

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions



**October 12, 2022**

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### **NB POWER**

**Mr. K. Chiasson** (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

[*Original*]

When I asked the Premier about the electricity rate hike and the subsidies that the pulp and paper mills were getting, he went on a rant about how important it was to follow processes. But lo and behold, that same process could be changed on a whim.

Let's take, for example, the Mactaquac Dam refurbishment project. Processes were in place, and legislation was passed in the spring to completely eliminate the EUB from the process. So my concern is about oversight. What kind of oversight is there? But there is a ray of hope, because the minister, after being grilled last week, came out and said that the EUB would have a look at the project. I am just wondering whether the Premier can actually define exactly what the minister meant by giving the EUB a look at the Mactaquac Dam project?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, as we know... Madam Deputy Speaker. I apologize. As we know, in general, the utilities projects around the country, around the different provinces, have a habit of being excessive, going over their budgets. The process that NB Power will put in place is to have oversight from the people who actually manage the projects, and the EUB then will have access to that information. The EUB itself does not have the capability or experience to actually manage the projects, but the EUB will have access to the people who can actually do that, who can provide an oversight that will be detailed, and who will be able to present to the public and be very forthcoming on the issues that arise.

I think what we need is a step change, because we have seen—Muskrat Falls is an example—what has gone wrong with utility projects, and it happens a lot. I think what we have done here is to say that we want to treat this more like a private-sector project—managed as a private-sector project—but have it accountable to the people of the province in a very transparent and different way. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. K. Chiasson** (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. The EUB came out, right from the get-go, saying: Listen, we do not have a say in this project. We do not even know what our role is going to be when the Mactaquac Dam refurbishment project is actually brought forward. It was actually really concerned about this because, obviously, it is NB Power that is going to be carrying the debt. It is like having someone say: Listen, we are going to build you a house. You are actually going to pay the mortgage; but you do not have a say in what it is going to look like, and we are not going to show you the plans.

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Obviously, we put a little bit of pressure on the government and it folded. Its members said: Okay, well, we are going to show them the plans. We are at least going to show the EUB the plans. So imagine someone on the outside following the energy file. When it came to rate hikes, obviously, the Premier came out and said: You have to follow the process. When it came to Irving Oil, he said: Well, we might intervene. Now, when it comes to the Mactaquac Dam project, which is a huge \$2-billion project, the government is completely eliminating the EUB. Again, I am asking you: What role is the EUB going to play in this project?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Madam Deputy Speaker, I think that in the past, we have seen all kinds of projects that have been managed or we have seen all kinds of decisions that have been made right here, whether it be freezing power rates, building a plant that was never intended to be built, or buying material and not having a contract to support it. I think that NB Power went through \$1.5 billion worth of political decisions that have had a negative impact on its bottom line.

Do you want to talk about transparency and the ability to manage a project and do it like any other company would do it? Then you allow the company to do just that. You have it report the dollars on it. But to manage a project and, as you say, look at the plans and look at the blueprints... I think that what you are really referring to is looking at the numbers and saying: Are we going to be able to manage the numbers? Are we going to be able to keep the rates down to a minimum because we are managing the project? Madam Deputy Speaker, we are allowing NB Power to have the ability to do that, and we are asking that it report the information to the EUB. The EUB can ask continuously. I want oversight. I want access to information. I want to have somebody that is looking into this on our behalf. That process will unfold, but we will be able to do it in a constructive way.

**Mr. K. Chiasson** (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. That is pretty rich, Premier. Yesterday, you tried to school us on process and on the importance of process, and now you are trying to school us on transparency. Come on. Come on, Mr. Premier. It does not make any sense.

Imagine for departments, the EUB, and NB Power... Obviously, a process is in place for a reason. We have to follow processes. Either you put a process in place, or you do not put a process in place. You cannot start fiddling around with it, picking and choosing, and saying: Well, we are going to follow the process on this project, but we are not going to follow the process on the other one. How is someone supposed to understand this whole process? It looks political from the outside. I am just wondering whether the chief of staff, Louis Leger, actually has a map with coloured dotted lines and says: Okay, listen. If you are going to follow this route, we will go through a process. If you follow this route, we will go through another process.

Can the Premier explain this to us: Is process important for these projects or is it not?

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**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Madam Deputy Speaker, process is really important. It is interesting to hear the member opposite talk about process. I guess that when you think back, you say, well, I wonder how the process was followed when NB Power was going to be sold to Hydro Quebec. Was the process followed then, Madam Deputy Speaker, or was that a decision made in the back rooms with a select few? I think that it was even a surprise to the caucus members and a surprise to the ministers. It was a surprise to everybody. So I do not think that the process was followed.

In this scenario, we are actually saying, okay, the other processes have not worked. The process of a rate freeze and the process of all these decisions made politically were not followed. The EUB played no role in those areas in which political decisions were made totally outside of a process.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we are actually going to follow a process that is well established in the private sector on how to manage big projects, how to do it with the right people who have done it before, and how to not have massive overruns like what we are seeing in other utility projects around this country. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

**Mr. K. Chiasson** (Tracadie-Sheila, L): I think that we got the Premier on the run. I think that when he is referring to the past or when he goes to the past, it shows that he is not as confident as he was yesterday.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to talk about revenue-generating ventures. Again, to come back to legislation that was passed in the spring, the minister gave more flexibility to NB Power to kind of dabble in revenue-generating ventures. The minister actually went in front of the media and said, Listen, I am going to meet with NB Power at the end of June to kind of have a talk with it to see where it is at and what kinds of projects are on its radar.

My question to the Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development is this: Did you go forward with that meeting? What is actually on the radar with NB Power to generate new revenues?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Madam Deputy Speaker, I think what we are talking about with NB Power is in relation to focusing on energy conversion. What NB Power is seeing is that the capital costs of trying to replace energy consumption in renewable energies are huge going forward. What it is trying to do in this case, which it has started and enhanced, is to have an energy reduction program with the heat pumps. I mean, that program has expanded dramatically at our request and because we see these rates increasing. We do not see a path forward where energy rates are going to get cheaper unless people in this House think that the right thing to do is to artificially control the rate when the utility continues to be in trouble and not have a future financially. That is what has happened in the past.

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Madam Deputy Speaker, it is a different approach. It is an approach where we are allowing NB Power to manage its business and to report on what its business is because it has oversight from the EUB. Going forward, its main initiative right now is on how it can deliver energy more cheaply but also on how it can get people to use less of it. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. K. Chiasson** (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Madam Deputy Speaker, my question is simple: Did the minister meet with NB Power executives to talk a bit about a new project that is on the table to generate more profits for the Crown corporation? Obviously, it was announced last week that there will be an increase in electricity rates, and taxpayers will be the ones who will have to send more money to the Crown corporation to help pay back the debt and cover expenditures. However, a piece of legislation was implemented in the spring to allow NB Power to maybe develop new projects to generate higher profits.

So, my question is very simple: Has the Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development done his duty and met with the executives of this Crown corporation to start this discussion and figure out what can be done to avoid electricity rate increases like the ones announced last week?

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Madam Deputy Speaker, this goes back to what we said earlier in the week and last week about the rate increase proposal, which is that it is a proposal. It is an application process. It is one that the EUB scrutinizes at great length through a process of intervenors and by understanding every component. Components that are brought forward include: How do we have the right structure that makes sense?

I talked yesterday, I think, in relation to our current rates in the province being much cheaper than those in many other jurisdictions in the country. I know that we are third, fourth, or somewhere in that range. How do we manage that going forward? How do we ensure that the company can afford its capital infrastructure requirements? That is where it is right now. It is trying to figure out: How do we refurbish the Mactaquac Dam? How do we ensure that we can provide an energy source going forward? Where do we put investments going forward? We can talk about the small modular nuclear reactors. How do we have a vision for the future that really supplies the energy needs of the future?

So, it is a bold vision of NB Power's, to make a company that is responsive and managed in an appropriate way that gets results for every taxpayer in the province.

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[*Translation*]

**Mr. K. Chiasson** (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

[*Original*]

To avoid huge rate increases, NB Power put in place the new heat pump program. The goal is to encourage people to reduce their electricity consumption. There are some hiccups. Obviously, as my colleague said, it went with one supplier in the province. I doubt that it will be able to actually meet the target of 50 000 units in the next three years.

A bigger problem is that a lot of what we are hearing from constituents around the province is that when they applied, they were denied the heat pump program because they had already benefitted from another efficiency program a few years ago when it came to insulation. NB Power helped these customers halfway, but it stopped there. It does not want to actually help them go right to the end and get the heat pump program. To the minister, I am just wondering why it is that you are actually blocking some of these clients from getting the program.

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. In the case of the program that is rolling out, it is almost unprecedented in terms of its breadth in dealing with energy consumption and in trying to reduce it. It is a very expansive program but one on which we need to move forward.

I cannot speak directly to knowing the particular instance. I could go back and say: How do we have one supplier at this point? We have one supplier at this point because the plan was never going to be as extensive as it is now. It was basically for a certain component and primarily for people with very low incomes, people on social assistance, and seniors. I do not know exactly how many categories, but it was a very limited program. Tenders went out, and that company won that tender.

But the point of it being a massive program and the point that we will need every other supplier to be part of this program are very valid. We want to expand that across the province so that absolutely all our contractors have an opportunity to work in this field, because there is such a demand. And, yes, it is going to be an extensive process. But we will continue to do it, and we will involve other contractors to do it. Thank you.

## HOMELESSNESS

**Mr. Gauvin** (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Department of Social Development is a tough file because it deals with a vulnerable part of the population. This population does not often have a voice and is absolutely at the mercy of the decisions that we make in here. One part of this population is the homeless. In New

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Brunswick right now, one of the challenges is that more and more people are living on the street. That is just a fact. It is not debatable. That is a fact, and we all know it. All over the province, there are hundreds. Just in Saint John alone, there are 148. Those are the numbers that have been given to us by the people on the ground.

Now, there is frost on our windows and frost on the ground. Winter is coming. To the minister, I would simply like to know this: What are the plans of the government to make sure that as few New Brunswickers as possible sleep on the streets during the winter? What is the plan, please? Thank you very much.

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, PC): Madam Deputy Speaker, it is nice to have a question from the official opposition. I appreciate the question because he is right. None of us can deny the fact that there is more visible homelessness than we have ever really seen before. We are seeing it not just in our urban centres but also in our rural communities—in more rural communities than we have seen in the past. I think the fact that, since 2018, we have increased our investments in shelter by 500% is a good thing; however, we know that there is more to do.

I want to thank the member for asking this question. I cannot tell him, because of his question, that the plan is going to be revealed today, but what I want him to know is that there has been significant effort going into this these past few days. In the coming days, I am going to have some announcements that I think will address all the situations that he is speaking of. I am looking forward to talking about them and to giving a solidified plan.

*[Translation]*

**Mr. Gauvin** (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Thank you very much. Thank you for the answer. Of course, we are looking forward to hearing about the response, but the people involved are certainly looking forward to it even more, because the nights are getting increasingly colder.

Now, if I may, I would give you some suggestions. I know that, within departments, people are working in offices here in Fredericton. This allows us, as critics, to go see the situation on the ground. As for the demand, this is something I could not have known about without going out there. When you go out there, it is eye-opening.

There are potential solutions. We are saying that shelters are needed, but I do not know if we could work together with municipalities. That is because, when people go to these places, they carry their only belongings on their backs. Therefore, adequate security is needed, because a lot of people have addiction and mental health problems. These people go to shelters and a lot of them get attacked at night. When the temperature is 40° below zero, people want to be inside. However, they do not want to be attacked. So, I am asking you this: Could you please take that into consideration? Thank you very much.

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[Original]

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, PC): We are absolutely taking that into account, Madam Deputy Speaker. Thank you so much. The fact of the matter is that municipalities do have a lot of conversation to bring to this table. I want you to know that I am participating tomorrow in a roundtable discussion in Saint John on homelessness and on housing. We have been working diligently every single day to ensure that our plans are in place.

Communities have a lot to offer. We look at the 12Neighbours project here in Fredericton. You know, that project gives me hope. That project gives me hope that we could actually transition the homeless population into permanent housing. We have many layers of that to do. We need new housing. We need transitional approaches through our shelter systems, and we need to hold them accountable to help move those people through to ensure that they have a safe place to live.

I am very excited about what is coming in the next several days, and I am looking forward to sharing those plans with you.

[Translation]

### HOUSING

**Mr. Gauvin** (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Thank you very much. The minister talked about housing units and housing, so I am going to move in that direction, because the discussion we are having this morning is about short-term solutions to help people who are in immediate need so that they have a place to stay this winter.

This government has been saying since last year that it has a housing strategy. There is said to be a strategy. An announcement was made, and dollar figures were mentioned. There is still known to be \$235 million available from the federal government. All of these things are known.

However, when a strategy is mentioned, the toolbox has to go along with it. I do not know whether it is possible this morning to let us know what is in the toolbox. I know that rent controls will soon be coming to an end in January. What can people expect? What kind of protection can people who are not sheltered from rent increases expect now that rent controls are coming to an end? What can vulnerable people expect in terms of rising costs? Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker.

[Original]

**Hon. Mary Wilson** (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Military Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question, Madam Deputy

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Speaker. When it comes to rent, as we know, rent control is currently set to expire at the end of this year. Everybody in this room and in the province also knows that my colleagues and I are in discussions on what is going to happen for the year ahead.

Just as a point, I would like to say that of the many responsibilities that fall under Service New Brunswick, the Residential Tenancies Tribunal is one. The member opposite, in his statement this morning, said: The minister has made her decision. I have not made any decision. My colleagues and I together are discussing what is going to happen. I do not have the right to make that decision. The mandate of the Residential Tenancies Tribunal—the core function of the RTT—is to arbitrate disagreements between landlords and tenants. That is it.

We are very concerned. We know that our tenants are concerned, and we are working hard to find that balance. Thank you.

## RENTS

**Ms. Mitton** (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Madam Speaker, what we are hearing from the government on this issue is very concerning. As we know, in recent years, rents have skyrocketed and some New Brunswickers have lost their housing as a result. It is a basic human right—but it is not being treated as a basic human right—to be housed. There are many unhoused people.

There are many people at risk of losing their housing, and housing has become increasingly commodified and less and less affordable. New Brunswickers are already getting notices of rent increases for 2023 that exceed the current rent cap, because it is set to expire. Madam Speaker, what are renters supposed to do when they cannot find affordable housing and their rent will be going up on January 1? Where are they supposed to go? Will the Minister of Service New Brunswick take this opportunity to announce an extension of the rent cap for 2023?

**Hon. Mary Wilson** (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Military Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question, Madam Speaker. I do appreciate the chance to stand up and speak about this because we know that our 38 000 tenancies in New Brunswick are looking forward to finding out what the final decision is. Again, my colleagues and I are discussing this very important issue, and we are looking to strike that balance because the biggest concerns here in the province are affordable housing as well as the low inventory rate that we have right now, at 1.7%, as noted by the CMHC. Anything under 3% is a problem, so we have to find that balance to encourage development and to protect our tenants, all at the same time.

Please be assured that the Residential Tenancies Tribunal, which is there to arbitrate disagreements between landlords and tenants, is there. The expertise is there to answer



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any questions that our tenants and landlords in the province have, so please reach out. You do have protections.

Six months' notice has to be given before your rent goes up, by the way. It used to be three months. Thank you.

**Ms. Mitton** (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Madam Speaker, that six months means that people have been getting notices of major rent increases for months already. They know what is coming, and this rent cap is set to expire on January 1. What are people supposed to do?

And I have heard the minister saying in the media that the rent cap has not solved the affordable housing crisis. No kidding—it was never meant to. It was meant to protect tenants. It was meant to protect renters. It was meant to protect them from predatory rent increases, which we saw and which were unprecedented and terrifying for people. That is what they see coming down the line, and they are waiting for someone to stand up and say: We are going to protect you. We are going to keep you from losing your housing.

Yet what is the government waiting for? Tenants and landlords are wondering what is going to happen. What is it waiting for? When will the Minister of Service New Brunswick announce an extension to the rent cap?

**Hon. Mary Wilson** (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Military Affairs, PC): Thank you again, Madam Deputy Speaker, as we discuss this very important issue. I do not think that the member opposite has been paying attention over the past year to the significant protections that we have put in place under the Residential Tenancies Tribunal for tenants here in New Brunswick. From December 2021, rent can be increased only once in a 12-month period. It used to require three months' notice for a rent increase, and that has been extended to six months.

As always, before the rent cap, currently within the rent cap, and in the future, if any tenant in the province feels that an increase they have received is unreasonable, it requires a quick call to the Residential Tenancies Tribunal, where a jurisdictional scan will be done. Many, many increases that have been put forward have been refused. Please, as a tenant in the province, reach out to the Residential Tenancies Tribunal. The staff are there, they are professionals, and they know the rules. Just give us a call. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

**Ms. Mitton** (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Madam Deputy Speaker, I have been paying attention. What I have to say is that the protections for tenants are not good enough. They are not strong enough. I wonder whether the Minister of Service New Brunswick has been paying attention to what the renters in this province are saying. They are saying that they are terrified of losing their housing, that their rents are going to increase, and that they



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need more protection. There is a long way to go to get to where we need to be to protect the tenants in this province.

The Premier has yet to appoint a minister responsible for housing. Let me ask the Premier this. Housing is a basic human right. We have seen the price of housing go up, with as much profit as possible being squeezed out. There has been an attack on tenants by certain predatory landlords. Without something to protect tenants, without a rent cap in place beyond January 1, people are going to lose their housing. Will the Premier ensure that a rent cap is maintained in our province?

**Hon. Mary Wilson** (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Military Affairs, PC): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the question. I assure New Brunswickers that my colleagues and I are discussing this very important issue on a regular basis. We are looking to make sure that we make the right decisions. We are looking to make sure that we protect tenants.

Many different protections have been put in place. I mentioned the ones that were put through in December of last year. In June of this year, we also strengthened protection for tenants in the event that the landlord is trying to have their tenancy terminated. There are only four reasons why that can happen: an immediate family member will occupy the unit, major renovations are being done to a unit that would make it totally unlivable, a tenant's contract to maintain the building has ended, or the unit is no longer a residential premise. So unless one of those four reasons is put on the table, a tenant will not be removed from the premises.

[*Translation*]

## CARBON TAX

**Mr. LePage** (Restigouche West, L): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

[*Original*]

On that rant, I thought the minister was going to give us a 1 800 number, but I guess not.

I will get back to my file. In the Climate Change Action Plan tabled last September, the government states—oh yeah, by the way, that is another plan by the government—that it will continue to “invest carbon tax revenue into climate change initiatives through the New Brunswick Climate Change Fund and provide transparency on expenditures”. We have just gone through Fiona. We do not want to see the carbon tax revenues fall into the projected surpluses of this government. Can the minister provide an update on the projected \$275 million in carbon tax revenues as of October 2022?

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**Hon. Mr. Crossman** (Hampton, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the question from across the way. As you know, our climate change and environmental stewardship committee will meet at one o'clock this afternoon. Bring all your questions with you. Our deputy minister will be there, along with our secretariat. Our new plan that is coming out—it is a big one, if you have read through it—is *Our Pathway Towards Decarbonization and Climate Resilience*, for the period from 2022 to 2027.

Regarding what you are talking about, the Climate Change Action Plan, it will have been mostly addressed to the Climate Change Fund. The additional money coming will help as well. There is a lot to it. It is not a government but an all-of-government decision—one GNB. As you would know by reading through the plan, all departments have been participating in coming up with it, and the reception to it from the people who have received it has been overwhelmingly positive. Thank you.

[Translation]

**Mr. LePage** (Restigouche West, L): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

[Original]

I was looking for leadership from the minister. It is his plan, under his department, with partners in other departments. If the minister cannot take the lead on this plan, it does not give me hope that this plan will be taken seriously by the government.

As a member of the opposition, my question to the minister is this: If he cannot tell us that the \$275 million in carbon tax revenues will not be in the surplus and that it will be invested in New Brunswick, then can the minister provide an update on the investments made through the Climate Change Fund? The last update was in May 2022, and if my calculator did not jump a few numbers, the total was about \$52 million. Where is the rest?

**Hon. Mr. Crossman** (Hampton, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, PC): Thank you very much again for the question from across the way. The number that I have is \$47 million. There may have been some additional funds to get things across when there was slippage with those plans, as happens with the ongoing costs of the labour and the materials that are needed to get these projects done.

More than \$47 million was allocated in the 2022-23 budget to support dozens of projects related to climate change. The investment comes through the carbon tax fund, which you were asking about. It was directed toward the initiatives that would help reduce greenhouse gas emissions, foster educational opportunities, and build resiliency. As I mentioned, we, as the government of the province, are committed to doing our part to deal

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directly with climate change initiatives. The money that I mentioned—it was \$47 million—will be well invested. You can be assured. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. LePage** (Restigouche West, L): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

[*Original*]

This is my third and final question of this session to the minister. We want to know some numbers on those climate change initiatives that have been brought forward today. We also know that through the New Brunswick Environmental Trust Fund, the department has approved 234 projects—which is great—for \$8.6 million. We know that the government has invested roughly \$60 million on climate change. When and where does the government expect to invest the balance of that \$275 million on the carbon tax fund? Where is the remaining \$215 million going to be invested?

**Hon. Mr. Crossman** (Hampton, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, PC): Thank you to the member from across the way for asking about the Environmental Trust Fund. Applications open November 1. You have 30 days to apply. Please do not miss that deadline. It is a very worthwhile trust fund, for sure. The call for applications is coming out shortly, on November 1, and applications will be accepted from November 1 to November 30.

A total of 372 applications were received, requesting about \$18.9 million. A total of 234 funded projects, totaling \$8 641 200, was announced on May 4, 2022. As a government, we are committed to protecting, preserving, and enhancing the province's natural environment by funding grassroots environmental projects. There are many people taking part across the province. I know that we are on our way with the Kennebecasis Watershed restoration. There are a lot of wonderful projects, and there is summer employment as well—lots of good things going on.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** That concludes Oral Questions.

