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VETERINARY SERVICES

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): As always, good morning, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

Madam Speaker, farmers are not happy with the decisions of this government. This is the second time they have come to this Legislature to try to send a message that the decision to close and privatize provincial veterinary services is not the right way to go. They have met with the minister and have walked away from discussions because members of this government are just not listening. We are now seeing veterinarians, who do not have to work under uncertain conditions, begin the process of leaving. One has already announced it, and a handful of them have one foot out the door with multiple job offers from outside the province.

This Premier talks a lot about trusted leadership and collaboration, but there has been none with farmers. With all the farmers on the front lawn protesting her decision, is she willing to recognize how wrong she is and reverse this decision? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Translation]

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

[Original]

I want to thank the farmers with their companion animals and the farm owners. I don't know whether there are any in the gallery. I met them outside this morning. I certainly understand their passion. As a farmer myself, I have no doubt that they are here because they strongly believe in making their voices heard. Certainly, on a nice day like today, they'd probably much rather be on their farms. I agree with that.

I also understand their concerns and their fears with regard to the accessibility of veterinary services for their animals. I also know that change is never easy. It is never one hundred percent predictable. However, I can tell you today that we will continue to have strong veterinary services in New Brunswick. No, the lab is not closed, and the feasibility study is presently being conducted and will lead us to identify whether there is a better path.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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

[*Original*]

The morale of provincial vets and those working in the lab is at an all-time low. These people work side by side with farmers and know the risk to our food security and to animal welfare. They have been loyal and dedicated to the people they serve, despite the challenges they face daily. Despite this, this government wants to cancel this service for the sake of \$4 million, which the Minister of Natural Resources described as a rounding error. The word on the street is that the people who work in the system, including those at the lab, know that the transition cannot be done and that it is a waste of money. The official opposition has tried to get straight answers from this Premier, but she never gives them. Will the Premier give a radically transparent, open, and honest answer about the full cost of the feasibility study? What is the dollar amount? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[*Translation*]

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

[*Original*]

Madam Speaker, for the last two and a half months of the 12-month transition period, we have been busy meeting with the farmers' associations. We have met with the Agricultural Alliance, and we are meeting with it again next week. We have met with the National Farmers Union. We have had one-on-one meetings with dairy, equine, cattle production, egg, and pork organizations. We have met with them. We continue to have those conversations, but, more importantly, we continue to meet with our provincial veterinarians to make sure that they get the right information. I can say today that we're continuing this transition process. I'm very encouraged and confident that we are building a sustainable veterinary model for the province of New Brunswick.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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

[Original]

The government thinks it has the answers to all of this, but the people who are here to protest this decision know differently. The Holt government, in its arrogance and political calculations, feels it can get away with this because farmers represent only a small portion of the vote in this province. Whenever the Minister of Agriculture gets on his feet, his answers are only a few seconds long. He reads his prepared notes, and you can see that his heart is not in this. The Premier clearly does not care because this is all a political calculation for her. She doesn't care what this is doing to farmers. She doesn't care what this is doing to the provincial vets. She doesn't care what this is doing to workers in the lab, and she certainly does not care about food security and animal welfare. Will this Premier do right by farmers, by provincial vets, by lab employees, and by her own minister, who does not want to do this? Will she march out in front of the demonstrators, apologize for the pain she has caused, and back away from this attack on rural New Brunswick?

[Translation]

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

[Original]

We understand that change brings questions, and I remain dedicated to ensuring that we communicate with our provincial laboratory staff. I'd like to remind the member opposite that the information being used in the feasibility study has been developed in consultation with the staff, the Chief Veterinary Officer, and the laboratory manager. Those discussions are continuing, Madam Speaker. We are committed to ensuring that information is shared directly with the laboratory team as these discussions and meetings continue to take place throughout this process.

[Translation]

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Once again, Madam Speaker, the government is clearly not listening. Farmers are serious. They are not going away. Farmers have offered to pay more to keep this service. They have even met with the minister in an effort to find solutions. They've gone so far as to test the government's theory that the private sector can take this over. Farmers tried to get access to private care for fear of losing this service, given the needs they have in caring for their animals. What was the result? Private care providers were overwhelmed and inundated with calls and could not handle the volume.

What do you think farmers are trying to tell you with their presence here? Being here is a huge financial sacrifice. Look at them. Look at them out there. They're here because they have weighed the loss of vets and the lab against the money they will lose by being here today. They should be cutting silage and planting seed, but instead, they are here losing money to defend a service they know is essential. Premier, what do you have to say to these people who are losing income to defend themselves from your misguided decision?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. My team and I are maintaining a dialogue with departmental veterinarians. We will continue this dialogue throughout the transition to ensure that veterinarians are well informed and supported. Madam Speaker, a lot of information is circulating on social media, but we want to ensure that the real information is shared with them.

Madam Speaker, we are committed to ensuring that information is communicated directly to the team of veterinarians. Discussions and meetings will continue throughout this process. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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

[*Original*]

What is the minister's guarantee that this privatization will work? Will the Holt government guarantee that every single office will stay open? Will the Holt government give away millions of dollars in equipment? Will the Holt government lease, sell, or give the buildings to a potential proponent? Will the vet levels remain the same? Will no one be laid off? Will the lab continue to offer the same services? Will the pay remain the same for everyone, or will they be paid less? That's what's happening with the nurse practitioners for Foundever. We all know what will happen if the lab employees are paid less. They will leave because they are in huge demand, and our farmers and their animals will suffer.

The provincial vet service is not a business. It is an essential public service. The answer to all these questions is that none of this can be guaranteed. The provincial vet service and our provincial vets must remain. The only way those things will happen is if the Holt government reverses this decision. Premier, you have lost people's trust, but you can regain it by stopping this now. Will you listen to the people and reverse this decision now?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The department will work tirelessly to ensure a smooth

Oral Questions

transition for provincial staff members and the clients they serve. By prioritizing effective planning and ongoing commitment, we are laying a solid foundation for the next step. So, as the process continues, our commitment to providing quality services remains unchanged. We're certain a new model will enable veterinarians to better respond to the constantly evolving needs of the people we're helping and to do so without compromising on quality, Madam Speaker. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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

[Original]

Madam Speaker, the message from farmers is clear: Reverse the decision. Change it back. Say you were wrong. Farmers offered to pay more. The cost of this vet service is a rounding error for your government. This is not a business. It is an essential public service. There are people outside this Legislature who work every day to feed this province—everyone, including those kids in the gallery.

This is a very loud beginning, but it's only the start. Farmers will never go away. They will never give up. They will fight for this until you hear them. Farmers will never agree with this decision. They will always remember who put their farms and their animals at risk. Veterinary care is health care for animals. The official opposition stands with farmers. We stand with provincial veterinarians. We stand with our provincial vet lab service. It's time for the Holt government to show where it stands. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Translation]

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

[Original]

Madam Speaker, what I can say today is that we are continuing with the transition process. I am very encouraged and feel confident that we are building a sustainable model for veterinary service in New Brunswick—one that is agile, adaptable, and fair to our taxpayers; one that removes existing barriers for outside private veterinarians to come and establish themselves here in the province; and one that is in line with the rest of the country, with the exception of Newfoundland and Labrador.

I thank everyone, especially the farmers, for being here today. I had great conversations with them this morning. We are continuing the process. We will meet with the Agricultural Alliance next week to make sure everything is in line with the transition. I'm very confident we will come up with a very sustainable model.

[Translation]

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Three Rivers, PC): Madam Speaker, I'm starting to feel like a broken record. Here we are, on Day 79, surrounded outside the people's House by the hard-working farmers of our province, who are asking this government to show some mercy for their animals and their farming traditions, some of which are generations old. Farmers have obtained over 70 000 petition signatures. They have made three visits to this Legislature, have attended meeting after meeting, have written letter after letter, have built and fed social media, and have gained national support. My goodness, Premier, have you listened to the people out there today? This government has created a mess. Some 69% of New Brunswickers say that protecting vet services is their priority right now. They know that if farmers give up, sell their land, sell their animals, and lock up their barns, we all will be in trouble. Premier, you stepped outside. What did you hear our farming community say today? Did you hear them at all?

Hon. Mr. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Our department is focused on supporting the transition for both the provincial employees and the clients they serve. By prioritizing effective planning and ongoing engagement, we are building a strong foundation for the next phase. As we move forward, our commitment to quality and service delivery remains unchanged. We believe that a new model will enhance veterinarians' ability to meet the evolving needs of those we support without compromising quality.

[Translation]

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Three Rivers, PC): Madam Speaker, indeed, people can perceive things differently, but I can't imagine that what we are seeing today on the lawn of the Legislature can be up for interpretation. Our farm community knows best. They are right. You are wrong. They have not skipped a beat in their message since this government's budget came out on March 17. They know without a shadow of a doubt that these vet cuts and lab cuts will be disastrous. Our vets are being recruited by other provinces now, and the offers are appealing because vets are at least being offered certainty. When there's a shortage, doctors are recruited. Teachers are recruited. Yet this government is treating our animal doctors with total disrespect. Premier, why are our vets not worth this government fighting for them?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. As I just said, my team and I are maintaining a dialogue with departmental veterinarians. It will continue throughout this transition so that they are well informed. We have met with veterinarians. In addition, over the past few weeks, we have given them information sessions.

This process will continue until the transition is complete, Madam Speaker. We are committed to ensuring that information is communicated directly to veterinarians. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[*Original*]

Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Three Rivers, PC): Madam Speaker, why is this government so determined to shove down the throats of farmers something that they do not want, especially when the Department of Agriculture is supposed to represent them? Things are not adding up, and they haven't since the beginning of this mess.

The minister has said the department is working with private clinics to extend services to include large animals. If that's the case, why did a small animal vet reach out to me on Monday to say she met with staff from DAAF to discuss expanding services to large animals, only to be, in her words, blatantly dismissed? Behind closed doors, you didn't really want this vet expansion, despite the lip service we have heard here time and time again. I ask: Has this been a done deal since the beginning, and are you announcing a vet monopoly in this province? We know there's more to this story than meets the eye. Please, minister, tell us.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Thank you for the question. Yes, I was outside the Legislative Assembly and I talked to members of the Agricultural Alliance of New Brunswick. I talked to its representatives and to farmers I know well from my former riding. We realized that they were worried about what is to come. I was able to tell them that, thanks to the work of the department and the work our government is doing with members of the Agricultural Alliance of New Brunswick, the private sector, and veterinarians in the province, on April 1, the service will be in place to meet their needs. The laboratory will remain open, as we have said many times.

[*Original*]

The lab is staying in place. Pathologists are staying in place. The certification is staying in place. We will look after the food security of this province, and we will make sure that the

veterinary services that struggled under the previous government are strong and supported by a private—

Ms. Bockus (Saint Croix, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The Liberal government is fearmongering, and New Brunswickers are afraid. The decision to cut veterinary services and close the provincial lab is affecting not only farmers, whose livelihoods will be impacted, but also everyday people. New Brunswickers are becoming increasingly worried about the government's decisions on vets, on hydro bills, and on gas prices, and they share their worries with me. More and more of them say they are planting gardens this year to help them with continuing high food costs. I spoke to the owner of Mayfield Gardens in St. Stephen on the weekend. She has noticed a huge upswing—30% to 40% over last year—in the number of people coming in to purchase plants to start gardens.

People who have never so much as planted a seed before are asking her and her staff for help and guidance. Have the Agriculture Minister and the Premier thought about how their decision to cancel vet services and close the provincial lab affects ordinary people? Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Madam Speaker, I think it's rich to hear the comments about fearmongering from the opposition members when they talk about a lab closing that is not closing. The lab is staying in place. The pathologists remain employed. The certification is staying in place. Those services will continue to be there for the critical agricultural sector that this minister is investing in. Unlike his predecessor, his department is putting millions of dollars into the agricultural sector.

The member wants to talk about the challenges that New Brunswickers are experiencing. She talked about their challenges with hydro bills. Well, we took 10% off their hydro bills. The other side wants to apply a levy that would increase their power bills. The member opposite talked about the cost of groceries and struggles with the cost of living. Our government is providing a universal school breakfast program and now a pay-what-you-can school lunch program, saving families \$800 per year on their cost of living. We are here to support New Brunswickers while those on the other side wish they had—

Ms. Bockus (Saint Croix, PC): Madam Speaker, the Agriculture Minister and the Premier keep telling us that the provincial lab is not going to close. During questions last week, the main focus of all the Agriculture Minister's answers was to tell us that his department is going to conduct a feasibility study on the lab. If the lab isn't closing, why are you conducting a feasibility study now? Is it to support your eventual decision to close the lab? Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The purpose of the study is to identify ways of doing things better and to be more efficient and accountable to the public. The study will determine all of that. There are no predetermined outcomes. We're doing this study to see if there is a better way to do things. If the study shows us that there is, we will do it. If not, we will do what the study determines is the best thing to do with the laboratory. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[*Original*]

Ms. Bockus (Saint Croix, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. With the latest debacle of cancelling the provincial vet service, concerned New Brunswickers have turned their focus to sustainability. Those who can are planting vegetable gardens with the aim of growing food for themselves and their families. The demand for plants and seeds is huge, says the owner of Mayfield Greenhouses in St. Stephen. This past weekend, she told me that, in order to meet demand, she was still planting tomatoes, peppers, and other crops in a 3 000 ft² greenhouse as well as in another 1 500 ft² greenhouse. She plans to continue planting seeds for another two weeks and then intends to launch an experiment. She will leave these greenhouses running so she can grow produce later into the season and offer it for sale. Has the Agriculture Minister considered offering any funding so greenhouses can expand their scope of business while he cancels vet services for farmers? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. As a former garden centre owner and as a vegetable grower, I can certainly relate to people wanting to plant gardens for their own food. It is a busy time of year, and it's always encouraging to see more people come in for plants. I don't know if you recall, but the first time I stood up in this House, I kind of gave a crash course on how to plant tomatoes. It didn't go too well, but I'm still open to guiding people on how to plant a garden and grow their own food.

Madam Speaker, I can tell you that this is a busy time of year. It's very encouraging to see this movement happening. Over the weekend, I'm going to go open the garden in Memramcook, and the whole community will be there. I think that's very encouraging. My goal is to grow more food in New Brunswick for local people and for export.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

EDUCATION

Ms. Mitton (Tantramar, G): Madam Speaker, last week, when I asked the Minister of Education about her plans to roll out a K-to-12 AI curriculum, she wouldn't acknowledge that it's happening. However, she made several claims. The minister said that parents are being consulted. As a parent, I've seen no evidence of this. The minister would only say that they were updating their digital literacy approach and guidelines when they are also changing the K-to-12 curriculum.

She claimed that young children would not be using AI tools, but that is exactly what the curriculum the department plans to roll out in three months says. It does indeed have children using AI in kindergarten, Grade 1, Grade 2, Grade 3, Grade 4, in elementary school and beyond.

Will the Minister of Education confirm that elementary school students in the Anglophone sector will be using AI?

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Madam Speaker, thank you to the member opposite for the question and for the opportunity to clear this up again. As I've mentioned before, we are proposing an update to the curriculum. It is in a draft format, and we are consulting with people right now. We are hearing some concerns, and we are hearing some praise. We will adapt it before we roll it out. We will not roll it out until it's ready.

There is a huge difference between learning about AI and using AI. For the early grades, we are committed to speaking about AI and putting in safe guardrails to make sure that students are using it appropriately eventually but not using it now. We also need to be providing teachers with resources so they are able to answer these kids' questions. Kids are seeing adults in their lives using technology. They have questions, and they turn to teachers. That's—

Ms. Mitton (Tantramar, G): Madam Speaker, I honestly wonder whether the minister has even seen the curriculum.

[Translation]

It is clear that there is nothing on artificial intelligence before Grade 6 in the education plan for the Francophone sector. However, the education plan for the Anglophone sector—and I quote—"embraces AI literacy as a prominent part of our vision, a catalyst for curiosity, confidence, and opportunity". However, some administrations are going in the opposite direction and are removing technology from classrooms to improve academic performance.

Will the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development abandon the rollout of the artificial intelligence curriculum for kindergarten to Grade 12?

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you to the opposition member for allowing us to clarify our position on this again, this time, with respect to the Francophone sector. Yes, sometimes, there are slight differences between the two sectors, but that's intentional. We want to be able to recognize the uniqueness of the two sectors.

Yes, I have read the curriculum. I absolutely want this to be clear: It's a draft. We are still working on it with people giving us feedback.

As for the Francophone sector, as is the case in the Anglophone sector, learning in our schools is based on curiosity and play, and there's particular emphasis is placed on literacy and numeracy. The approach is the same in both sectors. Both education plans include time without screens because we absolutely want to protect that time and ensure that children learn outdoors...

[Original]

Ms. Mitton (Tantramar, G): Madam Speaker, again, in the Anglophone education plan, it says that "AI is not simply a tool used in a computer science class, but a powerful catalyst that touches curriculum, assessment, teaching practices, and student learning across the system". It sure sounds as though the department has jumped on the AI bandwagon.

The Anglophone deputy minister and staff members will be giving a presentation on the way they've infused the K-to-12 curriculum with AI at an AI summit starting today in Fredericton. Their presentation "showcases New Brunswick's Digital and AI Framework, including...the integration of AI across K-12 digital literacy and curriculum documents." In the curriculum documents, it says that young children will use AI tools.

Madam Speaker, it sure feels as though the minister has been gaslighting me. As I ask her about the new AI curriculum, one of her deputy ministers will be presenting about integrating AI into the K-to-12 curriculum at an AI summit tomorrow. Why is the department presenting this information to a paid audience when it hasn't shared it with the public?

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Madam Speaker—

(Interjections.)

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Madam Speaker, that is a good question. Sure. It's a good question, absolutely. Yes, part

of the goal of the public education system is to teach students how to navigate the world that they're going to be living in and that they're living in now. Part of doing that is teaching about technology and AI, because it's all around them. It's about answering their questions and telling them about the risks and responsibilities. Teachers are telling us that they need guardrails. They need best practices to be shared, and that's what we're delivering in this updated curriculum. Now, it's not being rolled out yet. It will be rolled out when it's ready. Yes, we have to reflect on what this will look like at every stage throughout the learning process. But I can guarantee that it is not about putting technology in the hands of young children. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[*Translation*]

VETERINARY SERVICES

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

[*Original*]

Farmers are tired, Madam Speaker. They're tired of this government telling them what is good for them. They're tired of this government trying to convince them that it has it all in hand and that everything is going to be so much better. Farmers know that the truth is very, very different. The minister, in one of his statements today, said that the vets and the farmers have it all wrong. They have walked away from dealing with this government because they know that what it is doing is wrong. I spoke with those farmers out there. They said that they will never accept whatever this government is cooking up. All they will accept is this government backing away from what it's doing, restoring the provincial vet service, and making sure that lab services continue the way they are, untouched. That is what they want. They will fight for this. They will not stop until this government backs away. Will you back away, yes or no?

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Madam Speaker, our government is committed to working with the agricultural sector, and we have had an open door to them, with open engagements, ever since. We're thrilled that the Agricultural Alliance has come back to the table and wants to continue meeting with us and discussing how we can roll out this transition so that this province will have better veterinary service on the other side. For too long, it's been understaffed. We haven't had the right supports. We haven't been able to take on new clients. Now, we see the opportunity to ensure that veterinarians are well paid, that the private sector comes in and provides support, that the lab and regulatory services are in place, and that the Chief Veterinary Officer is in place.

Our government is out there engaging with the dairy sector, with those who produce cattle, pork, eggs, and chicken, with the Alliance and its members, and with the veterinarians.

We're going to continue talking to them. We're going to continue working collaboratively, something I understand is hard for those on the other side to recognize, and we're going to do that to make sure—

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