

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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[Translation]

NURSES

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Good morning.

[Original]

Nurses, or RNs, perform community health or public health functions outside of the hospital envelope, Madam Speaker. They provide preventative care. They provide education programs. They go into schools. They provide vaccines and vaccine programs and nutrition programs. They work with kids and new moms. They work in Extra-Mural. They work in mental health and addiction programs. We're now into day three of no answers and no clarity on what is happening with these public health nurses, Madam Speaker. The least the government could do, in Nurses Week, is to provide clarity for the nurses' future. Please, for the sake of these affected nurses, tell them the scope of the impact on them, on their patients, and on community health in general. So, the question is this: How many RNs are you going to replace with LPNs? That could be for the minister or the Premier. One of them, please, answer this question.

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Thank you to the member opposite for the question. As my colleagues have already stated, nurses are critical to the functioning of our health care system. I think that if you ask any New Brunswicker today, they would say the health care system isn't working the way that they would like it to. Too many New Brunswickers cannot access the care they want when they need it. They're waiting in emergency rooms. They're waiting for primary care. They're making really difficult decisions.

In an ideal world, if we had all of the money and all of the people, then we would have every possible position in the health care spectrum filled. But right now, we have a health care crisis, and we have to follow the advice of the experts who say to start with the front lines, to provide that primary care in the community. That's why our government has made it a priority to address primary care and get every New Brunswicker attached to a collaborative care clinic and family health team in their community.

Now, we're looking at our hospitals, we're looking at our nursing resources, and we're working in collaboration with nurses to determine the best way to deploy—

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, I appreciate the Premier getting on her feet and answering, and I appreciate that it was an answer. It wasn't the answer. In terms of working with the nurses, that's a hard no, Madam Speaker. Absolutely not. The government is not working with nurses. So, I asked very clearly: What

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is the scope? We know that public health nurses are stressed. They're feeling disrespected. They're anxious. The reason I am asking these questions is to give clarity to the nurses. They are afraid to approach government. They are afraid to work with their union. They are not getting answers, so they are coming to us, the official opposition.

We have a role to play here. Our role is to push the government members, to help them do the things they need to do. Nobody is saying that health care is perfect or that it doesn't need to change, but it needs to be done with nurses. So, this is a good start. Can the Premier or the minister give us the scope in terms of the nurses these changes are going to impact?

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I'm happy to expand because a minute wasn't enough time to provide more detail. We are absolutely hearing from nurses and talking to nurses on the ground, as well as other health care professionals and members of the union, to work collectively on this, which is why the scope hasn't been finalized. We're looking across the entire health care system. We're looking at every possible way that we can serve New Brunswickers in order to improve.

I'd like to challenge the member opposite if he believes that things should remain the way they are, if he is satisfied with the health care services in New Brunswick, and if he thinks that we should just keep the status quo. Our government does not believe that. We believe that we can do better, but it's going to take a different approach than that of the government that told nurses to move to Alberta. It's going to take conversations on the ground, hard conversations.

I want to thank the nurses who have been reaching out to me, sending me Facebook messages and emails expressing their perspectives. We're going to continue to have those conversations and work with them to figure this out so that New Brunswickers get better access to health care.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): There's a minute worth of nothing, Madam Speaker, and they're clapping for it.

Nurses are so unhappy—so unhappy—that they are talking about not taking the \$5 000 that this government is offering them, with strings attached, and quitting. They are that dissatisfied. They have buyer's remorse. They are not happy with this government. So, when it comes to the Facebook messages the Premier is talking about, I don't know how old they are, but they can't be recent. It can't be what nurses are saying now, because they are saying exactly the opposite.

We are trying to get answers for nurses about what is happening, and all we are getting is talking points. The Premier obviously doesn't listen to nurses. She didn't listen to me, because I just said that I recognize that changes need to take place. We're trying to tell the government members that they're doing it wrong. We're trying to tell them that they need to include nurses and that it is not happening. The RHAs are not talking to nurses. The

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government is not talking to nurses. Will the government change its approach and engage nurses—

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm happy to clarify this for the member opposite because we have received messages from nurses as recently as a few hours ago. We are having regular conversations, daily conversations, with nurses in our communities, in the communities of every one of my members. This is not a problem that we are going to solve rapidly. We're not going to come out and say here is the solution without doing exactly what we are doing now, working with the health authorities, working with the union, and working with the nurses. And I want to reassure them because the member opposite is fearmongering. He's making things worse and trying to drive down morale when this is absolutely a challenging situation. It is. Change is hard, and I cannot tell everyone that we're going to keep the system exactly as it is, with everyone in exactly the same jobs, because we do not want exactly the same results.

We are asking our nurses to do what they're doing now: Help us identify the problems; speak up and keep sending those messages and emails. It's collectively, with them, that we're going to find the best way to serve them—

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): I would love to thank the Premier, Madam Speaker, for saying that I am fearmongering when I am fighting for nurses. If that's what she calls fearmongering... If bringing out the facts of what's happening...

The government members said: Oh, yes, these redeployments are happening. Then, yesterday, all of a sudden, the minister said: No, they're not happening. Do you know what? When I started bringing out some facts about what's happening, they changed their tune. Oh, workforce redeployments. Adjustments or redeployments. When I asked them yesterday about the IV team being cut, they said: Oh, yes, that's happening. Now we find out that the entire employee team of RNs has been told to go elsewhere and has been replaced by LPNs. This is exactly what nurses have been telling us is happening. Can the minister or, in this case, the Premier, who's getting on her feet today, please confirm that RNs have been—not “will be”—adjusted in the workforce, redeployed, reassigned, or even cut out of the employees in health care?

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Madam Speaker, the way that the member posed the question makes the answer very easy. This is something that has been done in the past. It was done under the government that he was a part of six months ago, so maybe it's something that he's familiar with. I will say that I'm pleased to hear the change, because this was a government that attacked nurses, told them to move away, and couldn't get a deal signed with them. I am pleased to see that the member has changed positions to fight for nurses, but now he's referencing things that were done months ago under his government and his government's budget.

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We are taking a different tack. We are now working with nurses, their union, and their health authorities to find the best way to improve their working conditions. If you listen to nurses and what they're telling us, you will hear that they're asking for help on the ground. They need colleagues in the building, the same way teachers do. They're asking for their colleagues to come and support them in the most critical areas. So instead of making immediate decisions, we are talking with the nurses, the experts, and the unions to figure out the solution collectively.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): They are absolutely not doing that, Madam Speaker. What the Premier is saying is not what is happening on the ground. That is why the unions are coming to us, Madam Speaker. The Premier said: Oh, that's what they did. That's a weak answer. The government members know they're in trouble. When they feel that they're losing, that's what they turn to, but I have something here, and I really want to see how they're going to address it.

If you dial 506 623-6139, you get the Miramichi hospital employee health line. It will go to voicemail because there's nobody there to man it. This is the exact message that you get:

Hi, you've reached employee health at the Miramichi hospital. Due to a workforce adjustment, the RN position has been eliminated from staff health, and, in the next few weeks, an LPN will be replacing me. If, in the meantime, you have any questions or need help with anything, you can call 1 833 978-2580 and select number 1, or you can email occupationalhealth@HorizonNB.ca. Thank—

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It's unfortunate that the member ran out of time and wasn't able to ask a question with that example, but I think it drives home the challenge. In all our hospitals, we have nurses whom we are asking to move to the front lines. We're leveraging LPNs to their full scope. We are looking at the best way to serve New Brunswickers and to improve the working conditions of nurses. That's something that is hard work and requires change. Is the best use of that registered nurse to serve New Brunswickers on a helpline, or can we get them to help us decrease wait times in ERs and deliver better primary care to New Brunswickers? Those are the conversations we're having. Those are the hard decisions that we have to work through collectively, from a position of respect.

I think it's interesting that he mentioned working with the unions. I think that we have a really good relationship with the nursing union, something that we hadn't seen in six years. This afternoon, you can ask the nursing union members whether that continues to be the case.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Madam Speaker, the government members have gone from saying that, yes, this is happening, to saying that, no, this isn't happening, to saying that this will happen. Now, we're proving that it has been happening. Letters have been sent during their tenure in government.

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What is going to happen to this employee? We don't know. Is she going to be redeployed? Will she be laid off? Will she go into retirement? Will she have to quit because her job is being taken away from her?

What we are trying to say is that the Premier is now admitting that we have nurses with a particular skill set whom we now need to do something different. It's causing chaos in the system. The nurses are not prepared for it. It's that "ready, fire, aim" philosophy that we've been hearing and seeing with teachers and social development. It doesn't matter. The Premier is going on with talking point after talking point after talking point. The nurses want action. Give them a concrete answer. You will not change anything until you talk to them first.

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I think it's interesting that the "ready, fire, aim" philosophy came from Mr. Flemming. We see where that got him.

I want to make this really clear because it's really important. It's really important we make sure nurses understand we are not doing anything without them. We are at the "ready" stage, not at the "fire" or "aim" stage. We are engaging with nurses, with the department, and with their unions to figure out how we can best use them, how we can support them and their colleagues who are asking for more support, and how we can create the working conditions that retain nurses.

The members opposite talk about "fire and aim", and they want to fearmonger about something that is really scary. When the health care system is changing and when nursing jobs are changing or are about to change and we are asking you to work with us to figure it out, there is uncertainty. That uncertainty is difficult. I want to acknowledge that. What we're trying to do is create the best conditions for nurses and the best services for New Brunswickers.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, guess what. You're failing—failing. The IV team is gone. Employee health is gone. I said this, and I've been saying it for days: You're going to replace RNs with LPNs. The Premier said: No. Here it is. It's happening. It has already happened. It's already impacting our health care system. Nurses have been anxious and stressed because of the failure of this government. I'm doing my job.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): House Leader, you can wait your turn. At the end of the day, this government has a responsibility to nurses. The Premier can get up with all the rhetoric that she wants to use. All we're asking is for her to stop doing what she is doing, for this government to reset so that nurses are engaged, nurses can feel at ease that their jobs aren't being cut, and nurses can have that certainty.

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That's our responsibility as the opposition. It is their responsibility to listen and do what they need to do.

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I think that, at the core, we're actually on the same page. Because—

(Interjections.)

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Well, I just heard it from the member opposite. We need to change the system. The member opposite has acknowledged that. Nobody is satisfied with the results that we're getting. We need to do this very carefully. We can't go full steam ahead without engaging on the ground, which we've seen happen in the past. That is why the conversation about how best to use nurses in this province is just starting to happen now.

We're in that "ready" phase. We're starting the conversation with nurses, with the health authorities, and with the unions. I think that's something that we all want to do together. We don't want to make rash decisions that affect broad swaths of employees without engaging them in the solutions and ensuring together that the ultimate goals of delivering better health services to New Brunswickers and better working conditions for nurses are achieved. I think we can do that if we work across the aisle and acknowledge that we all share those goals and that we are here at the "ready" stage, ready to work together on the "aim".

TOBACCO

Mr. Hogan (Woodstock-Hartland, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I certainly hope that this government doesn't follow the lead of the Liberal government in Newfoundland.

My question is for the Minister of Health. The New Brunswick government will receive \$614 million over about 20 years from the tobacco lawsuit settlement. I believe the first part is about \$157 million this year. The devastating health consequences and health care costs from tobacco are at the origin of the reason New Brunswick filed the lawsuit against the tobacco industry in the first place. Tobacco remains the leading preventable cause of disease and death in New Brunswick from cancer, heart disease, emphysema, and other health effects. Now, high rates of youth vaping present an extraordinary new issue. Will the minister allocate substantial funding from the tobacco settlement to enhance the province's tobacco control strategy?

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, to the members opposite, I would like to clarify what has happened with the IV therapy team. What would happen with an IV team is something that has been under negotiation through the collective agreement, through the union, and through the members. There are no IV

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teams at the Dumont, the City Hospital, or the Fredericton hospital. We're just doing what is consistent across New Brunswick.

Members of that IV team were sent to our phlebotomy services that do specimen collection—they are still employed—and there is now an increased scope of practice for the nurses who work in the clinical units. We now have a specialized IV therapy group that tackles the very difficult IV access—the central access—so care has actually improved. We've done it under the collective agreement, and we have done it in cooperation with nurses.

Now, there's a second issue, and that's with the community health nurses. We have not done anything. We are still working with—

Mr. Hogan (Woodstock-Hartland, PC): Madam Speaker, I can appreciate that the minister wants to talk about a question that was asked 5 minutes or 10 minutes ago, but I asked a very serious question about the \$614 million that this province is going to receive from the tobacco companies in a lawsuit settlement. I asked about what the minister plans on doing with it because my fear is that this government is going to put it in General Revenue, just like the Liberal government in Newfoundland.

My question was this: What is this government, this Minister of Health, planning on doing with the money that we're going to be receiving from the tobacco lawsuit settlement?

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, I don't mean to diminish the member opposite's question. I will get to that.

The second phase of what we are doing with our public health nurses... Nobody has been impacted yet. We are talking to our nurses. We are respecting the collective agreement. Horizon will communicate with those nurses and with us before anything happens.

With regard to the money that has been granted to this province, we are currently looking at what we're going to do with that money. We saw a very good guest here today who talked about the consequences of cancer and how to prevent cancer. We are working with our Minister of Finance and other people on how best to deploy the money that we will collect through this settlement. So, there is no decision yet, but thank you for your advice.

Mr. Hogan (Woodstock-Hartland, PC): Madam Speaker, expert health organizations such as the Canadian Cancer Society, the New Brunswick Heart and Stroke Foundation, NB Lung, and the New Brunswick Medical Society have all urged the government to allocate a significant portion of the tobacco settlement proceeds toward strengthening initiatives that will reduce smoking and youth vaping in the province. If tobacco use is reduced, that will prevent disease, reduce health care costs, and perhaps stop the need for transferring nurses.

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Will the minister heed the advice of these expert health organizations? Will the minister take action and use the new funds from the tobacco settlement to do more to reduce smoking and youth vaping in New Brunswick? I understand that he says a decision hasn't been made, but he is certainly in a key position to influence a good decision.

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, to the member opposite, first, thank you for the confidence. Second, it's not only tobacco but also inhaled substances such as vape products, inhaled cannabis products, and cigarettes. We are very aggressive in advancing an agenda that decreases access for our youth now and as they get older. We're working on that with our trusted partners, such as the Cancer Society, Heart and Stroke, and others.

That said, we are on the same page. We want to reduce access. We want to reduce smoking. We want to reduce the use of any inhaled substances. We are going to be working with these trusted partners to accomplish that. I do appreciate your advice on what we do and how we will fund those initiatives. We take that under good advisement. Thank you.

[Translation]

ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Coon (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

New Brunswickers, surprisingly, have no legal right to a healthy environment, as a number of provinces and territories in this country do. Madam Speaker, that is why the health and well-being of New Brunswickers, particularly children, continue to be affected by environmental contaminants and degradation. Traditional environmental legislation, such as the *Clean Air Act*, *Clean Water Act*, and *Clean Environment Act*, is absolutely essential, but it is not sufficient.

We need a substantive right to a healthy environment entrenched in legislation along with the procedural rights necessary to enforce it. My Bill 19, which will soon be debated at second reading, provides an opportunity for this Legislature to provide that right. The evidence is clear. Where a right to a healthy environment has been recognized in law, it has made a difference. Does the Environment Minister agree that New Brunswickers should have the legal right to healthy air to breathe and safe—

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, Minister of Environment and Climate Change; Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I think it is clear that every New Brunswicker deserves clean air and clean water. The Premier gave me a mandate with this in mind.

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The previous government ignored the file for years. Our government wants to tackle it. My goal is to ensure the *Clean Air Act* and the *Clean Water Act* are reviewed by 2026. That's what we will do. Over the next few months, we will start the review process with stakeholders, people on the ground who have a direct impact, and New Brunswickers. That is the file we will tackle.

Thank you for the question. We are looking forward to debating the bill at second reading. Thank you.

[Original]

Mr. Coon (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Bill 19, *An Act Respecting the Right to a Healthy Environment*, proposes to entrench the substantive right to a healthy environment in law, which we do not have, along with a number of procedural rights to ensure citizens can enforce that substantive right. To help counter voter cynicism, the Premier has said in the past that MLAs on the government benches will have the opportunity to vote in the way their constituents want them to as long as that vote is unrelated to Cabinet decisions or their platform promises. The vote at second reading of the bill is on whether or not you agree with it in principle so that it can be sent to the committee stage where its provisions can be reviewed in detail and amendments can be presented. Will the Premier allow a free vote on Bill 19 in second reading and let her MLAs vote based on their constituents' wishes?

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): My apologies, Madam Speaker. I was in a discussion with my colleague, but I think I understand that the question is on whether we're going to allow members to vote as they see fit and participate in the debate at second reading. That is how it works over here. If it's not a matter from the platform and not a matter of something we committed to to get elected, members can vote as they and their constituents, the people who elected them to be their voice, see fit.

[Translation]

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

You know, Canadians have long been protected by substantive rights under the Charter, such as the right to life, the right to liberty, and the right to security of the person. I haven't heard anyone suggest that there is any overreach associated with those rights. What we don't have is a substantive right to air quality that doesn't cause, for example, brain damage in children, or a right to water quality that doesn't create intellectual disabilities in children. Madam Speaker, these rights have been available for the past 30 years to Canadians living in Ontario. We're not breaking new ground here. On an issue as important as children's health, I'm pleased to hear the Premier confirm that MLAs can vote according

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to what they believe is in the interest of their constituents. My question is this: Does the Premier herself support the principle that New Brunswickers should have a substantive legal right to a healthy environment, and will she vote accordingly?

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you for the question. We've had some conversations about this bill, and we absolutely agree. We're very supportive of it in the original form in which it came to us from the stakeholders, a passionate group of New Brunswickers who want to see that right to a healthy environment enshrined in this building. It's something our team has been working on with the folks who draft legislation, and we are looking at the examples you gave us on what's happening in Ontario, the federal government, and other provinces to try to find the best path forward to put forward the strongest legislation that we can that is in the interest of protecting clean air, clean water, and a clean environment for all New Brunswickers. It's something that we've prioritized, as the minister said. It's the mandate we gave him to make sure that New Brunswickers have that clean water and air they deserve and that we have the legislation that supports those rights and protections for the future.

ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES

Ms. Bockus (Saint Croix, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. It was reported on Tuesday that NB Liquor's profit for the final quarter of the 2024-25 fiscal year took a 15.1% year-over-year hit despite sales rising slightly. Profits fell from \$35.8 million to \$30.4 million. Cannabis NB also saw its profits drop from \$4.9 million to \$4.7 million.

I believe that New Brunswick taxpayers, the ultimate board of directors, will have a few questions. Sales are up but profits are down. What is causing this? This is the first quarter under the control of the Holt government. What has changed? We know there is American liquor sitting in a warehouse somewhere, gathering dust. Will the minister provide a dollar figure for how much money taxpayers have sitting in a warehouse? All we are seeking is a dollar figure. Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Randall (Fredericton North, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB; Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business; Minister responsible for NB Liquor and Cannabis NB, L): I really want to thank the member opposite for giving me the opportunity to answer the questions regarding the financials of ANBL and CNB. As I'm sure the House and the member opposite know from the budget process, the Galileo project, a transformative project to modernize ANBL, is under way. The previously budgeted expenses to implement the Galileo project are leading to the reduction in overall gross profit.

I will note that with the backdrop of wild changes in expectations around alcohol, including the news about tariffs and the move to remove U.S. alcohol from shelves, I am especially

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proud of the ANBL team for delivering sales growth. I am truly proud that we have been able to deliver with this tumultuous world around us. Thank you so much, Madam Speaker.

Ms. Bockus (Saint Croix, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I didn't hear an answer to my question. Can you provide a dollar figure for how much money taxpayers have tied up in American liquor sitting in a warehouse?

Hon. Mr. Randall (Fredericton North, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB; Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business; Minister responsible for NB Liquor and Cannabis NB, L): I really want to thank the member opposite for that question. Providing an exact number would be difficult. ANBL is not purchasing U.S. liquor at this time. We put a full stop to that. That was announced months ago. At this time, ANBL is working hard to ensure that the money that was sitting on the shelves is working through our channel partners so that we can be sure we fulfill our responsibility to New Brunswick taxpayers. We are responsible to the people of New Brunswick and the vendors that are bringing local products to New Brunswick. We want to create the space and the capital to better support local products on New Brunswick shelves. I thank the member opposite for the question.

Ms. Bockus (Saint Croix, PC): Madam Speaker, to the minister, you must know how much money you spent for that American liquor that was sitting on shelves. How much is there? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Randall (Fredericton North, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB; Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business; Minister responsible for NB Liquor and Cannabis NB, L): I want to thank the member opposite for the question. At this moment, inventory is fluctuating, as it does in any business. The number of sales that occurred yesterday may not be reflected today. What I can tell you is that when we first suggested that we would need to pull U.S. alcohol from the shelves and would stop purchasing from the United States, we started at \$14 million, give or take. Over the period of a month, that number was reduced to just over \$4 million. We look forward to being able to distribute that remaining inventory through our channel partners. We want to respect New Brunswickers and respect their investment and trust in this government. Thank you, member opposite, for the question.

[Translation]

Madam Speaker (Hon. Ms. Landry): Question period is now over.