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Chair

Mr. Scott Simms

Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Simms (Coast of Bays—Central—Notre Dame, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Committee members, colleagues, guests, thank you for coming. We are now at meeting number six, on March 10, of the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans, pursuant to Standing Order 108 (2), our study of the closure of the Comox MCTS station.

We have two hours to listen to witnesses. Our first hour is taken up with the department, and in particular with the Canadian Coast Guard.

From the Canadian Coast Guard, we have Gregory Lick, director general of operations; Roger Girouard, assistant commissioner; and Sam Ryan, director general of integrated technical services.

The way we normally do this is that each witness is entitled to 10 minutes for a presentation, followed by a round of questioning that we determined some time ago.

Will there be just one of you speaking, or would all three like to speak?

Mr. Gregory Lick (Director General Operations, Canadian Coast Guard, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Mr. Chair, it will just be myself giving opening remarks, which will be fairly brief to allow the committee members to ask as many questions as they need to.

The Chair: Mr. Lick, that's very generous of you. Thank you very much.

I will let you proceed with your opening remarks.

Mr. Gregory Lick: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll be keeping my opening remarks very brief to allow you sufficient time to ask as many questions as you feel are necessary.

We've provided you with a PowerPoint presentation today, but I think you'd rather just listen to us. However, we may point to a few of those slides for reference during either our questioning or during opening remarks.

Nationally, the Coast Guard's marine communications and traffic services centres play a pivotal role in saving lives, protecting our waters, and ensuring the safe and efficient movement of vessels for the smooth functioning of Canada's maritime economy. I would like to spend a few moments speaking to you on what I know are the vital links in the MCTS system that ensure the safety of Canadian mariners and the waters that they ply, namely the communications

equipment and infrastructure, together with our professional MCTS officers manning that equipment 24/7.

On the technology side, navigation and communications technologies have advanced significantly in the last decade. This evolution is not new for us. Look how quickly smart phones have become part of our daily lives. In the early 2000s, while much of the Coast Guard's MCTS equipment remained functional, it was quickly becoming antiquated and increasingly difficult to maintain. As such, in 2007, the Coast Guard made the decision to make significant investments to modernize its MCTS communications and data systems to bring our centres into the 21st century.

The implementation of this new technology provided us the opportunity to find efficiencies in our program delivery by reducing the number of MCTS centres from 22 to 12 without changes in the services to mariners. From day one, this project has been rooted in the principles that there would be no change in existing MCTS coverage and services and no disruption to those services as we transition to the new systems.

I would now like to dispel a number of myths that have appeared over the time of this project.

First, there is the myth of less coverage. I can confirm absolutely that coverage areas will remain exactly the same and that the number of radio towers and radar installations will not change.

Myth two has to do with insurmountable technical problems. Yes, we've seen some technical issues in the new systems, but this is not unexpected in a large project like this. Rigorous testing with our contractor and the MCTS officers has allowed us to find solutions to these issues as they have appeared. I and my colleagues have heard and seen these issues, and I can say with confidence that we have seen the successful implementation of solutions.

I can provide you with a quick example. We attended Prince Rupert MCTS last fall and actually heard the poor quality of the text-to-speech translation of the marine weather broadcast. Time spent by the contractor and Prince Rupert's officers to have the dictionary and translator functioning has produced a clear broadcast, one that will allow more time for the centre's officers to spend on distress and vessel traffic duties.

I am pleased to say that the Coast Guard has already successfully consolidated nine MCTS centres and transferred their operations to newly modernized state-of-the-art centres in strategic locations across the country. The consolidation of MCTS Comox into Victoria represents the final element in the Coast Guard's consolidation efforts and is currently on track for spring 2016.

Let's go to myth three, which is line of sight. The proximity of our centres to the coastlines they serve is not the principal factor for their location. The centres can literally be located anywhere in the country, given that our state-of-the-art equipment requires no reliance on line-of-sight monitoring. This is a good thing, since a line-of-sight requirement would significantly limit our ability to provide services at night and in heavy fog, which is common in coastal communities.

Let's move to our officers. There is a misconception that because of consolidation, some of our MCTS officers no longer have the local knowledge required to fulfill their duties.

• (1535)

This is simply untrue. Our officers represent the finest in their field. They complete a rigorous training and certification program at the Canadian Coast Guard College and study their geographical area of responsibility with intensive on-the-job training. Then they are fully checked out before assuming their responsibility for a particular area. To ensure the high levels of service that Canadians have learned to expect from the Coast Guard, we ensure that staffing levels and workload at the new centres are appropriate for the area they cover.

In addition, we have also built in surge capacity, something that the previous centres did not all have.

Now specifically on the issue of the closure of MCTS Comox, which is why we are here today, I can say with certainty that the consolidation of this centre is on track. We will be ready to ensure a seamless transition of operations into Victoria.

MCTS Victoria has been fully modernized and we are continuing to work closely with the contractor to ensure that the centre is ready to accept the transfer, building on the lessons learned that we had from the other nine centres that we've already consolidated. The consolidation of MCTS Comox represents a key step in this long-standing project. We are modernizing and replacing what we had before: 30-year technology. Any delays in proceeding with the consolidation of MCTS Comox in the spring of this year would result in increased costs to Canadians and increased risks associated with the continued use of antiquated equipment there, which is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain.

As such, I and my colleagues here today, who are accountable for the success of this project, both at a regional level and a national technical level, and I at a national program level, are confident that we have not identified any operational or technical reasons that would merit a delay in proceeding with this plan.

Thank you. We'd be happy to take any questions you have.

• (1540)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lick. We appreciate your comments and your opening remarks.

For our first question, we go to the government side.

Mr. Hardie, you're first.

Mr. Ken Hardie (Fleetwood—Port Kells, Lib.): Thank you, and thank you all for being here.

I'm from the west coast. Some of my colleagues don't know it, but my first father-in-law was a fisherman out of Prince Rupert. I've spent some time out in the boats. We saw *Queen of the North*. It went down. People knew where they were, or were supposed to have known where they were, but there were still difficulties. It's a treacherous coast and it has some treacherous conditions, which is why this issue was flagged for me well over a year ago by some friends who are in the broadcast engineering business who had been monitoring the stations and the quality of the signals.

I have a number of questions that will help me clarify exactly what's going on here. Once Comox is closed or at least converted, will the network be entirely digital?

Mr. Gregory Lick: Certainly. Thank you very much for the question.

I'm going to ask Mr. Ryan, our technical expert, to answer that one.

Mr. Sam Ryan (Director General, Integrated Technical Services, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Thank you very much for your question.

From the network perspective, first, the communication from the ship to the shore is as it always has been. Once it's received by our remote radio sites, it is converted from analog to digital and then it is transferred to the MCTS centres. That's consistent coast to coast to coast.

Mr. Ken Hardie: In terms of the messages going out to marine traffic, is that whole audio chain from microphone through to transmitter all digital?

Mr. Sam Ryan: We're talking about the safety communications, so it's the traditional channel 16, the transmission between the ship and shore. That is still analog transmission, but after it's received by the radio and once it is received by the communication control system, the equipment that routes it from the remote site to the centre, it is converted from analog to digital.

Mr. Ken Hardie: I'm thinking more in terms of the broadcasts that go out from the centre. Does the microphone go from a digital board into digital audio processing equipment to a digital transmitter?

Mr. Sam Ryan: The transmitter itself is still an analog modulation.

Mr. Ken Hardie: It's AM modulation, in other words.

Mr. Sam Ryan: I believe it's FM modulation.

Mr. Ken Hardie: This means the line of sight is important.

Mr. Sam Ryan: The line of sight is from the remote radio sites out to the ships.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Let me submit something I have heard. When a broadcast is originated, particularly now under the new regime, multiple repeating stations pick it up and rebroadcast it two or perhaps three times in some cases. I'm not sure of the number of hops that are involved, but every time there's a continuous number of transitions from analog to digital and back to analog, the quality of the audio that comes out of that little box on a fishing boat somewhere with a great big diesel making all kinds of noise has been poor.

Mr. Sam Ryan: Sir, I think I can speak to that.

In the previous technology, the actual network itself was converting the analog voice to digital. Especially on the west coast, we make use of microwave links, so all of the microwave links are digital communications. For the actual voice—and this is even with the old technology—we converted the analog voice that was in the microphone at the centre to a digital version of the analog voice. That was then routed over the microwave links and was again converted from digital to analog and then transmitted, using FM over the VHF radio network.

That is how it was in the past with the old technology, and because, again, the front-line communication is still using channel 16, which is still an analog transmission, overall we're using the new technology in exactly the same way.

• (1545)

Mr. Ken Hardie: The observation, though, is that there are frequent flips from analog to digital and that in each stage of that... If the fellow in Prince Rupert speaks into a microphone, it's analog. It goes to digital. It's transmitted to one of the hops where—what?—it's converted back to analog and rebroadcast?

Mr. Sam Ryan: No, if you're looking strictly from an analog-to-digital conversion and to how many places along the chain it gets converted, it's converted, as you said, in the centres themselves, which again is not a change. That is how it's always been over the past, let's say, 20 years.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Right.

Mr. Sam Ryan: That's the first analog-to-digital conversion.

Then it goes over the network, and the network is all routed in a digital way. You can ask, isn't your microwave link an analog transmission? Getting into the details of the microwave communications, yes, that in itself is an analog transmission. However, the voice data has not been converted back to its analog baseband level. It's still a digital voice.

Mr. Ken Hardie: But that analog broadcast, then, is subject to atmospheric and anything else that would be coming along.

Mr. Sam Ryan: Again, that's a difference between the actual—

Mr. Ken Hardie: But it still does speak to the overall quality that comes out of the box in the boat at the other end.

How many Coast Guard staff were involved in monitoring and communicating marine traffic information back when you had five stations originating information?

Mr. Gregory Lick: Give us a couple of seconds to find the answers to that.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Sure.

Actually, the question is what they will have left once Comox is gone. How many people will actually be on duty at any given time between Prince Rupert and Victoria?

Mr. Gregory Lick: The best way to respond to that is actually not so much with the number of people; it's actually to talk about the number of stands that are monitoring those radio communications, either from Prince Rupert or from Victoria.

Before, we had Vancouver, Comox, Tofino, Prince Rupert, and Victoria. In actual fact, the number of stands has been reduced slightly, and that's because—

Mr. Ken Hardie: It's from five to two, once this is finished.

Mr. Gregory Lick: Sorry, sir, the number of centres has been reduced from five to two; however, the number of stands in the pre-consolidation centres has been reduced very slightly to the two new centres. In this case the new technology that has given us some efficiencies, some economies of scale. Since we've been able to share those particular duties a little better because of those economies of scale, we have been able to reduce the number of stands very slightly, but we're still monitoring the same areas. We still have the same coverage with the radio towers and the radar installations.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hardie.

Mr. Strahl, you're next.

Mr. Mark Strahl (Chilliwack—Hope, CPC): Thank you very much for appearing and for answering our questions. I have some information here, and I'm just wondering if you can update it or confirm it.

I understand this isn't the first modernization that has been undertaken at MCTS stations over the last 30 years. I understand that in the nineties, Coast Guard integrated traffic and radio service moved from 44 stations to 22 stations. Am I correct in that, and if so, was there any impact on services when that number was essentially halved in the nineties?

Mr. Gregory Lick: Certainly that is correct, Mr. Strahl. Back in the nineties, we were able to consolidate from 44 to 22 with the new technology, and there was really no impact on services to Canadians at all.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Okay.

You mentioned the number of stands. Again, I was led to believe that there are 214 radio towers and 24 radar installations across the country. Even though we're talking about a reduction of centres, those numbers are remaining constant?

• (1550)

Mr. Gregory Lick: Yes, that is correct. As I said during my opening remarks, the coverage is exactly the same. I would just reiterate, though, that the number of radio towers and the number of radar installations will remain the same not only on the west coast but across the country.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Okay.

Can you walk us through this and maybe explain it in more detail? We've heard reports of outages from time to time. Can you give us some indication of what that typically looks like and how the technology kicks in? If one centre experiences an outage, you said it can be monitored anywhere across the country. Maybe you can just walk us through that.

How frequently do "outages", as the media or as we may call them, occur? When they occur, what is the sequence of events to ensure that there isn't a danger to marine traffic?

Mr. Gregory Lick: I'll answer that question from the national perspective in terms of the normal mitigating measures we put in place. I'll ask Mr. Girouard to address the regional perspective from the western region and then any technical aspects to the technology and how we deal with it in terms of technicians.

Outages do occur. It is a technology. We do have a country in which we have environmental effects. Weather, wind—those things do affect the towers periodically. We do have a reliance on certain telcos that provide the services on the links. We do have microwave links, as Mr. Ryan mentioned, that are affected sometimes by wind and weather, as well as by lightning and other atmospheric events.

An outage is relatively uncommon, in our minds, or certainly a major outage is. Most of our outages are very short, and during the outage time period we do have protocols in place to mitigate the problems that occur. We do have our own Coast Guard vessels out there, who now maintain a more diligent listening watch to radio transmissions, particularly distress radio transmissions. We do have SAR stations out there that maintain the same more rigorous listening watch when that happens. We also send out what we call a notice to shipping, which goes out to mariners to make sure they know there is an outage and they should maintain a more diligent listening watch. What we're concentrating on at that point is really distress communications, so we make sure we hear all of those.

In addition, in certain areas of the country we have co-operative vessel traffic services with the United States. They can take over some of our responsibilities in those particular areas if we do have an outage, just as we will do for them.

That answers the particular part of the question with respect to some of the national mitigating measures we will put in place for any type of outage.

I'll ask Mr. Girouard to talk about the western region perspective with respect to that question.

Mr. Roger Girouard (Assistant Commissioner, Canadian Coast Guard, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Perhaps I should begin with some anecdotes of the kinds of outages we've had in the last year. As Mr. Lick said, they range across a full spectrum, from lightning strikes to equipment failure not related to the modernization; as an example, a diesel that's providing electricity to a remote site may fail.

A number of outages have been related to third party carriers. In B.C. in particular, we are not landline rich; we're very dependent on third party carriers, in some instances, to transfer signals from nodes to nodes. We've had a number of outages related to those issues.

Last year we had one particularly notorious outage just as we transferred from Vancouver. That was related to moving old Vancouver gear to Victoria. You shouldn't shake an old analog piece of gear, because it will fail on you. It was not related to the modern gear but to modernization. That one lasted probably two hours.

In terms of the pure modernization, we have had some software interface issues. We did have a couple of outages that were caused when the contractor did updates without letting us know, and that locked up a system. Once we knew what it was, it was a five-minute fix. We've changed that protocol.

In terms of the modern gear, I've seen very little of it involved in a significant outage. Some of the site-to-node interfaces have had some glitches, but we've learned about the system and we've learned how to do rapid response in a way that's taken us from a 20-minute outage down to one or two minutes. The key for us is that if we do have an outage, we get the word out and put up a system to support the airspace. We hear on channel 16 the other mariners supporting us.

Right now, I believe we're building a more robust system as a result of what we're putting in.

● (1555)

Mr. Mark Strahl: I have a brief time here, but there obviously was a cost savings in reducing the centres from 22 to 12. If they remained open, I assume there would be a cost realized to keep them open as well as to modernize.

There would be no plan to leave them open at the current state of equipment. Am I correct in that?

Mr. Gregory Lick: Yes, Mr. Strahl, that is correct. I think we want to speak specifically about Comox as an example, since that is the subject of this discussion here.

To keep a centre like Comox open, which is working right now with antiquated equipment that is becoming more and more difficult to maintain, the equipment would need to be modernized. There is an operating cost for keeping the centre open and keeping the people there, and so on, but the major issue with keeping a centre like Comox open is the capital cost required to modernize the equipment, which we hadn't planned for.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lick. Thank you, Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Donnelly is next. You have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Fin Donnelly (Port Moody—Coquitlam, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I appreciate having our officials here to answer some of the questions on this important topic about the Comox MCTS. If there is any time at the end, then perhaps my colleague could ask a question.

The Chair: Would you like to split your time, Mr. Donnelly?

Mr. Fin Donnelly: No, but there might be a little time left.

With regard to cost savings, can you talk a bit more about the cost savings in the plan to close Comox? How much would we save?

Mr. Gregory Lick: When we've spoken about the cost savings, we've generally spoken about the cost savings across the country—

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Can we talk specifically about Comox? How much savings are there? Do you know an exact figure, or can you get back to the committee about that? It's probably tough to ask.

Mr. Gregory Lick: I'll give you the national figure and what we've put forward for Comox, and then we'll come back to the committee if there's a requirement for a little more accuracy on it.

From the national perspective, in terms of operating costs for the entire program, we're looking at a savings of about \$5.4 million with the consolidation project reducing the centres from 22 to 12.

With respect to Comox, we're looking at a savings of about \$500,000, \$600,000, \$700,000, or so. We'll come back to the committee with a little more accuracy if needed.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Thank you.

In terms of moving to technology, I want to pick up on your opening remarks about what we've heard in the media and what you've framed as myths, etc. Have you heard some of the transmissions that have been out there between ship operators?

Mr. Gregory Lick: Absolutely, and I'll ask Mr. Girouard to talk to some of his experiences in the western region. As an example, I will talk about when Mr. Ryan and I attended MCTS Sarnia.

We heard from the operators, and heard an experience right there, about some of the issues with respect to sound and what the operators were hearing in terms of the loudness of the centre itself. As with any particular project involving sound, microphones, and electronic messaging communications in a small room, you're going to have issues. So what—

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Can I just jump in and ask if you have heard them? Could you understand some of them? Some of the ones I've heard I couldn't understand because of the echoing, the reverberation, and that sort of thing. I'm wondering if there's ever a point where you couldn't understand what was being transmitted.

Mr. Gregory Lick: I will come to that point, Mr. Donnelly.

In Sarnia I was able to hear those issues, but the point I'm trying to make is that with any particular project involving sound in a small room, you're going to have to tune both the equipment and the room. A lot of those measures in Sarnia have been in place. Something as simple as putting sound-dampening carpeting in the space has improved the sound quite dramatically.

What the officers have heard now in Sarnia is that the sound is much better. That's the same with any project where you're involving sound in a small room. It's not much different from the National Arts Centre having to tune the particular space for an orchestra.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: I've heard some of these, and I'm not sure if the room is going to make a difference. I think it sounds like it could. On the transmissions, hopefully the committee can hear some of these, because I don't understand how the operators can understand them.

The time is short, and I want to move on.

I'm on the west coast, and I'm concerned about the west coast and Comox specifically. Could you tell me how many MCTS stations on the west coast are not in a tsunami zone?

Mr. Gregory Lick: I will ask Mr. Girouard to answer that one.

• (1600)

Mr. Roger Girouard: Both Rupert and Victoria are in areas where tsunamis are possible.

In the case of the Victoria site, if you look at the likely approach of a tsunami, it would have to take four left turns to get to that elevated site. I think it's fairly safe and secure.

Rupert and that entire coast have some vulnerabilities if they're hit with a tsunami. That's acknowledged, but I don't think that port is used very much, so it's a risk that we've judged as acceptable. The traffic will not be there if a tsunami hits.

As to Comox, mid-island on the inside is quite safe. It has some earthquake vulnerabilities and it's built on a high sand piece, so there are moments when I wonder what it would look like if there were to be an earthquake.

They all have some risk prospects, and the key isn't whether we lose a site but about how we back up and sustain the operation. It's about business continuity.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: I'm going to ask a question on training, workload, and retention. We did hear about how important that is.

Could you comment on how long it takes an operator to be trained? Under consolidation, are you retaining knowledgeable staff who are capable of dealing with the complexity of moving ships through the shipping lane, keeping an eye out, and dealing with outages? I know Victoria and Vancouver have had outages for periods of up to 30 minutes. There's no power then, and training is critical on what to do, how to use backup systems, and the use of emergency systems.

Can you comment on the staffing capable of handling this situation?

Mr. Roger Girouard: I'll touch on that and I'll remind you that the Victoria site will not be just one operator, but rather a nine-person watch with the capacity to surge. There will be senior operators backing up junior operators on some of the more complex zones. It's a good 6- to 12-month learning process at the site. There's a long-term development process, and that's after the education at the college.

As for the Victoria transition, we've brought in a fair number of new operators through the closure of Ucluelet, and those folks will be on the screens, learning and developing now.

In the case of complex scenarios, that operator isn't just left there to handle it. The safety side, the supervisors, will back them up. The flexibility in the new centre allows the supervisor to readjust tasks and workloads. There's a surge console for something like a complex search-and-rescue case or trying to deal with a distant earthquake when we know we're moving assets. They have the capacity to bring extra people in.

The HR side is always a challenge. You'll probably know that some folks in Comox have indicated they're less inclined to relocate, and we're looking at how to deal with that. Right now, I think my HR equation is satisfactory for where we're going this spring.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Girouard.

Ms. Jordan is next.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan (South Shore—St. Margarets, Lib.): Thank you, and my thanks to the officials for coming in and bringing your presentation today.

Could you give me a Coles Notes version of the difference between a Coast Guard station and a marine communications traffic station? What's the key difference?

Mr. Gregory Lick: That's a fairly easy question to answer, so I'm glad you asked it.

When we speak of a Coast Guard station, we're normally talking about a Coast Guard search and rescue station. It's a relatively small building in which the crew live and work. They will also have a search and rescue lifeboat along with a fast rescue craft. They will maintain a listening watch. They have a radio on 24 hours day. They also have communications with MCTS centres and with the joint rescue coordination centre, which organizes the coordination of search and rescue calls. That's a Coast Guard station, in our parlance.

An MCTS centre is a critical link between mariners on the water and the shore. It coordinates and receives distress calls and makes sure they are responded to by the joint rescue coordination centre. They also transmit marine weather broadcasts and safety information to mariners. In certain areas of the country, they also organize and coordinate vessel traffic, mainly for commercial shipping.

•(1605)

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: That leads, then, directly to my next question. If there was a spill or an emergency near the Comox MCTS station, where would the vessel be deployed from currently?

Mr. Gregory Lick: Well, certainly if there was a particular environmental spill, as an example, whether it is the old technology with Comox there or the new technology with a consolidated centre in Prince Rupert or in Victoria, the response remains exactly the same.

In this case, it could be a response from a search and rescue lifeboat station, depending on where the particular spill is. If it was a little bit closer to Prince Rupert, it could be a response from the environmental response group that's there. It all depends. The response has not changed anywhere across the country because of our consolidation efforts.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: I just want to clarify, then. Prior to the change and after the change, there will be absolutely no difference in how the response is handled. Is that correct?

Mr. Gregory Lick: That's correct.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: Thank you.

You spoke earlier about there having been suggestions of blind areas for radar. Can you expand on that a little bit? I'm having a hard time with that.

I've heard that with the radars the way they are, there may be blind areas with the modernization. I'm trying to figure out how that can happen. If a radar is there, a radar is there. What's the difference if it's manned by MCTS Comox or not?

Mr. Roger Girouard: I'd just offer that there are no new blind areas in British Columbia. The radar sites are the same and the atmospheric for the radio towers are the same. B.C., with its interesting topography, has some channels and some inlets that aren't utilized much and don't have radar. In those places we depend on radio and AIS to keep track of vessels, but there's no change to that radar coverage.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: Thank you.

How is the Coast Guard supporting their employees through the transition, and what has the feedback been from those working in these new modernized centres?

Mr. Gregory Lick: As we've gone through this large change, we recognize that the impact upon employees and staff is tough. Any change is tough, and we've really tried to make sure that people who may be affected by this particular consolidation effort are provided with all the transition measures that are available to all government employees, either through training for a new career or moving toward retirement.

In the case of many of our stations across the country that are MCTS, most of the people have been offered jobs within the MCTS elsewhere. Some have taken them and some have not. That's a personal choice, in many cases, for those people, but the transition measures have been offered to all of them, and they've made a personal choice.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: What do the employees who are in the new modernized facilities think of that, compared to working where they were? Is there any feedback from that end of things?

Mr. Gregory Lick: Absolutely. Going back to Mr. Donnelly's point, though, in terms of change, we did see issues—we're not saying we did not see issues—and we worked with the officers to try to address those issues.

What we are finding, though, is that for something like the text-to-speech marine weather broadcast, if time is spent with both the contractor and the employees to actually work on getting it right, they really enjoy it afterwards, because it does take a lot of workload off a relatively administrative duty, and now time can be better spent on distress duties in times like that.

So yes, as you go through change, there's certainly been... Some people say, "Well, it's not working", or something like that, but as they've got to know the new technology, we've heard directly from a lot of staff that this is actually a better technology. It's more reliable, in some cases. For many, it's a lot easier to use, and there are many things like that.

I think Mr. Girouard actually has a particular point from one of his staff.

Mr. Roger Girouard: I think it's fair to say that the team saw the change with excitement and trepidation. Some of it's been challenging. It's everything from knobology and learning the button strikes to some of the sound transfer issues. They've helped us get through that.

I was in Victoria MCTS about two weeks ago, just after they'd gone through the modernization process, and the feedback from one of my more experienced, perhaps grizzled, souls was, "Better than I thought." That's a high compliment.

It has been a challenge to a community that's undergone an awful lot of change and has suffered some change fatigue, and so their comments are tempered that way, but they are seeing this new technology as having the potential that it should.

•(1610)

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: Thank you. Okay, so—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Jordan.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: Oh, no. I still had about 10 questions.

The Chair: We'll get to them, maybe, in time.

Okay, that's the first round. Now we're going to a five-minute round. We're going to start with Mr. Arnold.

Mr. Arnold, go ahead. You have five minutes.

Mr. Mel Arnold (North Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here today for questions. I guess my first question would be that I saw in your report, as you mentioned this afternoon, that you've recognized about \$5.4 million in savings per year through this modernization process with no reduction in service, as again you've noted.

Is the Coast Guard able to redistribute resources because of these savings to provide better service in other areas, whether it's other areas of the country or other areas of service?

Mr. Gregory Lick: In this case, because of this particular consolidation effort and the time period in which it went through, those particular budgets were taken away or were let go. In this particular project, those funds have not been used elsewhere.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Are you saying in other projects they were? In this particular project, there was a reduction in overall budget, I take it, from what you're saying, but in other cases, were you able to provide better service?

I guess another question to that would be, would there have been reductions in services without the modernization and amalgamation of services?

Mr. Gregory Lick: It's a fairly general question, obviously. Certainly in many of our projects across the country we have been able to achieve efficiencies, but in many different areas other than marine communications. We've been able to move those funds back into the Coast Guard. I can't think of anything specifically at this point.

I'd like to point out, though, that we had been thinking about the modernization of our equipment even before we were thinking about consolidating. Consolidating was an opportunity that we saw because we have been able to achieve efficiencies through the more modern technology. In many ways, yes, those funds were removed, but in many ways they could have been used to go back into the Coast Guard, if necessary. It just didn't happen in this particular case.

However, I think the one thing I would like Mr. Ryan to actually talk about is in terms of the cost of maintenance of this equipment. Is it more or less than what we were seeing in the past?

Mr. Sam Ryan: I think, as Mr. Lick indicated, the equipment that we had was really near its end of life, so it's something that we were going to have to replace. It was a standard life-cycle management replacement. That's why, in the modernization, we had to replace all of the communication and control equipment at all the remote sites and all of the centres. It was so that we could have a service into the future for Canadians.

Mr. Mel Arnold: The modernization would then have cost more had it been spread out through the multiple stations that were there, and so on. Okay.

Does the new system allow for easier integration, should there be a system problem in one of the stations or should there be something that takes one of the control centres out of commission? Does the modernization of the new equipment allow for an easier access to tie in those systems?

Mr. Gregory Lick: I think this is where Mr. Ryan's expertise comes in. I think he can speak really quite well on the technology and the advantages it gives us.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Please, yes.

Mr. Sam Ryan: Thank you.

The new technology, as Mr. Lick has indicated, really has brought us into the modern world. From a network perspective, we're on some legacy telecommunication links, as has been highlighted. However, with this technology, in the future we can actually go on to modern communication links. This technology will allow us to change how we can offer services within the Coast Guard.

With the old technology, we did not have those options. We were very limited, because it was installed in some of the centres 20 or 25 years ago. Now we have brand new modern technology, so we can make use of and exploit the new telecommunication networks that the different telecommunication service providers are offering to us.

•(1615)

Mr. Mel Arnold: Since I have just 30 seconds, I'll defer, unless one of my colleagues has a 30-second question.

The Chair: Based on that advice, off we go to the next person.

Go ahead, Mr. McDonald, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Ken McDonald (Avalon, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I'd like to thank the gentlemen for joining us here today to share in our common goal, which is to provide an efficient and reliable safety network for our mariners from coast to coast to coast.

My questions are for Mr. Lick. If I run out of material for questions, Mr. Chair, I'll share the time with Mr. Morrissey.

First off, I'll relate some of this to my home province of Newfoundland and Labrador. When Newfoundland and Labrador were undergoing consolidation in 2015, you were quoted as saying, "We were already going to invest in it, but the investment in new technology has allowed us to become more efficient and consolidate into fewer centres saving taxpayers quite a bit of money."

How does the Coast Guard, from a marine safety perspective, measure these expected increases in efficiency of its delivery of services resulting from the modernization of its infrastructure and the consolidation of the MCTS centres?

Mr. Gregory Lick: Thank you.

There are very simple measures of efficiency in terms of the number of our staff and the amount of funds we expend on a particular operation. They are simple measures of our efficiency, and those we can provide in detail to the committee, if you prefer. Those are measures of efficiencies and very simple measures of efficiency.

In essence, the denominator hasn't really changed. The types of services we provide have not changed. The infrastructure, in terms of towers and radar installations, has not changed. The denominator hasn't changed, but the personnel and the centres that provide those services have. It's a very simple measure of efficiency.

Mr. Ken McDonald: Thank you.

Again, I'll quote another Coast Guard official, Assistant Commissioner Wade Spurrell of my Atlantic region. When Newfoundland and Labrador were being consolidated, he stated, "We've been clear from the start that we wouldn't be switching over until we were very confident in the new system."

I would appreciate it if you could explain how this modernization of the Coast Guard's infrastructure enables consolidation on the west coast, as it did on the east coast.

Mr. Gregory Lick: Mr. Spurrell was certainly talking about the rigorous manner in which we took the systems from the contractor and evaluated them before we put them into service. That happens with any particular IM/IT project. It's a testing procedure to ensure that we're not going to put into place a system that would be unsafe for the mariner.

Certainly we have seen issues as we've done that, and we've addressed them as they appear. I'd like Mr. Ryan to talk about the one issue we did have that was relatively significant and that we got from the contractor, and how we addressed that with him. I think that's an important aspect of your question.

Mr. Sam Ryan: I think what Mr. Spurrell was making reference to is that when the contractor first delivered the equipment, or the first version of the software, we installed it in one of our labs in

Halifax-Dartmouth. We determined that there was an echo problem. This was found in our lab.

We went back to the contractor. The contractor then did a software modification to address that situation. We tested it in their lab in Vienna. We tested it in our lab in Canada. We did not install it in any operation until it had been proven both in their lab in Vienna and in Canada, that there was no issue with the echo. Only after the version of software completely passed all of our tests did we go ahead and start the modernization and the consolidation of centres.

Mr. Gregory Lick: To get to the other part of your question, though, around how we're taking lessons learned from the east coast or from the rest of the country and applying them to the west coast, that's an important aspect. Recently when we looked at sound issues in Sarnia, as an example, Mr. Ryan's team developed a solution with the contractor that allowed us to deal with those sound issues. We tested them again in Prince Rupert to make sure that they did work before we fully applied them to the rest of MCTS Victoria.

That's the approach we take. It's a lessons learned approach with lessons learned from other centres. We apply a solution and make sure it works before we fully apply it in the rest of the centres.

• (1620)

Mr. Ken McDonald: I have one last question. Am I out of time?

The Chair: Go ahead. You have 20 seconds.

Mr. Ken McDonald: Okay. I'll ask the question really quickly.

From the perspective of coastline coverage—traffic, marine conditions, and technology—how do Coast Guard infrastructure and services on the west coast compare to those on the east coast, once all consolidation has occurred?

Mr. Roger Girouard: Let me hop on that and say that the west coast is different.

Our antennas are closer together, in the main. Our topography is more challenging, and our traffic tends to be a bit more concentrated, especially from Buoy Juliet to Vancouver and near Prince Rupert. That's obviously where we focused our level of effort and energies. We have some differences. The fact that we're microwave-intensive has been part of the challenge.

There are coastal aspects to this project that have emanated.... I'll come back to the point that when the echo, or the time delay, manifested itself in Rupert, it generated some frustration there. We put the brakes on moving into Victoria because of that, and we worked very hard to essentially put in a time delay from antennas so that the echo would no longer be apparent.

It was a technological change. When that was resolved to the satisfaction of my operators, we then decided we could make the shift.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Girouard.

Sorry, but speaking of putting on the brakes, I have to do much the same. I apologize. We're over five minutes.

Mr. Strahl, I understand you're generously giving your five minutes to Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Blaney, you have five minutes with our witnesses. Welcome to committee.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you so much.

Thank you so much for being here today.

I concur with your analysis that the staff are incredible and they do great work, and I appreciate the amount of training that they do.

I'm curious. One of the things you mentioned was that there's a lot of study around geographical knowledge.

What did the training look like around local knowledge? As you know, most people refer to areas from their perspective and sometimes the slang can be unusual, so I'm wondering how you trained your people to know that information.

• (1625)

Mr. Gregory Lick: Certainly. I think Mr. Girouard and I will answer this one.

The training at the Canadian Coast Guard College is from a national perspective. It's about how to use the equipment properly. It's communication procedures and all of the technical and operational aspects of using the equipment and operating as an MCTS officer. That is what I would call the base training.

Then we get at the geographic training and how you operate in the area of responsibility that you'll take on. With that, there is a rigorous on-the-job training program that is done in the centres. It gets trainees to go through various aspects of those geographic areas and the peculiarities of those geographic areas. It is an on-the-job training type of approach. They are checked off in various areas, and they will not take on the responsibility for a particular area until they've been checked out, which in essence is pass the exam, if you want to think about it that way, for that particular area. Then they will be assigned responsibility for that area.

Mr. Roger Girouard: I'll just hop on and say, for instance, that as we moved the site's responsibility from Ucluelet to Tofino, we brought down Ucluelet operators to spend weeks at a time in Tofino, get to know the waters, actually manage those waters, in preparation for when the transfer of gear would occur.

The area has not changed geographically, but the console moved. To populate that knowledge, we brought operators down to look at the charts, to talk on the radio, and to speak to those areas and zones and deliver on that knowledge when they went back to Prince Rupert.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

I'm just wondering if a communications infrastructure audit has been undertaken to identify local compatibilities and specific gaps in coverage. I know this was a recommendation from Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada.

Mr. Sam Ryan: Can I ask you to repeat the question? I am not sure I quite heard.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada has recommended that there be a communications infrastructure audit and that it be undertaken to identify local

capabilities and specific gaps in coverage. I am wondering if this has been done.

Mr. Roger Girouard: I will also ask Mr. Ryan to speak to this, but from the Canadian Coast Guard's perspective, we are a continually learning and evolving organization, particularly with marine traffic patterns and with areas of risk. One of the things we have to understand here is that we are not a static organization. We will evolve with.... If we find gaps, we will address those gaps. In the case of the Canadian Coast Guard across the country, not just in the western region, we would certainly welcome any particular audit that helps us to identify gaps and risks.

I am not sure if Mr. Ryan has any other particular points with respect to that.

Mr. Sam Ryan: Really, just to reiterate that, I think the last slide in the presentation showed the number of radio towers and radar towers. Before and after consolidation modernization, there is no change in the coverage, whether it is radio or radar. From a service perspective, this is a different question, but the modernization and consolidation had nothing to do with the coverage itself.

Mr. Roger Girouard: Maybe I could just add something from a regional perspective. I am not familiar with the audit from that perspective, but in B.C., because of the great focus on earthquakes—and you'll probably be familiar with the provincial Auditor General's comments about catastrophics—we have been doing a lot of work with not only Public Safety Canada but with EMBC, Emergency Management British Columbia, to make sure that we have the networks inventory and that we understand how we might cover each other off and respond to a more complex scenario as the partners that we have to be.

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I have 20 seconds.

You talked about evaluating how the workers are feeling about this. I am wondering what the process is about asking the people who are actually using the services on the water how they are feeling about modernization.

Mr. Gregory Lick: Certainly there is a regional.... We do have advisory boards, as an example. We have a National Marine Advisory Board. More specifically here, that concerns mainly commercial traffic. Each region—and Mr. Girouard can speak to his specific region—has advisory boards that advise on that.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Finnigan, you have five minutes.

Mr. Pat Finnigan (Miramichi—Grand Lake, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Before asking my questions, I am going to let Mr. Serge Cormier, the parliamentary secretary, ask a question. I am going to share my question period time with him and I will let him begin.

[English]

Mr. Serge Cormier (Acadie—Bathurst, Lib.): Thank you very much for being here today.

We talk about the consolidation of the centres across the country. I just have a couple of questions about that.

When the consolidation of the centres started.... I know that the guests talked about the myths about the centres regarding coverage, technical problems, and line of sight. Regarding technical problems, I think there was an interruption of service on February 21 at the Victoria centre. There were a lot of people saying that it was due to the new technology, which was not working well. Can you explain what really happened there, when there was an outage for 35 minutes? I think it was on February 21.

Thank you.

Mr. Sam Ryan: Thank you very much.

I think my colleagues have spoken about the different outages and sometimes the different reasons behind the failures. The outage that you are referring to was a human error. There was an interruption in a signal. It had nothing to do with the new technology or the old technology. It was the communication line that was bringing all the information into Victoria. It was a human error and had nothing to do with the technology. As you indicated, it was quickly fixed, within half an hour, and then everything was back up and running. Again, that outage had nothing to do with the new communication control system technology.

Mr. Serge Cormier: When did the consolidation of all the centres across Canada begin?

Mr. Sam Ryan: It was approximately one year ago when we did the first consolidation in the southern centres. Actually, it's modernization, then consolidation. We started in Halifax with modernizing MCTS Halifax, and then it was the consolidation of MCTS Saint John into MCTS Halifax.

• (1630)

Mr. Serge Cormier: I have one last question. Can you explain a little bit the line of sight so that we understand when you talk about it?

Mr. Roger Girouard: There are two aspects, visual and radio or radar signal. It is exactly that. I have a radio tower, and it can project a wave to a location. Radio signals don't tend to bend around corners. Radar is a little more malleable. That is why we have the number of towers that we do to provide the coverage.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Even if the centre is in Prince Rupert or Victoria....

Mr. Roger Girouard: It's the technology that gets it to the operator, and that isn't line of sight, necessarily. It moves in a different way.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Thank you very much.

Mr. Pat Finnigan: Okay. Information that I received and that was shared shows that most of the workers are nearing retirement age. That's not a reflection of you guys—I'm not here to do that—but that's what we're hearing.

Do you have a plan to make sure that the knowledge and experience will not be lost and that there won't be a gap before we get up to speed?

Mr. Gregory Lick: We're all experiencing age. Joking aside, it is a challenge not only for our organization but for many organizations within the government and across the country.

To start from the very beginning, in terms of recruitment we have a continual recruitment program that gets people in the door. It gets them started on what we call the *ab initio* program, which is the program at the Canadian Coast Guard College to get them that base level of training. Then they move into the centres to get their on-the-job training, get checked out, and actually get into the stands and working on the system.

Yes, we are making big recruiting efforts to be able to do that, and it will remain a challenge for some time. Those recruiting efforts are reasonably successful, I would say, in this type of environment and this type of market, so we will continue with that approach.

Mr. Pat Finnigan: Thank you. Do I have time for one more?

The Chair: No. Well, you have 10 seconds.

Mr. Pat Finnigan: With the modernization technology that you're implementing with your new centres, has that cost anything to the water users? Have they had to modernize—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Finnigan. That's it. I'm sorry, I'm trying to play it tight here. I'll give you literally 10 seconds, maybe 20 seconds, to respond.

Mr. Roger Girouard: There's no change for the operator.

The Chair: I'm trying to be generous here, folks, but we're also pressed for time. My apologies, Mr. Finnigan, but I have to be tough.

For the final three minutes, we have Mr. Donnelly.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: I just wanted to pick up on one issue. When stations experienced outages, have there been any near misses on the west coast when those stations were out? I mean with ships, tugs, recreational boats, and traffic.

Mr. Gregory Lick: I'll ask Mr. Girouard to respond afterward, but certainly from the national perspective and the national program across the country, among all of our centres we are not aware of any particular near misses or near incidents or any particular safety issues that were caused by any particular outages.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: In terms of the training, we're recognizing that it's an aging force. In other words, we're losing a lot of knowledge with consolidation with those who may not leave Vancouver or go to these new stations in Victoria or Prince Rupert. Maybe they don't, so while some may get picked up, some may not.

You're recognizing that there is an effort to recruit. It's obvious that it's going to take some time before someone is trained up to a satisfactory safety level for operating in these complex areas. Can you comment on that? You have to be confident, before you close these stations and lose this knowledge, that you're okay. You have to be confident that those vessels are going to be safe on the water and that if there is a distress call, they're going to get the response they need.

•(1635)

Mr. Roger Girouard: Mr. Donnelly, I want to tell you that I share the concern on the HR management piece. It's always an issue. I'm one of those folks who answers the question, "How long does it take to grow 20 years of experience?" with "It takes 20 years."

I'm actually in good shape in Prince Rupert. Two years ago, we got a batch of *ab initios*. I won't quote the exact average age in Prince Rupert, but it sure isn't 50. It's probably closer to age 30, so that team is growing in terms of its knowledge. When I look at what I have in Victoria now, I see a tremendously energetic and smart OIC who is working every day to grow the skill and knowledge of his team.

What will we lean on if we start losing folks? We'll lean on retirees, and we'll do a bit of shifting around to the best of our ability. The last thing I ever want to do is cut a service because of an HR issue. We're watching that piece very carefully.

The morale, the knowledge, and the level of satisfaction of those folks are important. They deliver important stuff to people. They really do.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Girouard.

Sorry, Mr. Donnelly, but your three minutes are up. I apologize.

Mr. Girouard, Mr. Lick, and Mr. Ryan, thank you very much for being here today.

We're going to break for a short period of time because we're pressed for time, and I'd like to do some committee business at the end of this meeting. Let's take a break for a couple of minutes.

Thank you.

•(1635)

(Pause)

•(1640)

The Chair: Welcome back, everybody.

Can I get everyone to take their seats? I don't mean to rush people along too much, but I need some time at the end here for some committee business. It may only take five minutes, but it's very important. We have a couple of things to discuss, so let's get through this.

Right now we have, from Unifor, Mr. Scott Hodge, vice-president, western region, local 2182. Good to see you, sir.

We also have Dale Gross, officer in charge of programs, MCTS, Canadian Coast Guard.

Both of you are entitled to your opening statements. Let's start with Mr. Gross.

Mr. Dale Gross (Officer In Charge, Programs - MCTS - Canadian Coast Guard, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair, and members of the committee. Thank you for inviting me to participate in this study.

I would like to provide you with a bit of my background. I started as an officer with vessel traffic services in Vancouver in 1980 when it was separate from Coast Guard radio. I went through the

amalgamation of vessel traffic services and Coast Guard radio in 1995 when MCTS was created, combining both disciplines.

During the amalgamation I took a three-year assignment as an instructor at the Coast Guard College in Sydney from 1997 to 2000. After my assignment I transferred to the office of boating safety in Dartmouth up until 2005, when I returned to the west coast as the officer in charge, or OIC, of Tofino MCTS, which was consolidated with Prince Rupert in April 2015. I then briefly worked at Vancouver MCTS as OIC, assisting in its consolidation with Victoria in May of 2015. Currently I am the OIC of Comox MCTS.

During my time with the public service I have definitely become accustomed to change, but I was not prepared for the announcement that came in 2012 that involved the consolidation of MCTS centres, resulting in the western region going down from five centres to two centres.

Over the last 15 years there have been many studies of MCTS: workload studies, least-cost analyses, change initiatives, and strategic reviews. MCTS has been discussed several times during previous parliamentary sessions of this committee. I would like to refer to statements made on October 9, 2003, by Mr. Martin Grégoire, who was the union president at the time.

Mr. Grégoire stated:

We believe there is a limit to the number of frequencies and noise that a human being can listen to. We believe there is a limit to the knowledge an employee may have of an extended geographical area. We believe there is a limit to the workload that a single employee can handle at any given time. We believe local presence and knowledge is important in order to provide adequate services, and we believe a reduced number of centres increases the risk of losing all communications over an extended geographical area, as opposed to a limited and smaller geographical area with many smaller centres, when facing major events like hurricanes, floods, ice storms, fires, or earthquakes.

These statements are still valid today, and we can add tsunamis to the list of major events.

The slides that I am about to show you are just a few of the many statistics that have been gathered from the various studies. The first couple of slides I will go over quite quickly because there are a lot of numbers.

The next one is a graphical representation, but it definitely shows that the workload of Pacific region, which is now western region, is double the other four regions that have been combined now to central and Arctic region, and Atlantic region. These are all using the statistics compiled from our vessel traffic management information system between 2011 and 2014.

The next two slides display the same vessel traffic movement statistics for 2013 and 2014, and show that 50% of the vessel movements occur in western region. This slide not only shows national 2015 statistics but breaks down western region into the traffic positions of the three remaining centres in western region after Tofino's area moved to Prince Rupert and Vancouver harbour moved to Victoria.

In the bottom pie chart are the four busiest positions: blue, which is the south area; red, which is Bowen; green, which is the harbour; and purple, which is Comox. That all makes up 83% of vessel movements in western region. These would be the four positions that are going to be put together in Victoria.

● (1645)

One of the reasons the old Vancouver VTS was split up was that it was determined that the combined workload for the entire area would have been excessive for one centre after amalgamation with Coast Guard radio. The checkout rate, or success rate, for new officers training in Vancouver VTS was just above 50%, due to the complexity of this centre. Since the split of Vancouver traffic into what was Victoria, Vancouver, and Comox, the checkout rate rose considerably.

The next three slides are taken from the maritime search and rescue annual reports. Again, they are showing the high volume of incidents handled from Pacific or western region, with Pacific being on the left and the other four regions that have combined following that.

I want to draw your attention to this map. This shows the location of most of the incidents in western or Pacific region. As the high density of dots indicate, this is all of Comox's area right now. This was Vancouver's. This is all Victoria's area. Again, the highest concentration, a majority of the events, are all occurring in the three centres that are scheduled to be consolidated.

Now let's look at post-consolidation staffing levels. Victoria and Prince Rupert will be handling over 50% of the traffic movements and a majority of the maritime incidents, yet, after consolidation, they're expected to handle this workload with only two centres.

This disparity continues on with funding as well. This was taken from the Canadian Coast Guard integrated business and human resource plan of the total allocation of funding for 2014-15. This is still with Comox operating prior to consolidation. Western region, with a three-centre configuration, still delivers an efficient, cost-effective service to the maritime stakeholders and is handling a majority of the workload.

Now I'm going to switch to a program that will demonstrate the sites. The green circles represent all our remote sites. There have been a lot of questions about our transmitter towers and receivers. These are all the sites that send and receive data from our communications centres.

What are some of the advantages to keeping Comox open? We have a great opportunity to minimize the risks by keeping Comox MCTS open and redistributing the workload among the three centres.

During evidence heard by this committee—and it was restated here—a number of the issues of outages were linked to third party providers. Mr. Pelletier stated on February 23 that we rely on third party providers to bring the signal from a tower to the other more centralized centres. If I look at the majority of outages, it is due to the third parties.

There has been some discussion today about the cost of keeping Comox open, the cost of modernizing Comox, because, yes, the equipment we're using is outdated, but all the new communications equipment is installed at Comox centre. That is where it is sitting right now. It is already installed at each of the remote sites that are on that chart. The only portion of the modernization that is not in Comox right now is the consoles and the equipment that is sitting in Victoria.

● (1650)

Those two extra operating positions in Victoria could just as easily be installed in Comox. That is where the equipment resides. That is where it switches over to the third party provider and that data is sent from Comox down to Victoria, the same way the data that came to MCTS Tofino and Ucluelet is transmitted all the way from Ucluelet via a third party provider up to Prince Rupert.

Third party providers are used to carry all the digitized data—the voice, the AIS, and the radar—that's collected at Amphitrite Point, which is the former Tofino MCTS site, and send it all the way to Prince Rupert. The U.S. Coast Guard vessel traffic service at Seattle was extremely concerned with this risk, as it relies heavily on the ability of Tofino MCTS, now Prince Rupert, to manage the approaches to the Strait of Juan de Fuca as part of the co-operative vessel traffic services agreement.

Their concern was evident when they proposed a plan and purchased equipment, which is at the Tofino MCTS site, to install a microwave link that would carry the radar and communications data to the VTS operation in Seattle in the event the Prince Rupert MCTS lost the capability of providing VTS services in this area. This equipment has not yet been installed. This data could easily have been routed to Comox via microwave links to minimize third party networks and eliminate the risk of sending this data to Prince Rupert.

With respect to costs—

● (1655)

The Chair: Mr. Gross, I hate to interrupt you and I'm sorry, but your 10 minutes are up. Do you want to finish up your presentation very briefly? We have to go on to Mr. Hodge.

Mr. Dale Gross: Okay, I will be very brief.

I only have one final comment, and that is to commend the officers at Comox MCTS. Through all the turmoil of the last four years they have displayed dedication and professionalism in delivering the MCTS program to our clients. If the Coast Guard follows through with the consolidation of Comox MCTS, we will be losing several excellent officers in addition to those we have already lost in Tofino and Vancouver.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

Mr. Hodge, your opening remarks are next.

Mr. Scott Hodge (Vice-President, Western Region - Local 2182, Unifor): I'd like to thank you for inviting me to speak to you today.

I'm here because the Coast Guard's marine communications officers believe that the Coast Guard is acting recklessly to close traffic and communication centres, putting our coasts and the people who live, work, and play in these waterways in danger.

Before I get into more detail, I want to briefly discuss my qualifications.

I grew up in Vancouver and have lived on the west coast for over 35 years. I spent 12 years in the Canadian Armed Forces as an electronics technician, which gave me the opportunity to travel across the country. After a training accident, I was released from the armed forces in 1992 and joined the Canadian Coast Guard as a marine traffic regulator in Vancouver. I transferred to Comox in 1997. Since consolidation was announced in 2012, I have worked in the Vancouver MCTS until it closed, on assignment there, and in the Victoria MCTS as well, because of short-staffing. While working in Victoria MCTS, I requalified to work in all the vessel traffic and safety positions at that centre.

When I started working for the Coast Guard in Vancouver in 1992, vessel traffic services and Coast Guard radio were separate but complementary. VTS is much like air traffic control for ships, and the main function of Coast Guard radio is to act like a 911 radio service for mariners.

During the 1990s, something very important happened to this country's Coast Guard that I want you to reflect on. My union recognized that new technology, such as cellphones and satellite communications, would soon make some of the work they did and the offices they performed redundant. The union presented the Coast Guard with a proposal to merge Coast Guard radio and vessel traffic services. The merger of these two services would create greater efficiencies by combining operations and would allow a reduction in staffing through attrition rather than layoffs. The savings from this merger would be about \$14.5 million a year.

After consultation with stakeholders and a risk assessment were completed, the Coast Guard agreed. Between 1995 and 1999, 30 Coast Guard radio stations and 14 vessel traffic services centres were closed or merged together to form 22 marine communications and traffic services across the country.

During the reorganization, the technology was available at that time to combine Vancouver traffic, Vancouver radio, and Comox radio into one centre, but this was not done for important operational reasons.

The first was emergency backup. Due to the locations of the three centres, if any one centre lost communications, the other two would be able to cover the gap, thus helping to ensure the safety of mariners travelling in this area. The workload and vessel traffic complexity that would have resulted was too great for one centre.

Next was training. It could take up to two years to train an employee to work in such a large and complex centre. It was felt that breaking the centre up would result in a higher retention rate because trainees would be given an opportunity to be more successful. Also, the fact was that the building that housed Comox Coast Guard radio had just been opened in 1993 and was designed to allow for expansion without having to do any major construction.

As a result, Vancouver traffic was split up, with one part moved to Comox in 1996. In 1998 and 1999, the remaining part was split into Vancouver and Victoria. In other words, marine communications officers have not just consented but have initiated policy discussions about consolidation of bases. What's happened over the last few years is very different, and we cannot sign off on the latest round of closures for public safety reasons.

One of these reasons is disaster management. As previously mentioned, the building housing the Comox MCTS centre was opened in 1993. Comox MCTS is the only Coast Guard communications centre in B.C. that is not located in a tsunami zone and is built to earthquake standards. The building is located approximately 100 feet above sea level on Cape Lazo, with a commanding view of the northern Strait of Georgia. All vessel traffic transiting the inside passage must pass by this point. If Comox is allowed to close, our west coast communications network could be paralyzed in the event of a tsunami event.

Beyond natural disaster, the closure of Coast Guard centres has not adequately considered officer workload and expertise. The Coast Guard has closed nine of the 22 centres in Canada. The decision was made without consulting industry, mariners, the public, or the union.

In B.C., three of the five centres were scheduled to close. The Tofino MCTS centre was closed and the work moved to Prince Rupert in April of 2015, without any of the previously qualified and trained officers moving. Vancouver MCTS was closed in May of 2015 and the work was moved to Victoria. Only five of the 11 officers actually moved.

● (1700)

The Comox MCTS centre is scheduled to close in May, and the work will also be moved to Victoria. Eleven officers are required to move with the work; six to eight officers may actually move. This will increase the staffing shortage already felt in Victoria even further and result in overtime costs that could reach \$2.2 million per year. These shortages have resulted in occasions where members have worked for 30 days in a row or more.

As a result, the first, second, and fourth-busiest MCTS centres in the country are to be combined into one centre in Victoria that will be carrying over 40% of the MCTS workload of the entire country.

I'd like to conclude by summarizing my members' concerns and policy recommendations.

On tsunami alerting, Comox MCTS is the Coast Guard's tsunami alerting centre and is the only Coast Guard communication centre on the west coast that is not in a tsunami zone. With regard to emergency backup, keeping Comox MCTS open helps to ensure that radio coverage of the busy lower Strait of Georgia and the approaches to Vancouver harbour are maintained in case of a central outage.

On costs, the costs associated with moving Comox MCTS to Victoria—up to \$1 million for relocation, \$2.2 million a year for overtime due to short-staffing, and the cost to train new staff—far outweigh the cost of keeping it open, which would be between \$400,000 and \$500,000 a year.

As for staffing, keeping Comox MCTS open helps to ensure that the shortage of staff at Victoria MCTS is not made worse by the departure of experienced staff when Comox closes. The Coast Guard regional management in B.C. was so concerned about this that they asked Coast Guard management in Ottawa to delay the closure until at least October of this year, and to possibly keep the centre open.

With regard to workload, relocating Comox MCTS to Victoria would set up a scenario in which over 40% of the MCTS workload in Canada would be handled from one location.

With regard to local knowledge, local knowledge is very important because local people often use local names for places. For instance, in the Comox vessel traffic zone, there are two places called Twin Islands, two places called God's Pocket, and two places called Hole-in-the-Wall. Over half of the staff will not be relocating if Comox MCTS closes, and this will result in the loss of knowledge that cannot be easily replaced.

On technical problems, there are concerns that relocating Comox MCTS could result in the same echo problems that have plagued other MCTS centres since they were modernized.

As for marine safety, in his mandate letter the minister was asked to improve marine safety. How does closing the only MCTS centre in B.C. that is not in a tsunami zone improve marine safety?

The government's decision to reopen the Kitsilano Coast Guard base has sent a strong signal to British Columbians that public safety, the protection of property, and the integrity of the environment are worth protecting. The federal government should apply these principles to the important work of the Coast Guard's west coast marine traffic safety monitoring and cancel the closure of the Comox MCTS centre.

A moment ago I briefly referred to technical problems, specifically the problems with the communications control system, or CCS, that is currently being used in many of the communications centres. It's the new technology. This technology has been plagued with issues since its implementation, which started in 2012. The problems with CCS are systemic.

To give you a better understanding, I brought along a recording of a Coast Guard transmission, which was obtained through freedom of information. The audio exchange originates from a marine traffic and communications service centre in Iqaluit, which was the first centre to be modernized. It clearly demonstrates that at times Coast Guard transmissions are unintelligible.

• (1705)

[Audio presentation]

The Chair: Mr. Hodge, thank you for that. Your 10 minutes are now up. Perhaps you can get your concluding remarks, if you have any, into the question and answer period.

Folks, since I'm new, I should have been a little more judicious over the time at the beginning. We won't have any time for committee business if we go through one round of seven minutes each, so I would seek unanimous consent to extend this meeting to 5:40. We probably only need five minutes for committee business.

Can I get unanimous consent to extend this meeting to 5:40 p.m., and we'll do one seven-minute round?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you very much, committee. They're a good bunch to get along with here. What can I tell you?

For questioning, we'll start with Ms. Jordan for seven minutes.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: Thank you.

Thank you very much for the presentation. I have a number of questions, and I'll start off with the recording we just heard. When was that taken?

Mr. Scott Hodge: That was Iqaluit Coast Guard radio in the spring of 2012.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: If we were to hear the same recording again today, would it sound exactly the same as that?

Mr. Scott Hodge: I was in Prince Rupert in January after they made the fix they talked about at the Coast Guard briefing. It does sound like that still.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: Okay.

You talked about the loss of officers and the number of people who are expected to go Victoria, but they'll only have six. Is that because they're electing not to move or is it because of retirement? What's the reason? Are they being offered positions elsewhere and not taking them? I'm just questioning why there seems to be a discrepancy there.

Mr. Scott Hodge: All the officers were offered positions in Victoria. Most of them chose not to go, and not just for reasons of relocation. They did not want to work in Victoria. Victoria MCTS currently has five operating positions. In the same room where they have those five, they're now putting 10. The noise levels will be very high. Most of my members, myself included.... I'm personally worried about going to work there.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: If they haven't gone, I would question how they would know that it's bad. That's just a comment.

You also talked about outages. Are these outages that are happening, or that have happened, not outages that could happen anyway? Were there never any outages before all of these transitions started to take place? Were outages never a possibility until all of these changes started?

Mr. Scott Hodge: I think we're getting lost in the new technology here, because the new technology is just part of the whole thing. The reason to not close Comox is not just to do with technology. As Mr. Gross pointed out, the equipment was all purchased to go into those centres anyway. It's just being put in Victoria rather than in Comox.

The reason to keep Comox open is for redundancy, emergency coverage, and staffing issues. Victoria is already short five and a half staff. They're going to be short 10, once Comox goes there, and that's out of a full staff of 50 people. Over the past few months, they couldn't cover 50 shifts of overtime. Their overtime budget was \$400,000. This year it will be \$1 million.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: I asked specifically about the outages. Have there been outages before?

Mr. Scott Hodge: Oh, sorry. There were outages before and there will be outages after.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: How, then, is the technology to blame for the outages?

Mr. Dale Gross: Prior to this digitized communications system, all the data except for a few sites was transmitted by microwave links. In my 17 years working in Kap 100, or the old Vancouver VTS, and now Comox, Vancouver, and Tofino, I can recall probably fewer than five outages that were attributed to microwave link failures. We've had more outages based on the third party provider, and that is what the new CCS equipment is dependent on.

• (1710)

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: Thank you.

To that point, if outages can happen, and if Comox were to stay open, would it not have to be modernized as well?

Mr. Dale Gross: Yes, and that's what I ran out of time to say. The CCS equipment is at Comox. It is there. It's all installed.

All our remote sites feed into the centre at Comox. The building isn't going anywhere. The technologists aren't going anywhere. There are no additional savings from closing Comox MCTS, because the building and equipment all reside there. The site of Comox is where it's handed over to the third party network and sent down to Victoria on those data lines, on those network lines.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: Is it fair to say, then—and I'm not trying to put words in your mouth, just trying to make sure that I get it right—that your major concern is the third party provider?

Mr. Dale Gross: A lot of our concern is with the third party provider and the distance that the data network has to transit.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: The problem is not necessarily the outages or the staffing, it's the third party provider. That seems to be your biggest concern.

Mr. Dale Gross: That is one of our biggest concerns.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: Thank you.

You also talked a great deal about tsunamis and that being the only MCTS station not in a tsunami area. My understanding is that you are in a high-earthquake area. Is that correct?

Mr. Scott Hodge: Yes. The whole B.C. coast is a high-earthquake area.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: I'm actually from Nova Scotia, and any time I've been to B.C. I've only ever been to the interior, so I don't know the geography of the coastal area of B.C. and I apologize.

Is Comox about three hours from Victoria?

Mr. Scott Hodge: Yes.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: If a tsunami hit Victoria, would Comox not be affected at all?

Mr. Scott Hodge: The centre would not be, because it's 100 feet up on a cliff. By the time a tsunami reached there, it would be—

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: However, an earthquake could affect you, but not Victoria. Would that be...?

Mr. Scott Hodge: An earthquake would actually affect Victoria more than it would us. The Comox building was built to earthquake standards. It may be on a sand cliff, as Mr. Girouard pointed out, but we felt the Seattle earthquake in Comox. I was sitting, and my chair suddenly started moving. The building was designed to withstand an earthquake. It's a post-disaster building.

Victoria MCTS was put into what was warehouse space at the Institute of Ocean Sciences in Victoria. They took a chunk of warehouse and put it inside there. That building was built in the 1970s or earlier. Also to do with earthquakes, there is a fault line in the middle of Georgia Strait that is also part of the subduction zone, and there could be an earthquake there that could cause a tsunami in the the Strait of Georgia, not necessarily a tsunami coming in from the west coast.

There is also a fault line—I was watching the news the other night—in Victoria that actually runs from the American side across the border into the Canadian side and meets the Saanich Peninsula, which is very close to where the Victoria centre is located.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Jordan.

Thank you, Mr. Hodge. I appreciate it.

Your seven minutes are up. Mr. Strahl, you have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you.

Mr. Hodge, referring back to your presentation—and I asked this same question to the Coast Guard officials here—you mentioned that it was a union-led effort to consolidate, between 1995 and 1999, 30 Coast Guard radio stations and 14 VTS centres to form the 22 marine communications and traffic services centres.

If that exercise was undertaken in the 1990s, was there no opportunity for further consolidation based on improved technologies since that time? I guess I'm trying to understand, given that consecutive ministers have said that this is going from old analog to new digital technology, if there is not room for further consolidation, or was that exercise that happened in the 1990s as consolidated as these services could ever become, in your view?

• (1715)

Mr. Scott Hodge: No. If we had been consulted, our suggestion would have been to close Vancouver traffic and move it to Victoria, as long as there were cameras available to monitor the harbour, because that line of sight thing that people have been talking about is important.

I worked in Vancouver, and the radar coverage in the harbour doesn't tag radar tags. They don't have a little thing on them telling you which boat is which, just because it's too congested, and there are blind areas in the harbour. You could have a contact go in and two come out, and you don't know which one is which unless you can actually see them. The line of sight in the harbour there was very important.

As far as consolidation is concerned, we would have suggested that Vancouver move to Victoria, because Vancouver was unsustainable in that they could not keep staff there. It was very difficult to train, and the retention rate was very low.

As for Tofino MCTS, the building there needed replacing. Most of the staff did not live there anymore because the Coast Guard got rid of the housing that they had in the early 2000s. Most of the staff actually lived in Port Alberni and drove an hour to work and an hour home. The suggestion would have been to move Tofino to Comox, and to leave Prince Rupert alone where it is, because Prince Rupert, again, has a low retention rate for staff.

Mr. Mark Strahl: I infer from that that it's not necessarily that consolidation shouldn't have happened, but that it shouldn't have happened this way.

Mr. Scott Hodge: That's our opinion.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Okay.

Mr. Scott Hodge: We're not opposed to consolidation as long as it's done in a logical manner, and this doesn't seem logical to any of us who work in the system.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Another point you've made, and that we've heard, is that any time we're talking about marine safety—and without getting into Coast Guard stations themselves, such as Sea Island or Kitsilano—there is always this desire for redundancy. I guess that's my question. How do you determine that you don't need a redundancy on a redundancy? When does it become redundant to be worried about redundancy?

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Mark Strahl: There you go. You're welcome. That's a deep philosophical question.

Mr. Scott Hodge: I've been in the government service for 35 years now, between the military and the Coast Guard, so I definitely understand your question.

If you look at the sites Mr. Gross had on his chart, you can see all the little radio sites. A lot of those used to be manned sites, and there were people there. Over the years the Coast Guard has consolidated in different places. Alert Bay used to be a radio site, and that was moved to Comox a number of years ago.

With redundancy we're talking about a large area with very low levels of radio coverage. Once you get north of some areas, there isn't even cellphone coverage.

With Prince Rupert, if it went out.... The Prince Rupert area itself is 77,000 square kilometres. When you add Tofino to it, there are another 30,000 square kilometres. If a tsunami hit Prince Rupert and knocked the centre out, you would lose radio coverage from Alaska to Washington State and along the west coast of Vancouver Island. That's not a small area.

You can have too much redundancy. On this coast originally there were only Coast Guard radio stations in Prince Rupert, Tofino, Comox, and Vancouver, and three vessel traffic centres. We actually went to five centres from seven when we merged.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you for answering my redundant question with "redundant" in it several times.

Are there other agencies in B.C. that you're aware of, either federally or provincially, that have a specific tsunami-based redundancy requirement?

Mr. Scott Hodge: We're the redundancy for Emergency Management B.C. They get tsunami warnings. We get tsunami warnings. When a tsunami warning is broadcast, first it's for the entire coast. EMBC decides which area needs the warning, watch, or whatever, and we broadcast that for them. We're the redundancy for them, so they don't have to have a redundancy.

• (1720)

Mr. Mark Strahl: The word cloud for this committee is going to be "redundancy".

Mr. Scott Hodge: We prefer "emergency backup".

Mr. Mark Strahl: "Emergency backup"—okay, that's fair enough.

I know you mentioned some of the overtime costs and the costs to move individuals. You said that if they had asked you, you would have said to close this and not this. Have you done analysis as to what the savings to the treasury would have been for your proposal versus what the government did?

Mr. Scott Hodge: I don't have those numbers offhand.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Okay. If you had them, I think we would enjoy receiving them.

Mr. Scott Hodge: I think Mr. Gross can speak to that.

Mr. Dale Gross: I would like to add that when this announcement was first made, the officer in charge, a supervisor, and a union representative from each of the five centres had a meeting for three days with the regional management. We all put forward to management that a two-centre option was not a viable option. We all strongly urged the regional management to put forward a three-centre option back to Ottawa, but my understanding is that it was never done.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gross, and thank you, Mr. Strahl. Perhaps someday we'll get, as a witness, the redundancy department of redundancy, I hope.

Sorry, Mr. Strahl. I'm not picking on you specifically. It's just that I thought that was a great exchange.

Mr. Donnelly, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to both of our witnesses not only for coming to the committee and providing testimony but for your service to the country. You have a huge number of years between the two of you.

Mr. Gross, obviously you're not only a fully qualified and experienced officer in charge, but you've taught at the Coast Guard College. We know the Vancouver port is the busiest in the country. You just heard, as did I and the committee, that the DG of operations and the assistant commissioner say they are confident that Victoria and Prince Rupert stations can handle the workload with fully trained and capable staff who can handle the complexity and the workload of the job by using this technology.

How confident are you that the Coast Guard can handle the traffic, the incidents, and the complexity with two stations on this coast?

Mr. Dale Gross: I know one thing that Mr. Lick mentioned a couple of times was the surge capability, but when we had five centres, we had three operating positions in Tofino, three operating positions in Comox, and three operating positions in Vancouver. We had a supervisor at each site, and that supervisor was part of the surge capability. If the two main traffic and safety positions got overburdened, you had that third person there.

By the time we finished with consolidation, with Vancouver, Victoria, and Comox all going into one site, you've eliminated two of those supervisors. Now you have one supervisor spread out over eight operating positions. We have lost part of that surge capability to handle the high volumes.

Transport Canada has done studies showing tremendous increases in traffic projected. There's tanker traffic, there are LNG terminals proposed, and we don't have the room for expansion anymore.

As Mr. Hodge stated, we've fitted nine operating positions, plus the supervisor desk, into a building that was originally intended to hold four. We've put all that workload on those extra operating positions, and no, I do not feel confident that the training and the knowledge are capable of handling all that extra workload.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: To go further, you showed the committee a graph of the number of incidents on the west coast in the Inside Passage and the northern Georgia Strait. With that in mind, how important is the Comox station in providing a robust marine communication emergency response safety system in that network?

Will that robust safety system be there under consolidation? I want you to elaborate on dealing with that huge workload and the number of incidents occurring along 40% of the coast. We're talking about the busiest port in the country.

• (1725)

Mr. Dale Gross: As I stated, when we have three positions in Comox, one is a supervisor position, but when it's busy in the summertime they routinely assist when the number of incidents is more than one safety officer can handle. The same thing is happening in Victoria. They have two safety positions, and they each help each other as safety gets busy. Now you're adding Vancouver's safety position as well.

All these three centres experience extremely high volumes of incidents in the summertime, and they all had a supervisor to back them up. Now all those positions have only one supervisor to back them up.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Perhaps I could ask my colleague in the remaining time to ask a question on that.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much for coming here and sharing with us today.

One of the things I heard from the previous group was that it's not about the number of people, it's about the number of stands. Can you please tell me what that means from your perspective?

Mr. Dale Gross: What we call a stand is basically a workstation. It's a position. It's a position that is manned 24-7. We have a safety position that monitors channel 16, and we have a traffic position that talks to the commercial vessels and maintains their safe passage.

We staff those positions with 5.5 people, on average. When we're talking about guaranteeing a number of positions at a centre, that's what we're talking about. We haven't been able to staff all those positions at a level of 5.5. This has resulted in short-staffing situations and overtime—excessive overtime.

Mr. Scott Hodge: In 2003, when this committee did a study of MCTS, they made a recommendation that MCTS should go to a staffing level of seven people per position because of the factors that Mr. Girouard just touched on. That hasn't happened, which has led to excessive overtime. If you look at the statistics, MCTS officers do more overtime than any other federal government employees.

That level is not there because we want to work overtime, because you lose time from your family and everything else. Some people seem to think the money is important, but it's not. The reason our officers do that is they're concerned about the safety of everyone else. I've missed a lot of time with my family because I didn't want somebody not to be there when someone calls for help.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: During the consolidation, was a risk assessment made in order to make sure that if there was tsunami damage and destruction, the two remaining centres would be okay? Was there a real risk assessment completed?

Mr. Scott Hodge: I know that Unifor has put in freedom of information requests for any risk assessments or studies or anything else to do with consolidation, and we have not been able to find anything at all.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: In the case of Comox actually closing, which we hope doesn't happen, has the MCTS found an alternative site to broadcast warning and subsequent communications?

Mr. Scott Hodge: It will either be done from Victoria or Prince Rupert, and if an earthquake happens or a tsunami happens, then it won't be done.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hodge. Thank you, Ms. Blaney.

For seven minutes, we go.... Actually, you're splitting your time, I understand.

We'll start with Mr. Finnigan for three and a half minutes, and then we'll have Mr. Hardie for three and a half minutes.

Mr. Pat Finnigan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for addressing the committee today.

I have one question regarding the recording we just heard. I understand that was 2012. From what the Coast Guard has been telling us, the newer equipment is much clearer and much more efficient. Can you comment on that and tell us why you haven't brought a 2016 or 2015 recording?

Mr. Scott Hodge: That recording is on the new equipment that was installed in Iqaluit when Inuvik was closed. That is from the new equipment. That was from a freedom of information request. We asked for that three years ago and just got it a couple of months ago.

I know that recordings were made in Prince Rupert in January, when they tested out the fix they did up there, and we've tried to get copies of them. There are copies of recordings that were made by our members, but I can't really release those.

•(1730)

Mr. Pat Finnigan: Thank you.

I have another question. If I understand, and of course it's certainly not the field of my expertise, but we're not cutting any rescue equipment or closing any.... In other words, as far as the equipment to get to the emergency call, everything is the same as it was. We're only talking about an emergency communication system.

If Unifor were eventually satisfied that the system does work as it should, would you be in favour of the new concentration of the whole emergency response system?

Mr. Scott Hodge: It's as we put it before. It's just like a 911 operator, but the difference is that in a 911 centre, you're waiting for a telephone to ring, and once the phone rings you know it's an emergency.

I don't know if you've been at a Newfoundland kitchen party or anything like that. There are conversations going on all around you, and every once in a while you'll hear something in another conversation that intrigues you, but you can't hear all of it.

It's the same sort of thing when you're listening to different radio channels. You're not just listening to channel 16, as has been pointed out. If you are, and it's in Prince Rupert, for instance, then you're listening to channel 16 on 22 different sites, plus you're listening to channel 83A, which is a Coast Guard working channel, plus a couple of other channels as well, plus MF. All of this noise is coming in at the same time.

The more you concentrate the noise and the more noise you have there, the less likely you are to hear somebody call for help. Often when a call comes in, it is exactly that. It's "help", or somebody who asks if anyone can hear them. It could be anything. People in trouble don't always say "mayday", or "fire" or "I'm sinking". Sometimes it's a simple request.

I recall a fisherman who called up one time and said he was taking on a bit of water and had been taking on water, actually, for about four hours. They were off the north coast of Vancouver Island. The guy didn't seem concerned at all, but it was a big issue, because that boat did sink and there was loss of lives.

Emergencies aren't always just "help". It's not like that. If you can't hear the call properly, what are you supposed to do? Sometimes it's only one call, and I can give you lots of examples.

Mr. Pat Finnigan: Okay. Do I have any more time?

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Mr. Pat Finnigan: Okay.

Since the concentration or modernization, if I can use that word, began some years ago, do you have any statistics that show we've had a greater number of incidents, such as deaths or injuries, on the water?

Mr. Scott Hodge: I'd have to say no, but those statistics go up and down every year. I don't think the concentration will necessarily cause more accidents, but we don't have any statistics for what will happen in Victoria, for instance, when everything is combined into one room.

I mentioned earlier that some of our members are scared of actually going to Victoria, and there was comment that if they haven't been there, then how do they know? I worked in Vancouver Traffic—when it was just that—and when Vancouver Coast Guard radio came in. At that time, that was Victoria's area as well. It got noisy in there. You were trying to decipher a lot of different things when a lot of other things were going on around you.

When you take a room that was designed to hold four workstations and you stick 10 of them in there, the noise level will be increased a lot.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hodge. I appreciate it.

We will go to Mr. Hardie for the last few minutes, please.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Actually, I will split my time and allow my parliamentary secretary friend here one quick question.

The Chair: It's looking like a kitchen party all over again.

Go ahead, Mr. Hardie.

Mr. Ken Hardie: We're dealing with issues of quality of audio and with the fragility of the network. For example, if Prince Rupert goes down, everything right down to western Vancouver Island is gone. We're also dealing with staffing issues. However, I also want to talk about community engagement and localization.

If Victoria is saying one thing about what's going on in their part of the ocean, Comox could be saying something else that's very local in that area. Is that correct?

A voice: Yes.

Mr. Ken Hardie: In addition to that, with the closure of the station on west Vancouver Island, haven't you already lost a linkage to people in the community who also, on a volunteer basis or even on a contract basis, got directly involved in assisting where help was needed?

Mr. Dale Gross: Actually, that is true. Some of the officers I worked with in Ucluelet, at Tofino MCTS, were also members of the auxiliary and were also members of the ham radio club. They participated in a lot of local events.

•(1735)

Mr. Ken Hardie: And that's gone.

Mr. Dale Gross: That's gone.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Okay.

Go ahead, Mr. Cormier.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Thank you for being here.

I'd like to go back to a question I asked earlier. I know your group was very vocal about the quality of the new technology. As I asked the previous witness, there was a power outage in Victoria on February 21 that probably lasted 35 minutes or something like that.

Were you aware that this was human error and not due to technology? Were you aware of that?

Mr. Scott Hodge: Yes.

Mr. Serge Cormier: You were aware of that. It doesn't have anything to do with the new technology, right?

Mr. Scott Hodge: It just happened after the new technology was installed.

Mr. Serge Cormier: I think you just said that you were aware that it was human nature. Again, it was human nature. It had nothing to do with the new technology, right?

Mr. Scott Hodge: Correct. A technician flicked the wrong switch.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Okay, so that can happen in any other centre. It could be human nature. Someone could just walk by and pull a plug. That can happen, right?

Mr. Scott Hodge: Yes. That can happen anywhere.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Again, it has nothing to do with the new technology.

Mr. Scott Hodge: Right.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Okay.

Regarding the audio we listened to, this was in 2012, you said. What happened to the boat that tried to call the centre? Was it able to reach the centre? Did it sink? What happened to this particular boat that tried to reach the centre?

Mr. Scott Hodge: That was a Coast Guard boat doing radio checks with Iqaluit at the time. From what I recall, they actually called the centre and talked to each other. It was when they were setting up the new equipment.

As the Coast Guard stated earlier, they said that the new equipment wouldn't be released until these problems were solved. Well, the recording shows that it was released before the problems were solved. That's when they first noticed them.

The problems are still occurring in Prince Rupert, and when Comox is moved to Victoria, they're concerned that they'll have the same problems because of landlines.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cormier.

Mr. Gross and Mr. Hodge, thank you for coming.

We had some great exchanges today, by the way. I appreciate that and your generosity in many cases.

Let's go straight into committee business. As we take a look at the schedule, the immediate thing is March 24. We left it up in the air as to whether we were having a meeting. We have nothing scheduled. We left it open in case the minister was able to arrive. He is unable to

come at that time, so it is open at this point. It is the day before Good Friday, March 24.

How do we feel about that now?

Go ahead, Mr. Donnelly.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Could I get an update from the clerk about the witnesses and the number of responses? I don't think we knew on Tuesday, but maybe today we have more knowledge of who said yes and who's available.

The Chair: While the clerk is looking for that, just to be judicious with our time, can I go on to another point?

Mr. Fin Donnelly: You bet.

The Chair: Here's what the other point concerns. I know that we'll get to the cod report, but on April 12 and 14 we're talking about Comox again.

Oh, the clerk has the information already. That was quick.

We have potentially two who could not come at this time but are interested in coming on April 12 as Comox witnesses. We have more to invite, of course, because of this list. This is just a quick update.

Is there anything further, then, Mr. Donnelly?

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Are we able to accommodate that?

The Chair: I believe we are.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Thank you. That's good to know.

The Chair: I said "I believe"; I wouldn't say it's a certainty.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: I believe in your belief.

The Chair: I'm sorry. I misspoke. It's not all of them. No. There are a lot of witnesses here, Mr. Donnelly, for that particular day. I apologize. I didn't mean to mislead you. We have a lot left on this list.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: When are they coming?

The Chair: Well, we have the one day. We have the 12th.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: They are all coming on one day?

The Chair: It will be whoever is available until we can fill the slots and put them in. Does that make sense?

Mr. Fin Donnelly: How many slots have we had and how many have we missed?

• (1740)

The Chair: We have...how many slots in total? For that particular day, we'll have eight, obviously, and that's the other thing. We have to give them 10 minutes each, so that's potentially eight right there, unless you want to trim down how long their opening statements are. I'm assuming that you want all of them.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Well, ideally, and if you're going to put eight in one meeting, it obviously means that we're going to be just listening to witnesses for one meeting with no opportunity to ask questions.

The Chair: That is correct. Are you asking for a motion to have another day of witnesses?

Mr. Fin Donnelly: I think we have to do that. We've had some time. We've done half-meetings. If the committee can take that—

The Chair: Are you proposing, then, Thursday, March 24, as a day of witnesses?

Mr. Fin Donnelly: I'm not proposing that. I don't know if they're available or not.

The Chair: All right. That's a good point.

Mr. Mark Strahl: If we have perhaps an hour on the 24th, it would be nice if there were witnesses who could appear on this topic, even by teleconference, that day.

Again, this was done in camera, so I'll try to be careful. At the time when we discussed this previously, there was a work plan that was set up to get a report to the House by a certain date. Now, if we're no longer concerned about an end date, perhaps we have that opportunity, but that would be my concern. There was some urgency, which is why this was done in the first place and why we had consolidated or abbreviated the number of days that we would consider it.

The only thing I would say to Mr. Donnelly or to anyone else is that by adding dates, we push out the date for the analyst to have a report. If I recall the calendar, I think it pushes it out into May. We heard that date mentioned today. I think we would do better to try to use that meeting on the 24th for this and try to get a report back to the House prior to May.

The Chair: You're proposing a one-hour meeting on the 24th?

Mr. Mark Strahl: That would be my preference.

The Chair: That would be 3:30 to 4:30 on March 24. Okay.

Before I proceed any further, do I have unanimous consent to stretch this meeting to 5:45?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay. That's not bad.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): I'm just hanging in here.

The Chair: I understand, Bev, and you're doing it well.

The proposal is out there to have a one-hour meeting on the 24th from 3:30 to 4:30. Do I see consensus for that?

Go ahead, Mr. Donnelly.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Yes, but only if it will be on Comox.

The Chair: Good. Let's do that for the 24th—but you want it to be about Comox.

Mr. Mark Strahl: If the Comox witnesses are not available, I would suggest we cancel the meeting. If we can get a Comox panel together for an hour, I would suggest we do that. If not, I would suggest we cancel.

A voice: Agreed.

The Chair: How do we feel on Comox for one hour, if we have time for committee business?

Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.): If we can't get any, then we have no meeting.

The Chair: If we can't get any witnesses, we won't have a meeting. All right, that's agreed to.

Now, the minister is coming in on the main estimates on the 19th of April. On April 19 the main estimates are being discussed here with the minister. Where we left it last time was that we're going to have another day for the mandate letter sometime in May or June, depending on his availability. That was talked about because April is obviously taken up with other stuff.

Is there any discussion on that? Go ahead, Ms. Jordan.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: I'd like to make a motion, please, that, we bring in the minister on April 19 for the full meeting to discuss the mandate letters, as the previous motion had suggested, as well as the main estimates on that day.

The Chair: That's a motion on the floor. While we're scribbling down that motion and getting it straight, is there any quick discussion on this motion?

• (1745)

Mr. Mark Strahl: It's unfortunate that we're coming to that. Obviously there's going to be an attempt here to have a vote on it. It was fairly clear what we had asked for. It was what the committee had voted in favour of on the first day. People on both sides of the table wanted the minister for a separate meeting to talk about his mandate letter. Now we have the minister coming for just one meeting instead of two.

Certainly that is not the spirit in which the invitation was extended, and it's regrettable that this is what is being proposed by the government side. I would have thought the minister would be eager to appear more than once to talk to this committee about his estimates and about his mandate letter. We talked in the last meeting about having the minister for an hour and officials for an hour on the estimates, and now that's being abbreviated to one hour. We talked about having the minister on his mandate letter in a separate meeting, and it is now being proposed to take that away.

I can count and I can understand what the government side is trying to do here, but it certainly violates the spirit of the original motion and the intent to have the minister here to deal with both of those issues in separate meetings, so obviously I will be opposing that motion.

The Chair: Mr. Hardie is next, and Mr. Donnelly will follow.

Mr. Hardie, go ahead quickly please.

Mr. Ken Hardie: The minister's schedule being what it is, I understand that a second meeting might take a while to organize, but we've got him for two hours, apparently, which is unusual, as I understand it, from past meetings, where ministers would ordinarily show up for an hour.

The other thing is that in the other committee that I'm on, the discussion itself led to a blending of both the estimates and the mandate letter. We transitioned back and forth between the two matters. With two hours to cover, you might even run out of questions.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Donnelly.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I find this unfortunate as well. I understand the idea of trying to consolidate the minister's visit and the minister's time. However, I have a huge list on fisheries, I have a pretty substantive list of questions on oceans, and while we've talked to Coast Guard officials, we haven't talked to the minister about the Coast Guard. I think those three areas warrant two separate visits from the minister.

I find it's unfortunate. It's been traditional that we've looked at that, given the opportunity, because we have the officials along with the minister. Then we have opportunity to hear from the minister and then drill down from the officials.

The mandate letter covers a fair amount as well. There are quite a few items in the mandate letter and there are a huge number of items in the budget. There's a range of issues from the last Parliament to this Parliament that I think warrant at least two visits from the minister. I too find it's unfortunate that we're going in this direction.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Jordan.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

There are a couple of things. First of all, there was never any discussion in the original motion about the amount of time that the minister would be able to give us. Therefore, we are now going to have him for two full hours, which we would not necessarily get.

Second, my understanding from doing a bit of research and homework is that in the past, the previous government's fisheries and oceans minister came for one hour, and that was it throughout the whole year. I think that bringing the minister here for two hours—an hour on the main estimates and the other hour on whatever else you have—is a fair compromise.

There's nothing to say that in the future we couldn't request that he come back another time. For now, I think we have to look at his time and when he's available, as well as the fact that the original motion never, ever said that we wanted him for a full meeting. It said we wanted him to come, and we're still getting that.

The Chair: Hearing no one who wishes to speak on this—

Sorry, Mr. Strahl. My apologies.

Mr. Mark Strahl: I think, quite frankly, that this is actually a reduction. As Mr. Donnelly said, if we're going to talk about the estimates, which are substantial, they alone require two hours. It's true that the minister typically only appears for the first hour, but then there's a full second hour with officials to drill down into that. If there's only a one-hour meeting, that generally means that not every member gets a chance to question the minister.

I think this is actually a reduction in accountability and in our opportunity for questions on the estimates. We had hoped there would have been a subsequent two-hour meeting with the minister and officials to discuss his mandate letter.

It's a reduction from four hours to two. We're well over the time that we allotted to this meeting as well. We won't see it as being great that we've had our opportunities reduced from four hours to two on this.

Mr. Hardie says that the minister may be able to come back later, but given how long it's taken to get him here once, and now with an attempt to get him here for two meetings into one, I think it's unlikely.

We'll try, though. We still want him here for two separate meetings, and I think that's what the committee actually talked about at the beginning and again in the last meeting. It was very clear in our committee business that we would have two hours to discuss the main estimates, and now there is an offer to take it away.

● (1750)

The Chair: Is there any more discussion?

Mr. Robert Sopuck (Dauphin—Swan River—Neepawa, CPC): I have a point of order. We're over the official time. Can we still continue business past the—

The Chair: That's correct. Do I have unanimous consent to continue this meeting for another five minutes?

Some hon. members: No.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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