

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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[Translation]

PROPERTY TAX

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

[Original]

Madam Speaker, this government promised an overhaul of the property assessment system for the 2025 tax year and of the whole system by 2026. This was evidenced by an interview the Premier did with the CBC on September 27, 2024. From the Minister of Local Government, we hear that this is now being pushed back—wait for it—by a year. This is from an October 22, 2025, CBC article. It's another broken promise.

The Minister of Local Government is trying to skate, saying: Well, we have to slow down and get it right. So, to the Minister of Local Government, be radically transparent and explain to municipalities why this is being delayed. You haven't explained it yet. Today is a good time to start. What is the precise reason that this is being delayed by a year? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Kennedy (Quispamsis, Minister of Local Government; Minister responsible for Service New Brunswick, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you very much to the Leader of the Opposition for the question on local government issues. We haven't heard too many of those in the past year, so I appreciate this opportunity.

Certainly, we have been quite open and transparent, as the member opposite has suggested we should be, throughout this process. We brought fiscal reform forward in the spring session of the House. We have been talking about property assessments and the property tax review, two very in-depth files that require a certain amount of study and collaboration with our municipal partners and with New Brunswickers. We have engaged people with a survey that received a huge number of responses. Over 7 500 people responded to that survey.

We're listening to New Brunswickers. We're talking to New Brunswickers, which is something that the former government didn't do very well. So, Madam Speaker, we are continuing to work on these files, and we look forward to coming forward with a robust change, a transformative change, to property taxes and property assessments in New Brunswick.

[Translation]

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

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[Original]

You know, it's not even cold enough to skate yet, but he's got his skates on this early in the day. This is a former Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) for the town of Quispamsis. He should have known how long it would take to do a reform of the property assessment system. So, I'd like to ask the minister this: Was he involved in the making of this promise in the Liberal platform? Was he consulted at all? Did he tell the now-Premier that this could be done in the time frame that they originally committed to, or was he not part of it at all? This is another chance for the minister to be radically transparent. Let's see what kind of answer we get. Hopefully, it's better than the last one. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Kennedy (Quispamsis, Minister of Local Government; Minister responsible for Service New Brunswick, L): Well, it's really important, Madam Speaker, that we are willing to talk and collaborate with New Brunswickers and talk and collaborate with our municipal partners. That's what we've been doing, and that's what we will continue to do.

Certainly, from the feedback that we've received from a public survey, there is an extreme amount of interest and excitement over the fact that this government is doing something, unlike the previous government that punted fiscal reform down the road. It couldn't deliver on that, so it was this government and this Premier that came together to ensure that municipalities receive the fiscal reform they require and that they get it in time for the 2026 budget year.

We are working on the property tax and property assessment review, and we are going to come forward with a dramatic change to the way New Brunswickers are taxed. It's important. One of the things that we heard when we were going door-to-door last year was that property assessments are way too high in the province. They skyrocketed for four years, and the members opposite sat around, looked at the sky, and did absolutely nothing about it, Madam Speaker, but we will.

M. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The greatest lies that we tell are the lies we tell ourselves. I think the minister needs to look in the mirror.

On May 6—

(Interjections.)

M. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): I accused nobody of anything, Madam Speaker. It's an old saying.

On May 6, the Finance Minister introduced the change to freeze property assessments for the next year, further damaging municipalities that need the revenues, and—listen to this, minister—he changed it with no consultation with the municipalities, despite what the

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government members promised to do. So, who is right here and who is wrong? It's a promise broken once again.

The executive director of the Union of the Municipalities of New Brunswick (UMNB)—a stakeholder, just so you know—called this government out for blindsiding municipalities. Now, the Minister of Local Government has pushed back the date for reform of assessments for another year. When, precisely, did the Minister of Local Government know that he was going to further harm municipalities by kicking the reform ball further down the road? He should know that they have to get their budgets in by mid-October. He knew they had to have a plan. Why did he not give them more notice than the first week of October?

Hon. Mr. Kennedy (Quispamsis, Minister of Local Government; Minister responsible for Service New Brunswick, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I suggest that it will probably be dealt with after question period. I certainly don't appreciate the suggestion from the Leader of the Opposition that I am lying to this House. That is certainly unacceptable and inappropriate.

Madam Speaker, it is very clear that we have been partnering with our municipal partners throughout this entire process. There is an assessment freeze in place on the value for taxation. It is temporary. It is a one-year freeze. But we have to take into consideration that municipalities are receiving \$63 million more in financing from the provincial government in 2026. Because new construction and sales are exempt from the freeze, there is a 2.7% growth in the assessment base for the province. There are only 4 out of 77 municipalities that are seeing negative growth this year, so 73 out of 77 municipalities are seeing growth in their tax base in 2026. That's good news, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, I'm glad he brought that up, Madam Speaker. The freeze that the government put in place has created a \$200-million gap, which dovetails nicely into my next question. Can the minister explain exactly where the supposed \$63 million under the new fiscal funding model is coming from? Is it from General Revenue? He has never explained that, Madam Speaker. Now that the assessments are frozen, it is creating a gap of over \$200 million. How is this money supposed to help? There's a gap of over \$140 million. How are municipalities supposed to cover that gap created by your mismanagement?

Hon. Mr. Kennedy (Quispamsis, Minister of Local Government; Minister responsible for Service New Brunswick, L): Well, thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It's going to be interesting over the next few weeks as municipalities come forward with their local budgets, because they're probably going to see that, because of this huge influx of money they're receiving from the provincial government, \$63 million in additional funding in 2026, and because there is 2.7% growth throughout the entire province... That is similar to the growth rate before the members of the previous government stood around and watched property assessments soar, causing New Brunswickers to pay way more than their fair share of municipal property taxes, but the previous government decided to do

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nothing about that. We are very excited to see these local governments come forward with their budgets, because there will probably be many that will be able to accept the money they're receiving through fiscal reform and keep their property tax rate the same or very close to the same. That will show that municipalities are partnering with us and are giving New Brunswickers the affordability measures they want. That government wanted New Brunswickers to pay more in property tax. This government wants them to pay less.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, Madam Speaker, I think the Minister of Local Government has the same problem as the Premier. On Amazon, you can buy rear-view mirror extenders so that you can see even more behind you. This guy likes to look behind rather than forward, which is what he's supposed to be doing, and his mismanagement is causing major headaches. There has been zero consultation, Madam Speaker—zero—on anything to do with the property tax freeze or anything else that this government is doing. They're not consulting. The municipality association is upset. Municipalities are saying that they're going to be losing money, not getting more. I asked very clearly: How are they going to cover the gap? Where did the money come from? He still won't say where this is coming from. It's coming from taxpayers, Madam Speaker. It's coming from our pockets so that these guys can try to make it look as though they're actually doing something. There is a massive gap in funding. What is the government doing to cover that shortfall for municipalities?

Hon. Mr. Kennedy (Quispamsis, Minister of Local Government; Minister responsible for Service New Brunswick, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm not sure whether the Leader of the Official Opposition is arithmetically challenged, but municipalities are getting more in 2026, not less. It is quite simple. They're getting \$63 million more in fiscal reform, and 73 out of the 77 municipalities in New Brunswick are getting more despite the assessment freeze because the tax base growth is 2.7% across the province in 2026. So, there is more. There is more money as a result of fiscal reform. There's more money as a result of the natural growth in the assessment base through construction and sales. That's good news for municipalities.

Again, when the member of the former government, the current Leader of the Official Opposition, says that he wants New Brunswickers to pay more for property tax, we don't agree. We think that New Brunswickers were paying way too much over the past four years, and those members stood around, staring at the sky, doing absolutely nothing about it. We are doing something about it, Madam Speaker. We're making it better for New Brunswickers.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. You know, I hope officials in municipalities are listening, and I hope they write to this minister. All the municipalities are saying: You have frozen our revenues. We don't have the ability to cover our expenses because you froze our revenues. He can talk about growth, and there is some amount that will increase in that, but it's not going to cover the shortfall that has been created by them.

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POLICE

Let's talk about revenues. This minister floated the idea of sharing revenues with municipalities from tickets generated in their municipalities. He said that cops weren't doing their jobs because they got none of the money. Does the minister really believe that the police are not doing their jobs because ticket money does not come their way? Before I forget, let's remind the minister that it was the Brian Gallant government that changed the way that the *Provincial Offences Procedures Act* (POPA) fines were issued so that all of the proceeds come to the province. We're in this mess because of the Liberals. What does he have to say about police not doing their jobs?

Hon. Mr. Kennedy (Quispamsis, Minister of Local Government; Minister responsible for Service New Brunswick, L): Madam Speaker, it is comical to hear the Leader of the Opposition talk about doing nothing. For six years, municipalities were asking him... He was the Minister of Local Government for a while. They were asking to get fine revenue sharing back.

This is not an issue of police not doing their jobs. Police have a lot of things to do on the streets. The other day, we floated an idea that the previous government members heard from municipalities. As with anything else that was brought their way, they didn't act on it.

The question is this: Should we share fines with municipalities, which would allow them to invest more in local policing? As the former CAO of a municipality, I know that is the issue that municipal politicians hear about more than anything—distracted driving, people running stop signs, people running red lights. It's rampant in New Brunswick. There are social media websites dedicated to Fredericton's worst driver, Moncton's worst driver, and Saint John's worst driver, so we think that, by collaborating with municipalities, we can make our streets safer for all New Brunswickers, Madam Speaker.

EDUCATION

Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I asked several questions last week to the Minister of Education about the current professional development (PD) pilot project, and they were not answered, so I will ask again. With respect to the current PD pilot project that is now functioning within 37 schools in the Anglophone sector and the fact that both the minister and the Premier have acknowledged that there is no data to support it and that more digging into the numbers is needed, I have pragmatic questions: How will the government department ensure that students in pilot schools are not disadvantaged by reduced instructional time? What supports are in place for students with special needs and those who rely on school for stability and routine? How will the pilot project affect rural or low-income families who may not have access to childcare on Fridays? Will the province subsidize or coordinate that care?

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Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the multiple questions. With the PD pilot, we are looking at the retention of teachers because that is a top priority for our government. We're also looking at how we can best support students in literacy and numeracy and how we can encourage students to learn beyond the classrooms. These are all challenges that have been brought to us, and they didn't appear overnight. We're looking to do things differently, and this pilot is a specific example of that type of innovation. We're going to monitor it and make sure that we take the right steps moving forward. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Again, I didn't hear any answers about stability and routine for kids and special needs kids or about parents having access to childcare on Fridays, but I'll move on.

There is little data to suggest that there is a correlation between more PD days and better student testing. The majority of the research points to professional learning communities (PLCs) as the most beneficial and to the need to add 50 minutes to the school day of a four-day school week as a result of adding PD days. My question to the Minister of Education is this: Instead of reducing school weeks by two Fridays per month in order to add two PD days, why aren't you a proponent and an advocate of asking your districts to help schools establish functional, ongoing PLCs within the framework of a school week?

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Professional learning communities, professional learning... All of those different types of opportunities for professional learning are going to happen within this pilot. We are letting schools discover how they want to collaborate and how they want to contribute to their own training...

It's a thing of beauty, and I know this because I visited schools on these Fridays to watch teachers collaborate and do their training. On that front, a teacher from Moncton said: The extra professional learning days have given us the opportunity to engage in meaningful, grade-level-specific training. This has made our math instruction more relevant and directly applicable to the needs of our Grade 5 learners.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I've heard the same testimonial read three times. I'm going to move on.

No data has been acquired from the Francophone pilot project to warrant a similar pilot being introduced in the Anglophone sector. I am aware of several educators in the government caucus, and one member in particular was a former NBTA president. His time as president coincided with the Gallant government's attempt at addressing education in New Brunswick, which was a debacle. At that time, and in that role, the member for

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Restigouche East criticized the government's handling of the education file and warned teachers of the outcome. I know because I was one.

This government's handling of the education file is of similar concern. My question to the Minister of Education is this: Are you talking to and discussing your plans with the individuals in your caucus who have decades of accumulated classroom and education experience? Do they agree with and support this move?

[Translation]

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Yes, absolutely. The project was created in collaboration with the districts and the associations representing New Brunswick teachers. This is a collaborative project. They asked us for this project, and we listened to them. We have collaborated with them. We are working with them on designing the project. We absolutely are listening to them, and we are taking action. Thank you.

[Original]

FOREST INDUSTRY

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The forest industry of New Brunswick contributes significantly to the overall economy of our province. With over 20 000 jobs tied directly and indirectly to the sector, any loss of market and sales can have a profound impact on our GDP, on employment, and on tax revenue. The list goes on.

It's clear that wood mills in this province have struggled under rising electricity rates, and now, with the tariffs imposed by the U.S., we are extremely vulnerable. A recent CIBC report ranks New Brunswick as one of the most tariff-exposed provinces in Canada. With rising electricity rates, double-digit tariffs, unpredictable markets, and an anxious workforce, what has the Minister of Natural Resources done to ensure our forestry sector stays intact?

Hon. Mr. Herron (Hampton-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Natural Resources, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I share the concern expressed by the member opposite. Clearly, the forestry sector is the economic engine of this province. Well over \$600 million in tax revenues come from the forestry value chain. We need to keep all those machines turning, whether they be sawmills, chip mills, pulp mills, paper mills, or the like.

The honourable member is absolutely accurate that we are, perhaps, the most forest-dependent province in the nation. That's why I'm very proud that this Premier and Premier Smith have leaned in with the federal government to ensure that the forestry sector, the softwood lumber sector, is at the very top of the trade docket. We need to make sure that we keep all those machines spinning. It is absolutely vital to those 28 000 New Brunswickers who earn their living from the forest.

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Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. So, to conclude that, nothing.

ECONOMY

We are already seeing businesses pulling back from investment and freezing hiring and expansion due to all the uncertainty. It shows, as we are currently tied for the worst unemployment rate in the country, at 8.1%.

Madam Speaker, when U.S. tariffs first hit New Brunswick several months ago, this government's great plan was to remove the alcohol from U.S.-based factories, which we had already paid for through NB Liquor, hide it away in a warehouse, and then resell it at a discount so we can take a loss. Great plan. We sure showed those Americans.

Does the minister of ONB have any other well-thought-out plans on how to save jobs here in New Brunswick? Maybe we should hand out some more tax dollars to another U.S.-based consulting firm so that we can fork out more of our money and see no results.

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, Minister responsible for the *Regulatory Accountability and Reporting Act*, L): Madam Speaker, we are hearing about the pain New Brunswickers are feeling about affordability. We're hearing about the pain they feel about the job market.

I would like to point out that overall year-over-year employment did, in fact, grow by over 5 000 people. Since we've been in office, this government has invested in the economy by almost double the amount the previous government did over the same period . We removed the restrictions it placed on Opportunities New Brunswick that prevented the department from being able to invest in the right places at the right time.

We do not believe in one-size-fits-all solutions, which is why, since we've been in office, ONB has signed deals that have added over \$100 million to the province's economy. We are hearing New Brunswickers. We're hearing their pain, and we are acting.

NATURAL GAS

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. With no real plan to save jobs here in New Brunswick, maybe this government can turn its attention to national projects that can boost our economy.

The Premier talked a really good game with all of her trips to Ottawa, but what did we get in return? Did we get a pipeline? Nope. Maybe we got some investment in energy and small modular reactors (SMRs)? That would be a hard no again. The federal government

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investment went to Ontario. This government can't even get a sidewalk for the Miramichi bridge from the feds.

Now we have no plans for job loss due to tariffs and no plan for the rising electricity rates that are impacting residents and industry. You'd think we could help ourselves rather than worrying about the federal government. If this government cannot get any help anywhere outside New Brunswick, then maybe we could start helping ourselves. Will this government lift the moratorium on natural gas development and bring New Brunswick into an era of prosperity?

Hon. Mr. Herron (Hampton-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Natural Resources, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Just to touch upon a couple of the sectors that the member opposite brought forward, the Department of Natural Resources in New Brunswick has worked collaboratively with the department of natural resources in British Columbia. With respect to softwood lumber, traditionally, Canada has had about 30% of the market share of the softwood lumber sector in the U.S. Right now, we have 24% or 25% of that market share under tariffs. We now have a national perspective—something that we have never had with softwood lumber over the last four decades that it has been an issue.

This department, working with our counterparts in other provinces, has found a common perspective: we might need a tariff-free hard quota. This is a national perspective. I am very proud of the team we have at DNR who actually brought this forward.

With respect to other projects of national importance, wait for assisted mine development. Thank you.

EDUCATION

Mr. Coon (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Since I was first elected 11 years ago, I've been so perplexed by the fact that we have graduating students who can't read well. We continue to have real problems with literacy in our schools. That was until I recently learned that teachers are not permitted to carry out universal screening assessments in kindergarten, Grade 1, or Grade 2 to identify students with potential reading problems so that they can intervene. Instead, the department requires teachers to use the early grade literacy assessment tool, which fails to achieve this.

Universal screening is now mandatory for kindergarten, Grade 1, and Grade 2 students in Ontario, and universal screening for French immersion students is used throughout Manitoba. We will not solve the literacy problem until teachers are permitted to screen all students to identify those at risk and then intervene effectively. Why will the Minister of Education not permit teachers in our province to implement universal screening to identify their students who are at risk for reading problems beginning in kindergarten?

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you for the opportunity, once again, to talk about

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how our government is prioritizing literacy and how we are moving forward with our plans for education. There are multiple ways that literacy can be evaluated at the classroom level. A lot of those are done in New Brunswick, and that's great.

We are also investing to surround students with specific resources to increase their capacity to read and write. Part of that is academic support teachers. We're very excited about providing that extra support directly to students from academic support teachers.

Now, on the question about universal screening, that is something we're considering and looking into. I'll be happy to update the House when we have more information on that important subject. Thank you.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Clearly, Madam Speaker, the minister's department continues to fail our students. Universal screening is the key to ensuring that every student graduates with the ability to read well. In the absence of screening, this goal will just never be achieved. You know, it took a complaint to the Ontario Human Rights Commission to bring about mandatory universal screening in kindergarten, Grade 1, and Grade 2 in that province to ensure that they identify students there with potential reading problems and children who need extra support. Madam Speaker, it's working.

Without universal screening in New Brunswick, we are going to continue to graduate young people who have difficulty reading. We're failing them. Why won't the minister institute mandatory universal screening now in kindergarten, Grade 1, and Grade 2 to identify kids at risk to enable early intervention by their teachers rather than waiting until later when it's too late to support those students in their learning journey, Madam Speaker? Thank you.

[Translation]

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. We are putting many resources into literacy here in New Brunswick, and we are delighted to see some improvements in tests and provincial evaluations.

In the Anglophone sector, we have seen an improvement in literacy in Grades 4 and 6, and we have seen stability in the Francophone sector, which is good news because we have at least stopped the decline that was seen in previous years.

There are multiple ways to evaluate literacy in the classroom, and I recognize that universal screening could be one of them. With regard to doing that, we will look at and consider it, but, in the meantime, we will continue to give direct literacy support to students. Thank you.

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[Original]

GOVERNMENT FUNDING

Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Three Rivers, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I had a few questions on this, but I'll cut to the chase in case I run out of time.

Blueberry producers have reached out to this government pleading for help for this sector, which lost about 60% of its blueberries to the worst drought we've seen in decades and to field closures because of wildfires. When the potato industry was in trouble a couple of years ago, our government stood up. We believe in the critical importance of agriculture. Now, we have a government that, out of the gate, said that agriculture was going to be supported like never before, yet on this request for financial help, it has been crickets. Is this government going to put its money where its mouth is and help these blueberry farmers? Will the minister put an AgriRecovery program in place to help blueberry farmers like we did when our potato farmers so desperately needed it a couple of years ago?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Our blueberry producers and farmers are still facing very tough conditions, whether they are linked to markets, frosts, or insects. This summer, Madam Speaker, producers experienced the kind of drought we have never seen before. I've never seen anything like it in my life.

I made phone calls, I met with producers, and I was in constant communication with them and my colleague, the Minister of Natural Resources, when forests were closed and there was no longer any access. We are collecting information. However, there are programs. AgriStability and AgriInsurance are already in place to help producers.

I can promise you that we are still having discussions, analyzing data, and helping our producers by providing them with the support they need to get through this tough time. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Three Rivers, PC): You know, Madam Speaker, our farmers do not feel supported. They have faced unprecedented drought, and they have faced hardships due to the closure of their fields, especially blueberry producers, during prime harvest time, without any consultation. The Agriculture Minister has not even sat with these blueberry farmers to have a conversation about this. Our blueberry producers are being ignored when they are in crisis. The Agricultural Alliance says that drought conditions will result in a 75% to 80% loss of crops across all sectors, while poor grazing conditions have significantly increased the need for feed for our livestock producers.

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One producer said he would pay between \$60 000 to \$80 000 more for feed this year, and more farmers are talking about getting out of the business altogether. Yes, there is AgriInsurance. Yes, there is AgriStability. However, farmers say those programs are not cutting it. How is the minister going to help these farmers? Will he sit down and listen to what they have to—

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Madam Speaker, this year, or more specifically since February 2025, I have travelled 32 000 km by car. I was travelling around the province to meet with people from all over to discuss agriculture, aquaculture, or fisheries. I didn't stop. I was on the ground. I got my boots dirty, Madam Speaker. I have soil and mud on my boots. I am still communicating with people. We are prepared to help them, as needed, through existing programs. We will establish others when the need arises.

However, Madam Speaker, I can promise you that I am in constant communication with producers. That is what my department will do. I sincerely thank the Department of Natural Resources for its cooperation in dealing with one of the worst wildfires the province has experienced. We are taking action to help people. Thank you, Madam Speaker.