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[*Translation*]

AGRICULTURE

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

[*Original*]

The Holt government, in announcing the elimination of the provincial veterinary services and the provincial veterinary lab, all over the cost of a rounding error in the government's overall budget, has created chaos for farmers, who are the lifeblood of our food production in this province—all for a \$4-million shortfall in a vital program that upholds our food security in this province.

This government has given \$2.4 million to Agropur to cut 60 jobs in Sussex and \$1.6 million to Tourism for a jersey partnership with the Toronto Blue Jays. That alone equals \$4 million. That's not to mention the \$15 million in strategic infrastructure line items in RDC, PETL, and General Government. All told, that equals \$19 million, which could fund this program for the next five years. Farmers have even committed to making this a cost-recovery program, where there would be no more deficit. Why is this Premier continuing her attack on rural New Brunswick and our farmers?

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Our government recognizes, as some of the members opposite have said today, that we have a challenge that needs to be fixed in terms of our veterinary services. We are not alone. Every province across this country has been experiencing challenges with staffing veterinary services and ensuring that care is available.

We have incredible vets in this province, in the public system and in the private system. They want to make sure that animals in this province are well cared for, that labs and systems are available to diagnose animal diseases, and that we have a safe food supply for New Brunswickers. Our government sees the problems in the unsustainable services that we have—it is not only that they don't pay for themselves but also that we can't even take on a new client. It's been more than two years since the system has. We are committed to changing so that we have a sustainable system with a sustainable staffing model in place that allows our animals to have the best care possible.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): As a little memo, Madam Speaker, labs and systems are available. The Holt government has said that it wants to privatize provincial veterinary lab services, yet it has engaged the Research and Productivity Council (RPC), which is a Crown corporation, to launch a feasibility study on the possibility of moving the services over. Over to where, you ask? Potentially to RPC. So

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this government wants to move a service, which is under a provincial department, to a provincial Crown corporation. Can the Premier explain to the people of this province, the farmers of our province, and the farmers here in the Chamber today whether she thinks this is privatization? Can the Premier also tell us the cost of this feasibility study? Was there already a signed contract with RPC? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Hon. M. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[*Original*]

Madam Speaker, I want to start by acknowledging the group in the gallery, all the farmers and other stakeholders. Former Premier Alward visited my farm some time ago when he was Premier, and we've had a lot of collaboration since.

Madam Speaker, to be clear, the lab is not closing. Any changes to the delivery of laboratory services will be determined upon the completion of the study. There is no predetermined outcome. The feasibility study is meant to assess the capabilities and opportunities for the Research and Productivity Council to deliver laboratory services. RPC is already currently providing services for water, aquaculture, and fluid milk.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[*Original*]

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, I'll let that speak for itself. The cost of this feasibility study is important, Madam Speaker. In RPC's 2024-25 annual report, we see that it ran a shortfall of \$1.65 million. This feasibility study, for whatever amount the Holt government is paying, improves the bottom line of RPC. Remember, the underlying issue is that the veterinary lab services cost too much—according to this government—and ran a shortfall. So what this Premier is trying to do is take a program that is running a shortfall and give it to another provincial entity that is also running a shortfall. Can the Premier please share with everyone here today that this is indeed the case?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The feasibility study on the laboratory is being conducted by the department and is drawing on the expertise provided by key staff members involved in

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daily operations, including the Chief Veterinary Officer of New Brunswick. To be clear, Madam Speaker, I stress that the laboratory will not be closing.

Any change to laboratory service delivery will be based on the study results. There is no predetermined conclusion, Madam Speaker. The goal of the feasibility study is to assess the capacity of the New Brunswick Research and Productivity Council and determine whether the council can provide laboratory services. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): There clearly wasn't an answer regarding the cost of the study, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

In New Brunswick, we have a provincial veterinary lab service that is run by professionals who are highly qualified, highly educated, and highly trained in their specific field of study. Yet our Premier, in an April 30 interview, said: "We're not experts at running labs and so we think we can get better service." Once again, this Premier is uninformed and unaware. This provincial lab has been there for over 80 years, Madam Speaker, and the people who work in it are professionals. Is this Premier truly insulting the level of expertise of people who work in a lab environment that she knows nothing about? Did she even consult farmers on what their experience has been with receiving the services provided by these highly trained lab individuals? History tells us no. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Translation]

Hon. M. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

Madam Speaker, the laboratory feasibility study is being led by departments with expertise provided by key staff who have been there for years and who are involved in the day-to-day operations, including our Chief Veterinary Officer. Again, to be clear, Madam Speaker, the lab is not closing. Any changes to the delivery of the laboratory services will be determined upon completion of the study. There is no predetermined outcome. The feasibility study is meant to assess the capability of and opportunities for the Research and Productivity Council to deliver laboratory services, as it is presently doing for water, for aquaculture, and for fluid milk. The laboratory feasibility study is being led by our department with its expertise, and we're confident that it will lead it through. However, there is no predetermined outcome, Madam Speaker.

[Translation]

Thank you.

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[Original]

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, I can tell you, Madam Speaker, that if this government continues down this road, there will be a predetermined outcome, and that will be that we will lose food security and safety in our province. Our provincial lab is run by experts regardless of what the Premier says. We have four licenced medical technologists and two veterinary pathologists. They are nationally sought after. If we lose them, we will not get them back. They are exceedingly rare. From whom, exactly, does the Premier think she can get better service if not from these people? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): No matter what changes are made to service delivery, the certification will remain the same.

The feasibility study is designed to assess the capacity of the New Brunswick Research and Productivity Council and to determine whether the council can provide laboratory services. There are already subject matter experts on the council who are providing water quality services. Everyone is already used to sending water samples to the RPC, Madam Speaker. The same goes for aquaculture and fluid milk in the agricultural sector, Madam Speaker.

So, the feasibility study on the laboratory is being led by the department and is drawing on the expertise provided by key staff members involved in daily operations, including our Chief Veterinary Officer, Madam Speaker. Thank you.

[Original]

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Let me explain this to the Premier and her minister, Madam Speaker. RPC is an analytical lab, while the provincial vet lab is a diagnostic lab. The two are not even close to the same thing. Diagnostic lab work goes deeper than analysis. New Brunswick's veterinary laboratory staff includes four medical laboratory technologists and two veterinary pathologists uniquely qualified for the work they do, and every other province in this country would take them on in a heartbeat. Pathologic tissue is not a soil sample, and these highly trained technologists are needed to predict epidemiology and provide recommendations on managing spread and managing disease. Does the Premier still think these services can simply be transferred to an RPC laboratory or private provider? Oh, by the way, since the Premier's unaware, the accreditations are held by DAAF and recognized by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA), so they are not transferable. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Translation]

Hon. M. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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[Original]

Again, Madam Speaker, we are not predetermining. The study will determine whether we can transfer all the certifications. CFIA has a role to play and so does our Chief Veterinary Officer, who will remain in place to make sure that diseases are recognized and treated accordingly. To be clear, the lab is not closing. Any changes to the delivery of laboratory service will be determined only upon completion of the study. We cannot predetermine what will be there, but we will make sure that we look at every angle to make sure that we continue the service seamlessly. There is no predetermined outcome, Madam Speaker. It's meant to assess the capability of and opportunities for the Research and Productivity Council to deliver laboratory services.

[Translation]

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. As usual with the Holt government, it has followed the leap-before-you-look strategy. In an effort to look like they are good fiscal managers, the government members have been penny-wise and pound foolish. Losing the laboratory and not having a replacement would make New Brunswick the only province in the country without a veterinary laboratory. A provincial veterinarian said the following in an interview:

"The certification we have does not immediately transfer to another entity," he said. "So they would have to go through the application process and the testing and all that all over again."

The article continues by stating:

he's not sure if the Canadian Food Inspection Agency "would entertain" a new application until the province's laboratory closes, which would leave a gap in services for the province.

In the same article, a long-time provincial vet is quoted, saying:

"three years is nothing. These accreditations can take longer and there's no guarantee you get them"

The Premier has guaranteed no gaps in service. Considering what was just said, does the Premier still stand by her assessment?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. There are different models across the country, including in universities. There isn't just one model. That's why the feasibility study of the laboratory is

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being conducted by the department and expertise is being provided by key staff members involved in daily operations, including our Chief Veterinary Officer, who must ensure continuity and certification. That's the goal of the feasibility study, Madam Speaker.

We can also assess the capacity of the New Brunswick Research and Productivity Council and determine whether it can provide laboratory services, as it already does for water, aquaculture, and fluid milk, Madam Speaker.

I want to clarify again that the laboratory will not be closing. Any change to laboratory service delivery will be determined based on the study results. There is no predetermined conclusion, Madam Speaker. Thank you.

[Original]

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Disease management is a major function of the provincial vet lab service. Veterinarians who take samples from animals and send them to the provincial lab can quickly identify the illness or pathogen affecting these animals and effectively suppress it, saving the health of the animals and of every animal they come into contact with.

Two weeks ago, there was an article published that mentioned a rabies case in St. Stephen. We all know how transmittable rabies can be and not only among animals. It can cross over to humans and is fatal if not caught quickly.

Considering what we know from the previous question, which is that there will be a gap in services if the Holt government is not stopped, can the Premier explain the contingency plan if a disease outbreak hits livestock herds and there's no publicly accessible lab to diagnose it quickly because of the gap that this government has caused? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Translation]

Hon. M. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

Thank you, Madam Speaker. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) will remain. The Chief Veterinary Officer will remain. It is their responsibility to make sure that diseases like rabies are tracked and dealt with. Every veterinarian, whether private or public, has a responsibility to report every transmissible disease. This will continue.

To be clear: The lab is not closing. The lab is not closing. Any changes to the delivery of laboratory services will be determined upon completion of the study. We cannot predetermine its outcome, Madam Speaker. It is also meant to assess the capabilities and

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opportunities for the Research and Productivity Council to deliver those laboratory services. RPC currently provides services for water, aquaculture, and milk, so it is no stranger to this work because it already does this kind of work. It will continue, Madam Speaker.

[*Translation*]

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

[*Original*]

I would like to ask the Premier: What does Public Health think of this? Was it consulted on this decision? Was its data considered in your evidence-based decision-making process? One of the functions of Public Health is communicable disease control, which means monitoring and managing outbreaks of infectious diseases to protect public health. Zoonotic illnesses are diseases that can be transmitted from animals to humans and are caused by various pathogens, including bacteria, viruses, parasites, and fungi. These illnesses represent a significant public health concern, as approximately 61% of emerging human diseases are zoonotic. Is the Premier aware of the potential impact that zoonotic illnesses could have on the public health system? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Again, Madam Speaker, the role of the CFIA is still the same, and it won't change. The role of the provincial Chief Veterinary Officer will remain the same. That person will be there to ensure that any transmissible disease is reported.

All veterinarians, whether they work in the private or public sector, have to report any presumptive case of a transmissible disease. That won't change, Madam Speaker. It will continue.

So, with the expertise of the people we will retain and the feasibility study, we will determine whether services can be transferred seamlessly. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[*Original*]

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): I'm sorry, Madam Speaker. I must've missed something because that question was about Public Health.

The Premier has clearly lost her caucus on this issue. The Minister of Natural Resources has been quoted as stating:

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“This is a top line \$4-million savings on a \$1.4-billion deficit. It’s not very much and it’s going to create a lot of grief,”

The minister also said that there has been no definitive decision. That directly contradicts the minister of DAAF, who said this was a done deal.

The Premier says she bases all decisions on data and evidence-based decision-making. How is it that the Minister of Natural Resources has a different dataset and evidence-based assessment than the Premier and the minister of DAAF? Whose data and decision-making run the show in this government? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Translation]

Hon. M. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

Madam Speaker, we need to be clear. As Minister of Agriculture, I will say that the vet service will transition on March 31, 2027. The department remains committed to providing regular updates and will work with all industry stakeholders that come to the table. We understand that this change is difficult. However, we encourage ongoing productive dialogue to support a sustainable veterinary model for New Brunswick’s agriculture sector that is similar to those in the rest of Canada, perhaps with the exception of Newfoundland. This is not new, Madam Speaker. We are just moving to a more sustainable, better-adapted, and more agile model for our farmers and food producers.

[Translation]

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

SALMON

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

[Original]

Fundy salmon are severely endangered, which is a little bit like the way our province’s farmers must be feeling. The only thing that stands between oblivion and the Fundy salmon is a gene bank at the Mactaquac fish hatchery, which the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) intends to close. The only thing that stands between farmers and oblivion, Madam Speaker, is their government and the supports it provides.

Wolastoqi chiefs, such as Biliik Chief Justice Gruben, have been raising the alarm about the salmon. One of the purposes of the New Brunswick *Species at Risk Act* is to provide for the



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recovery of wildlife species that are endangered, and it charges the minister to adopt a recovery strategy. In this case, Fundy salmon face extinction if DFO closes the gene bank at Mactaquac. Will the Minister of Natural Resources do his legal duty and take over the Fundy salmon gene bank in Mactaquac to keep the Fundy salmon from disappearing from the face of the earth?

Hon. Mr. Herron (Hampton-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Natural Resources, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I thank the honourable member for his question. It is a concern for this government. My colleague, the Minister of Indigenous Affairs, and my colleagues at DNR have encouraged the federal government to re-engage with NB Power on this particular issue. We have encouraged DFO to have those appropriate conversations with respect to that hatchery.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Madam Speaker, when it comes to keeping Fundy salmon populations from being obliterated, the Department of Natural Resources has leaned on the federal government like a crutch for far too long. Yet, provincially, NB Power is the one that built the Mactaquac Dam with inadequate measures for fish passage, and it's the government of New Brunswick that has licenced the use of net pens in the Bay of Fundy to grow domesticated salmon, who share their parasites and diseases with the wild Fundy salmon that overwinter in the outer Bay of Fundy—something that DFO says puts them at risk. These are all things that the province has sanctioned. Bilijk Chief Gruben has said that DFO has given up on the Fundy salmon. Has the Minister of Natural Resources held talks with the federal ministers of DFO and Environment to save the Fundy salmon gene bank, or has he given up on them as well?

Hon. K. Chiasson (Tracadie, Minister of Indigenous Affairs, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, and thank you very much to the member opposite for the question. This is a big concern for the Wolastoqey Nation. I've had a chance to speak with WNNB, and, in fact, they are very concerned about the fact that the DFO is actually putting an end to the biodiversity program.

We've been very clear with WNNB that we are encouraging the federal government to come back to the table and have discussions with First Nations to try to find a solution and figure out what the best path forward is. I know DNR is following the file very closely.

Again, we lend our voice to First Nations, and we ask the federal government to come back and to continue discussions to find a path forward that is sustainable and agreeable to everyone. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

AGRICULTURE

Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Three Rivers, PC): Madam Speaker, today marks day 52 since this government announced it was gutting the provincial veterinary service, shaking our agricultural sector to the core. It has been emotional, it has been unfair, and it has been cruel. Yesterday the Agricultural Alliance said that it will not participate in the



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government's bogus monthly meetings until the government's rationale is clear and a plan has been presented.

Representatives from the Agricultural Alliance have expressed deep disappointment in how they were treated when they came to the table to find a solution. Farmers were not even given a courtesy conversation before the decision to cut essential vet services was made. Now, farmers will not waste time pitching solutions to a government that refuses to listen, learn, or reconsider.

Government is in over its head with no plan for this foolish idea. My question is for the Minister of Agriculture. Now that you have completely lost the farmers' trust, driven them away, and no longer have their expertise at your disposal, to whom will you turn to fix the mess you created?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

We understand that this change is difficult. However, we continue to encourage ongoing productive dialogue to support a sustainable veterinary model for New Brunswick's agricultural sector. We have had at least two meetings now with a scheduled timeline to meet with stakeholders as we transition to this more sustainable model.

The department remains committed to providing regular updates and will continue to work with all industry stakeholders who come to the table. We are also working with the impacted government employees and their unions. We are meeting with them as we go. We need to be clear that the service will transition on March 31, but we will make sure it is done in a way that is sustainable and will cover our animals and our farmers.

[Translation]

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Three Rivers, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. This minister needs to check his email because these folks are out. Time is of the essence here. We know this uncertainty has several of our large animal vets interviewing outside the province. We will lose vets. That's not fearmongering. That's reality.

Running a private business is not something experienced vets want to take on deep into their careers. If we lose these vets, new vets can't fill the void without mentorship. The

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minister already knows this because the vets have told him. The minister also wants vets to take time away from their round-the-clock work schedules to come to him one by one with their plans for an entirely new career path when they already had one.

Minister, whether the vets are privatized or not, who will provide service when you have driven away the experienced vets and made sure that no new graduates choose to participate in New Brunswick? Will the government consider helping to bridge older vets into retirement instead of firing them? Will the province attract new vets and new veterinary graduates when the older vets are gone?

[*Translation*]

Hon. M. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The issue regarding veterinarians nationally affects all areas in all provinces, especially outside centres. In large centres, such as Sussex, Moncton, Fredericton, and Saint John, there isn't normally a problem. The issue isn't about whether the system is provincial or public but is about where most farm animals are.

Madam Speaker, we're working directly with civil servants and their union. The department remains committed to providing regular updates and working with everyone in the sector who comes to the table to negotiate.

Our discussions will continue, Madam Speaker. Again, we know that change is difficult. However, we are continuing to promote ongoing and constructive dialogue with all stakeholders to support a sustainable veterinary model for the sector...

[*Original*]

Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Three Rivers, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. This minister might be talking to himself. This change could break rural New Brunswick. On March 17, this government devastated our billion-dollar agriculture sector and the thousands of people whose jobs it supports with a single bullet point in a press release. Since then, over 34 000 New Brunswickers have signed a petition opposing this decision. Some of them have made multiple trips to this Legislature. Their names are on that petition that has been tabled. They have been on the lawn. They have been in the gallery. They have struck committees to simply ask why.

Can you please finally provide a clear rationale for your decision and explain your plan? Give the AgAlliance a reason to meet with you. The clock is ticking while experienced vets consider leaving this province. How much more do they need to do to show you that losing this service is a real problem, that sick and injured animals could be forced to suffer without care, and that, by cutting the vets and lab, you are putting at risk animal health, human health, and the economic benefits of the livestock sector? Premier, what do these people—



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[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Veterinarians, whether they're employed by the province or the private sector, have the same responsibility. They have taken the same oath to protect animals and ensure that they are well cared for. So, they have the same responsibility. Our goal is to transition very carefully to ensure that veterinarians have jobs and can continue to support their clients and look after the animals in their care.

Madam Speaker, the department is still determined to continue providing updates. Our latest meetings with the groups took place on Friday. Madam Speaker, the stakeholders and I have found the consultations very productive.

[*Original*]

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Madam Speaker, as usual, we are not surprised by this government, but we are disappointed. This government has failed farmers in this province, without question. Farmers don't want any more meetings with this government because they know the government is not transparent. They have received no explanation. This government promised transparency. It promised consultation. It has done neither. This was a Cabinet decision based on trying to save money because it overspent. This is being done at the risk of our food security. This is not going to get better for this government. We told the government clearly that an analytical lab is not the same as a diagnostic lab and that accreditation is not transferable. This government needs to understand that these folks will not stop until this cut is reversed. The Premier has the opportunity. Will she cut this now?

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. We recognize that we do not have optimal veterinary services in our province for all our animals and all the businesses and farms that need them. We cannot meet the need with the model we have today, which is why our government is taking a careful approach to a slow and seamless transition. First, we're working with the people we need to work with. The first communications on this had to be with the veterinarians. We can't talk about their careers with anyone else. Next, we are working with the industry. We are in conversations constantly with the industry and will continue to have that dialogue as we move forward. Third, we have a lab that we value. We value the pathologists. We value the unique diagnostic services they provide and the unique certifications.

Our government will make sure that people, animals, health, and food are protected through the mechanisms we have with—

Madam Speaker (Hon. Ms. Landry): Question period has expired.

