to putting the resources in place to help students with mental health needs?

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, thank you to the member opposite for the question. It is odd that the question starts off by talking about a crisis when, yesterday, the member was saying that there is no crisis. I am pleased to say that there has been a late-night conversion on a snowy November day. I am glad that we are on the same page, Mr. Speaker, because there is. There is a crisis with the mental health situation facing our schools and our students, absolutely. It cannot be solved only with our educational assistants, despite the incredible work that they do and the difficult situation that they are often facing every single day. We do need those additional layers of professional support.

As the honourable member knows, we have a shortage of trained professionals in this province across a whole range of fields, as the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour has often spoken about. We are working with the NBTA and working with the unions—not just the teachers' union but others—to try to see how we can quickly address this problem. Also, increasing the qualifications of our classroom teachers would give them some of the tools to handle some of these issues as well. Thank you.

Mr. C. Chiasson (Victoria-La-Vallée, Deputy Speaker, L): Mr. Speaker, the banter continues. The bullying continues.

The New Brunswick Student Wellness Survey shows an alarming rate of anxiety and depression. The survey, which was just released, showed that some 48% of students had experienced some form of anxiety or depression. I am sure that it comes in different forms, but these are things that can contribute to drug use, addiction, or, worse, suicide. Some 10% of students said their mental health needs were not being met. With close to 40 000 students surveyed, that is a lot of students who need help.

The minister says he is concerned, and I am sure he is. But if so, why is he not providing the resources that are needed for mental health services in our schools?

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thanks again to the member opposite for the question. We are working on this. It is difficult when we hear messages that are so contradictory coming from the

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opposition benches. On the one hand, everything is fine and we can change nothing. On the other hand, everything is falling apart, so why have we not taken action? That is not even considering the fact that only 13 months ago, there was another party sitting in these benches and another party sitting on the opposite side. I would appreciate it if there could be some level of consistency, and I hope the member does not take that request to be bullying or an assault of some form. This is a serious discussion, so if we could try to actually stick to the matters at hand, that would be appreciated.

Let's actually talk about these issues. When it comes to our school psychologists, we have had a real issue with recruitment because of a lack of supply. That has led folks in the department... I believe the member opposite who sat in the chair I am currently occupying tried to address this as well. The reality of that situation around psychologists is that it is going to take a number of years to address, if we can. We have to look at immigration. We have to talk with our universities about increasing the supply. In the meantime, we have to make sure as well that we are working with our teachers to make sure they have...

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Time, minister.

Mr. C. Chiasson (Victoria-La-Vallée, Deputy Speaker, L): I have not changed my tune. It is resources that the teachers are asking for—and stability. I have not changed my tune at all.

The minister indicates that there is not a sufficient number of psychologists to serve our schools, but in a CBC article dated March 23, 2018, the new Deputy Minister of Education said that school psychologists were underpaid. Then the President of the College of Psychologists of New Brunswick said that “universities are training plenty of psychologists”. They are just not interested in public sector jobs here in New Brunswick. Will the minister admit that the real problem is that the government needs to pay psychologists a competitive wage, and is he prepared to address this?

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thanks to the member opposite for the question. I hope it will not hurt his feelings in any way if I ask the following question. There was no new deputy minister in 2018, so I am not entirely sure of the basis on which the question is being asked. We had two new deputy ministers a few weeks ago, but the previous incumbent in that position was in that post for a number of years. I am surprised that the honourable member would not have basic information around this file for which he is supposed to be the critic—around the leadership of the department. This is not particularly complex.

Regardless, setting that aside, when we look at psychologists, we see that we have absolutely had a problem with the disparity between private-sector and public-sector wages. That has absolutely been one of the issues. As one of the areas in the election platform of the government party last year, we talked about trying to reach out to the private sector to address the massive backlog of assessments that we were asking psychologists to do. That has helped with some parts, but we need people who are trained

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specifically as school psychologists. We have heard that from both private-sector and school psychologists.

I look forward to working with the honourable member on this. Sorry for rushing the end of my answer. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. G. Arseneault (Campbellton-Dalhousie, Opposition House Leader, L): Earlier this year, the Minister of Health stopped the construction of the provincial Youth Centre of Excellence. He hired an outside expert, who reported in April about the conditions there, and it was a very favourable report. I am wondering whether the minister could advise this Chamber of his decision. He had said that he would reach a decision and then inform the House. Could he advise the House now as to what that decision is?

Hon. Mr. Flemming (Rothesay, Minister of Health, PC): Certainly, and thank you for the question. The difference between the previous government and this government is that we rely on experts to advise us as to what is in the best interest of the patients of New Brunswick. It is not so much about what I am going to do. It is about what is in the best interest of the patients. I think we have had a bellyful of what some politician is going to do, and we know how that has worked out. We are dealing with the experts. We are dealing with people who are knowledgeable and equipped and properly trained in this area, because this government puts the interests of the patients and the people first and we put politics second. That is what defines the First Minister of this province. That is what he believes, and that is the culture of this government. I know that it is a shock to some people, but it is what this government believes in.

[Translation]

Mr. G. Arseneault (Campbellton-Dalhousie, Opposition House Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That does not really answer my question. The expert said it should be noted that the work done to prepare for the proposed opening of the centre of excellence is impressive.

[Original]

The expert said that what is being done at the youth mental health facility just to get it open is very impressive. The recruitment is on schedule as well. He has also given that to the minister. So I ask the minister: When will he make that decision, and will he really consider the outside expert? His opinion is very impressive as well. He recommends that it be opened.

I ask the minister: Will he then also meet with the elected officials in that region who have asked for a meeting to discuss not only this issue but also other health issues that have been in the news lately? Will the minister make a commitment today to meet with those officials in Restigouche? Thank you.

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Hon. Mr. Flemming (Rothesay, Minister of Health, PC): Sure, I will meet with them, and I will even invite the member opposite to join the meeting if he would like. I mean, we are an open and accessible government. We have no reason not to meet. I certainly would be happy to do that, and I would personally invite the member opposite to attend such a meeting.

The other issue, of course, is that you have to understand that you are cross-piling the wood here. There are two issues here. There is the youth centre, and there is the Restigouche Hospital Centre. Mr. Weber was hired to do an analysis of the issues and problems brought to the floor by the Ombud with respect to the Restigouche Hospital Centre. You are asking questions about the youth centre when the purpose of Mr. Weber's report was to do it about the regional hospital. I would like you to be more specific as to what you would like to know. If you are asking specifically about the plans for the youth centre, I am more than happy to answer that question, but Mr. Weber's job was with respect to the...

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Time, minister.

Mr. G. Arseneault (Campbellton-Dalhousie, Opposition House Leader, L): The report by Mr. Weber does contain references because it was part of his report and part of the request from the minister to look at the youth mental health facility as well. My question is simple and plain: When will the minister announce that the youth mental health centre construction will restart and finish so that we can get it open? I spoke with health experts recently who said that any delay... Even if the decision were made to close it and move it to another part of the province, that would create a delay of seven to eight years in providing services to our youth in our province, who are now travelling to the United States for a lot of their health needs when it comes to mental health for youth. Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Flemming (Rothesay, Minister of Health, PC): I would be personally grateful if the member opposite would give me the names and the addresses and the phone numbers of the people who are travelling to the United States, because I would personally like to look into that. I would like you to provide me with the names that you allege, because I would personally look into that and take that very seriously. If you are going to talk about people travelling to the United States, would you please tell me who they are? I will personally look into it, and I will deal with that because that is, in fact, unacceptable. If you are going to make allegations, would you please provide the information? I would like the names and the addresses and the telephone numbers of the people you say are travelling to the United States, and I will personally look into it.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Member, member.

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Hon. Mr. Flemming (Rothesay, Minister of Health, PC): If you are going to throw snowballs, you had better make sure that you have some substance behind them. You absolutely produce the names. You tell me who they are because I do not know what you are talking about.

TRANSFER PAYMENTS

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, I was delighted to learn that the Premier participated in a teleconference with the other Atlantic Canadian Premiers yesterday in the lead-up to his upcoming meetings with the Prime Minister and the other Canadian Premiers next weekend. Yesterday's announcement that all four Atlantic Premiers are united in calling for a demographic adjustment to the Canada Health Transfer is important and certainly deserving of national media attention. I hope that the government's communications wizards are hard at work to ensure that happens. We can achieve much by presenting a common front to the Prime Minister and to the Canadian Premiers, as I have said repeatedly.

Can the Premier tell the House the specifics of what he will propose to the Prime Minister for a demographic adjustment to the Canada Health Transfer?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. Mr. Speaker, the purpose of looking at health transfers is, basically, we look at New Brunswick as being kind of ahead of the curve in terms of the demographic adjustment required. Every province is going to experience what we are experiencing, maybe more acutely, right now. There is the idea that we are all challenged for employees. I mean, every province is doing that. I just heard from Ontario how many people the province is looking for. The difficulty is that we do not have enough people here. We do not have enough people to send across the country, as has happened in the past.

So the purpose here is basically to identify New Brunswick as what you could almost say is a prototype in our nation. In my discussions with the other Atlantic Premiers, that was the very point, that Atlantic Canada is facing this like no other—New Brunswick, Nova Scotia... Newfoundland is in a state similar to ours. The idea is that we need a solution here that will be national, but right now, it is regional and it is in Atlantic Canada. So our purpose is to present our situation as being unique but what is coming to everyone else. Let's develop a solution for New Brunswick and have federal support to do so.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): I believe that all parties in this House support a demographic adjustment to the Canada Health Transfer and wish the Premier well in his discussions. All parties should be concerned with Alberta Premier Kenney's crusade to change equalization, which I expect he will be bringing to the meeting of Canadian Premiers. These issues speak to New Brunswick's place in Confederation, Mr. Speaker,



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since equalization does—and the Canada Health Transfer should, if the Premier is successful—help address fiscal disparities among provinces in this country. My question is a simple one: Will the Premier commit to briefing all party leaders in this House on the results of his meetings with the Prime Minister and with the Premiers from across this country upon his return?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Absolutely. I think it is important. You know, it has been interesting. I think that the decorum in today's question period has for the most part been very cordial. I think that the discussions are about what is real.

I think what has happened to the member opposite is certainly... To take a position, come in the House, and basically indicate what went on in a case in the member's personal life, with the member's partner and an investment that did not go quite as planned... We count on people like that, with that entrepreneurial spirit, to invest in New Brunswick and make it work. We know that it is a risk, and in this case, it is a personal risk. Many, many people are doing that very thing in a personal-risk style. But I am looking at the province and saying that we, as a province, have the same situation. We have talked a lot today about creating new positions. Mr. Speaker, it is about how we find ways to do things with what we have, because not unlike any business, it is about how we make it work.

In a short response, which I could have stopped early, yes indeed. We will respond in relation to what we have learned, where our focus points have been, and what the outcome is of the meetings I am going to have next week. Thank you.

RECREATIONAL VEHICLES

Mrs. Conroy (Miramichi, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The recreational ATV and snowmobile industry is growing every year and has become not only a huge industry but a big part of our tourism that has helped to support small communities. Miramichi is in the middle of the province, and there is no safe link to cross from one side of the river to the other. We have actually had a number of snowmobiles fall through the ice. Many ATVs and snowmobilers from around the province travel to our region and our growing trail system.

I thank the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure and the Premier for meeting with us numerous times over the past year about the possibility of turning the Morrissy Bridge into a bridge for the use of ATVs, snowmobilers, hikers, and cyclists and making this a safe crossing for the entire Miramichi region. The federation and associations have been lobbying for this for the past few years as well. My question is for the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure. Has there been any movement toward a safe and

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accessible trail on the Morrissy Bridge, which could take the place of the link and connect the trail system across the province?

Hon. Mr. Stewart (Southwest Miramichi-Bay du Vin, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I thank the member opposite for the question. Just last week, the Minister of Transportation and I met with the federation of ATVing and the federation of snowmobiling along with some of the club presidents from the region. The issues at hand were crossing the Northwest Miramichi River, the site of where the Anderson Bridge is today, as well as the Morrisey Bridge, crossing the main Southwest Miramichi River.

The issues with the Morrisey Bridge are that it is very old and it needs maintenance. It needs liability insurance, and it needs a bit of a vision and hopefully a new engineering estimate with a much smaller scope of work than what was previously mentioned some years ago when they were still trying to put traffic on the bridge.

The goal of this government is to help both federations get their snowmobiles and their ATVs across both the Northwest Miramichi River and the main Southwest Miramichi River. That is our goal. We are working with all parties to make sure that we have a path forward. Thank you.

Mrs. Conroy (Miramichi, PA): I thank the minister for that, and I really look forward to being a part of that and continuing it forward. I know that you are a new ATVer as well, and welcome to the world of ATVing. I know that you are enjoying it. Congratulations on that too. We have all been ATVing for a long time. We have been part of associations. I really am looking forward to this happening. Could you just give us an idea of how long this could take? When could we see some things start to happen or something start to build?

Hon. Mr. Stewart (Southwest Miramichi-Bay du Vin, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the member opposite. Right now, the federations are working with the Department of Transportation to look at the custody of care of the bridges long-term, to look at who would accept the liability insurance, and to look at how much money is potentially required for the Morrisey Bridge. I think that it is over 100 years old at this point. We are also looking at the Anderson Bridge that we are using today because we believe that it would be a great path, since it connects to Trail 42 and Trail 10, I believe, for ATVing. It is the same trail, which is basically the former central New Brunswick rail line.

It is going to take time. It has been bantered around for years, but we have a path right now. I feel confident that the outcome will be that we can get both machines across both rivers, but it is going to take some time and some tinkering. A lot of work will go into it, and I will keep you updated along the way and involve you as well. Thank you.

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MINISTERS

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The actions of the Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries in bullying and harassing, leading to an assault on a DTI road crew employee...

Mr. Speaker, this is not a laughing matter. An employee of GNB was assaulted. How you can sit on the other side of this House and laugh is inexcusable.

Mr. Speaker, unfortunately bullying, intimidation, and insults seem to be the way that this government operates, and the Premier appears to condone it. Mr. Premier, an RCMP complaint has been made, and it could result in criminal charges. Will you do the right thing? Show some leadership. Stand up to show New Brunswickers that bullying, intimidation, and an assault are unacceptable. Will you do the right thing and remove this minister from Cabinet and stop your colleagues from laughing and finding this funny? Will you remove the minister until this RCMP investigation is done?

Hon. Mr. Wetmore (Gagetown-Petitcodiac, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We answered these questions yesterday and the day before. I really have nothing else to add. This is an HR issue, and it was dealt with immediately. Since this is an HR issue, it means that it is also a private matter and we cannot discuss it publicly. I will tell you that if the RCMP contact us as part of an investigation, we will cooperate fully. Thank you.

CROP INSURANCE

Mr. Harvey (Carleton-Victoria, L): Mr. Speaker, 2018 was a terrible year for potato farmers in all three Maritime Provinces. Early frost and extreme wet weather conditions led to an estimated \$40-million loss in this important industry. Mr. Speaker, AgriRecovery is a disaster relief framework that is part of the federal-provincial Business Risk Management Programs. It is there to help agricultural producers recover from natural disasters. This framework represents a total reimbursement of 70% on margin on the extraordinary costs of a natural disaster, with the federal government making a 60% contribution and the province paying 40%.

The province has to request the federal assistance in order to activate the AgriRecovery program. The provinces of Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia have completed their AgriRecovery program for their farmers—to help their farmers recover from significant financial losses. Why does the Premier refuse to send this request to Ottawa? What is he waiting for? Why will they not support New Brunswick farmers in their time of need?

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Hon. Mr. Wetmore (Gagetown-Petitcodiac, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to thank the member opposite for a question on agriculture. Certainly, we recognize the importance and the value that the potato industry and growers give to the province of New Brunswick. What I can tell the members opposite is that we are certainly working with Potatoes New Brunswick. I have met with its representatives on a number of occasions. I have had the Premier meet with them on a number of occasions. Actually, I am meeting with them tomorrow. We are certainly working on this.

In business risk management, there are a number of tools in the toolbox to help farmers. Our department staff are looking at all the tools to make sure that we can bring forward the best financial program to help benefit the farmers. That is what we are doing. We are sitting down with all stakeholders. I have asked all my...

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Time, minister. Question period is over.

