



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

43rd PARLIAMENT, 2nd SESSION

Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 023

Thursday, March 25, 2021

Chair: Mr. Vance Badawey



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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Vance Badawey (Niagara Centre, Lib.)): Good afternoon, folks. It's a pleasure to be here today. We're looking forward to a great meeting.

Welcome to meeting number 23 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities.

Today's meeting, as you all know, is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of January 25, 2021. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. So you are all aware, the webcast will always show the person speaking, rather than the entirety of the committee. To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few points.

First off, members and witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. At the bottom or your screen, you have the choice of floor, English or French.

For members participating in person, proceed as you usually would when the whole committee is meeting in person in a committee room. Keep in mind the directives from the Board of Internal Economy regarding masking, as well as health protocols.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you are on the video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute your mike. For those in the room, your microphone will be controlled as normal by the proceedings and verification officer.

I would remind you that all comments by members or witnesses should be addressed through the chair. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute. With regard to a speaking list, as always, the committee clerk and I will do our very best to maintain the order of speaking for all members, whether they are participating virtually or in person.

Members, pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), the committee will now commence its consideration of the main estimates 2021-22.

It's my pleasure now to introduce and welcome our witnesses.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Chair, could I raise a point of order before we get into discussing estimates?

The Chair: You can when I'm finished my initial comments.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Okay. I know we often just roll right into it, so I just wanted to....

Thank you.

The Chair: When I finish my initial comments, Mr. Bachrach, you'll be more than welcome.

Once again, I'd like to welcome and introduce our witnesses.

First off, we have the Honourable Omar Alghabra appearing from 3:30 to 4:30. Omar is the Minister of Transport. He'll be followed by members of his team. From the Department of Transport, we have Michael Keenan, deputy minister; Craig Hutton, director general, strategic policy; Anuradha Marisetti, assistant deputy minister, programs; Kevin Brosseau, assistant deputy minister, safety and security; Ryan Pilgrim, chief financial officer and assistant deputy minister, corporate services; and Michael DeJong, director general, rail safety.

With that, and before I go to the witnesses, I will ask Mr. Bachrach to raise his point of order.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and my apologies for the interruption.

It's wonderful to see the minister at our committee, as always, but I must say that I'm a little bit confused about the process. This committee passed a motion to invite the minister and the Auditor General to appear at committee for one hour each on the topic of rail safety before March 25. I know the minister was already scheduled to appear on estimates, but the committee had an interest in asking questions specific to rail safety.

Perhaps, through you to the clerk, we could confirm that the invitation as articulated in the committee's motion was presented to the minister and that the minister declined to appear at committee specifically on the topic of rail safety.

The Chair: Mr. Clerk.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Michael MacPherson): The invitations were sent out pursuant to both of the motions that were adopted by the committee. The Auditor General has agreed to an appearance on April 13 and the minister has agreed to appear today. You would have to speak to the minister as to which topic he would like to speak to, understanding the main estimates do cover the entire portfolio.

• (1535)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Clerk.

Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the clerk for the clarification.

I would like to express my disappointment because we had hoped to have a conversation at today's meeting specifically about rail safety. I have a lot of other questions related to estimates that I would like to ask the minister and time is always very short.

Therefore, knowing the AG is coming to answer our questions on rail safety, I would like to make a motion that we invite the minister to appear on the same day to address our questions regarding rail safety for the duration of one hour.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

I will entertain that motion once it's provided to the committee in both official languages, as well as the notice is given.

We'll move on to now to Ms. Jaczek.

Ms. Jaczek, you had a question.

Ms. Helena Jaczek (Markham—Stouffville, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

In the spirit of collaboration and so on, I was simply going to offer to Mr. Bachrach part of my time during the rotations for him to have some extra time to question the minister as he sees fits. That's just something I would like to offer Mr. Bachrach.

The Chair: Thank you very kindly, Ms. Jaczek.

Mr. Bittle.

Mr. Chris Bittle (St. Catharines, Lib.): I know Mr. Bachrach and I know he didn't intend it, but it may have come across as a suggestion that the clerk wasn't doing his job properly. I just want to point out that he's been an excellent asset and has really moved this committee forward in my time here. I know this may be my last meeting in front of the committee, but it has been well run with his help.

I've never seen an objection to the minister attending with the minister sitting right in front of us. We're having a debate and the time is limited. I appreciate that you may want the two people together for Facebook or TV purposes, but both have agreed to appear. We have them. The Auditor General will appear later, so I guess I'm lost as to what the basis for the objection is, other than for objection's sake, I guess.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bittle.

Mr. Bachrach, quickly, because we are chewing into—

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Very briefly, Mr. Chair, I certainly didn't mean to imply that there was anything nefarious going on or that the clerk had provided other than the best service to this committee, as he has from the beginning.

Simply, the hope was to have the minister for one hour solely on the topic of rail safety. He's appearing today for an hour on estimates. That's appreciated. It's a very broad topic and we have lots of questions. The intention of the committee was pretty clear in the motion that we passed previously. My hope is that the minister will

return to the committee alongside the Auditor General to answer questions on rail safety.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

Now we're going to move on to the minister.

Minister Alghabra, welcome. It's great to have you back. You were here a few weeks ago. The floor is yours for five minutes.

Hon. Omar Alghabra (Minister of Transport): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Colleagues, good afternoon.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for inviting me here today to present our main estimates.

[*English*]

I am pleased to be joined today, as you mentioned, by representatives from Transport Canada: Michael Keenan, deputy minister of transport; Ryan Pilgrim, assistant deputy minister, corporate services, and chief financial officer; Kevin Brosseau, assistant deputy minister, safety and security; Anuradha Marisetti, assistant deputy minister, programs; Craig Hutton, assistant deputy minister, policy; and Mike DeJong, director general, rail safety.

Despite the challenges of the global COVID-19 pandemic, transportation workers across all modes have continued to deliver food, medicine and other vital goods to Canadians throughout the crisis. Transport Canada employees have also helped make this possible by introducing a range of measures and guidance to protect those working in the transportation and shipping sectors. All of the department's work has been informed by the latest science and data as well as the guidance of public health agencies.

As Minister of Transport, I have had the pleasure of working with Transport Canada and the other organizations in the federal transportation portfolio for a couple of months now. Officials at all levels have been working tirelessly to support me in my new role, and I have been incredibly impressed by their talent and dedication. I welcome this opportunity to highlight some of that work.

Transport Canada's mandate is to ensure that our transportation system is safe and secure, efficient, green and innovative. The department's planned expenditures in the main estimates for 2021-22 cover a range of important measures to maintain a safe and secure transportation system while keeping people and goods moving.

The total expenditures fall under four categories. They are as follows: \$912 million under efficient transportation; \$480 million under green and innovative transportation system; \$445 million under safe and secure transportation; and \$215 million for internal services. Among these items, Transport Canada is requesting \$229 million in transfer payments to continue the incentive program for zero-emission vehicles. This program encourages consumers to stimulate the economy by helping them purchase zero-emission vehicles, accelerating their adoption while greening our economy.

Rail safety is also a priority of mine, so I am also requesting more than \$21 million in transfer payments for the rail safety improvement program, which will further enhance rail safety across Canada. I would also like to highlight some amounts for federal agencies and Crown corporations within my portfolio. These estimates include \$770 million for VIA Rail. This funding is higher than that in last year's main estimates primarily due to extended funding provided to stabilize VIA's operations and support longer-term capital planning. These funds will modernize VIA's service offering through fleet renewal, improve safety with track infrastructure enhancements, and keep its asset base in a state of good repair.

The Canadian Air Transport Security Authority is seeking \$568 million. This will ensure the authority can continue to deliver effective, consistent and high-quality security screening of air travellers and their baggage.

Marine Atlantic Inc. is seeking \$150 million to support its year-round, constitutionally mandated ferry and seasonal ferry service. This represents an increase of \$7 million in operating and capital funding.

Finally, the Federal Bridge Corporation Limited is requesting \$18.5 million in emergency support to offset the COVID-19 pandemic revenue shortfall.

I would now like to turn to the Auditor General's follow-up audit of Transport Canada's oversight of rail safety. The report, which I welcomed in February, focused on select elements of the Auditor General's 2013 audit. Transport Canada has acknowledged the findings of this year's report and is committed to the continuous improvement of our rail safety program. As I mentioned, safety is my most important priority.

• (1540)

We are already working to address all of the Auditor General's recommendations to further improve the effectiveness of our safety oversight. As we focus on the future and building back better, the transportation sector will be vital to Canada's economic recovery. I am confident that the investments outlined in these main estimates will help advance a transportation system that is safer, cleaner and more competitive.

[Translation]

Thank you, Mr. Chair and honourable members, for the opportunity to speak to you today.

I would now be happy to answer any questions you have.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Alghabra.

We're now going to move to our first round of questions.

We're going to start off with the Conservatives, with Ms. Kusie for six minutes, followed by Ms. Jaczek for six minutes, Mr. Barsalou-Duval and Mr. Bachrach, once again for six minutes each.

Ms. Kusie, the floor is yours.

• (1545)

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Good afternoon, Minister. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Yesterday unfortunately was an anniversary and not a good one. It was a year ago yesterday, on March 24, 2020, that your former colleague, the finance minister at that time, Bill Morneau, told the House of Commons that they "will work with the various sectors to ensure that they have access to the funds needed during this crisis. That will certainly be the case for the aerospace industry."

It's now one year later, Minister, and now our pilots, our flight attendants and all other aviation workers are still waiting.

Minister, I've asked you this many times before, and I am asking you again today: How much longer do these suffering workers need to wait before we see support for the sector?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Chair, let me go over what our government has done since the beginning of the pandemic. We made a decision from the beginning to roll out direct support to Canadians in broad-based programs that offered support to Canadians, through the emergency wage subsidy, through CERB, and through, by the way, support for small business and support for highly affected large businesses. Those programs worked and helped many Canadians.

With the arrival of the second wave in the fall and then the introduction of variants, we needed to add extra measures for travel to protect the health and safety of Canadians. We recognize that, because of those additional measures, we need to work on direct support for the airlines. We are currently in discussions with major airlines to provide customized support for the Canadian airline sector.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Minister, for that response.

I think it's very unfortunate, and I believe the stakeholders I have talked to in the airline sector would agree that their sector, and beyond their sector, has been used as a scapegoat and as a punching bag for your government's inability to manage this pandemic.

Speaking of stakeholders, this is a quote from last month from the CEO of WestJet. During the course of the decision by the government not to provide funding for WestJet or Air Canada, “we have lost 23% market share to international carriers, and I think that is disgraceful.”

I am not alone, Minister, in feeling that the way this entire sector has been treated is disgraceful.

Many countries provided sector-specific aid to their airline sectors in May and June of last year, almost a year ago, Minister. Why is Canada at least nine months behind the rest of the world in supporting our aviation sector?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Chair, my colleague is correct that other countries have made different decisions at different times. We, as the Government of Canada, made a decision to offer immediate support for Canadians, for workers, for small business and for large businesses that were hard hit.

I recognize the additional level of anxiety of workers in the aviation sector. We are working on reaching a customized package for the airline sector.

Let me say to the workers of the aviation sector that I hear them and I know about their anxiety. We're working with our colleagues at the Department of Finance and the Department of Industry and with other stakeholders to find a resolution through this package. Hopefully it will be coming soon.

Let me just say this. The Conservatives can't have it both ways. They can't say they are against big government programs and then say, “Oh, we want this government program.” They can't say, “The government is spending too much money” and then turn around and say, “The government should spend more money.”

Let me say to the workers of the aviation sector that it is the Liberal government that's going to provide support, that has already been providing support and that will continue to provide support. The Conservatives are the ones who are playing political games with this.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: They've been waiting for a year now, Minister. Unfortunately, this is not the only area in which your government is failing. Labour negotiations at the port of Montreal are ongoing, and many fear that a strike is imminent. Industry is having to divert shipments as well as face delays. What are you doing to ensure the port remains operational and that these goods make their way to Canadian markets?

• (1550)

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Chair, I agree with my colleague about the importance of the role that the port of Montreal plays for our economy and for Canadians. We are concerned about this ongoing uncertainty that exists with labour negotiations.

As my friend the Minister of Labour said today in question period—I know my colleague asked her a question—we are very much involved in the ongoing discussions. We've been providing support through mediators. We've been encouraging the parties to reach a settlement. We know that this is an important file. We will do everything we can, but again, here's where I disagree with the Conservatives. We believe in the collective bargaining process. We want

the parties to reach an agreement and we'll do everything we can to help them get there.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: We're now going to move to Ms. Jaczek for the Liberals.

Ms. Helena Jaczek: Chair, I will be splitting my time with MP Zuberi. Mr. Bachrach didn't take me up on the offer of time.

Minister, let's turn to the main estimates.

We do see there's an 8% increase, and you've alluded to some of the main drivers. The area I'm particularly interested in is the whole incentives for zero-emission vehicles program. Obviously, as part of a government that knows that climate change is real, I feel that this is particularly important. I know it's very important for my constituents as well.

Could you give us a few more details about the incentives for zero-emission vehicles program? In particular, how much does each ZEV on the road contribute to reducing greenhouse gases in terms of emissions per year, and how many businesses and Canadians have actually benefited from the incentive program?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, for that question. This is an important part of my mandate.

Look, if we are serious about climate change—and we are serious, because we believe that climate change is real, and it is a crisis that needs to be dealt with. The transportation sector is the second-largest source of emissions into our climate. If we are serious about climate change, we need to reduce emissions that come out of the transportation sector. That's why the program for zero-emission vehicles, to create an incentive for consumers, is a fantastic program that supports so many Canadians, businesses and the auto sector as well.

The idea behind it is to provide incentives to consumers and businesses to help them move up their decision to purchase a zero-emission vehicle, which they might otherwise be hesitant to do. This will increase the number of zero-emission vehicles on the road and accelerate their adoption. This will stimulate the auto sector by increasing the demand for those zero-emission vehicles and, equally important, it will reduce and remove emissions.

By the way, each ZEV, or zero-emission vehicle, prevents four metric tons of emissions per year. To answer the member's other question, 79,000 Canadians and Canadian businesses have benefited from this incentive.

Ms. Helena Jaczek: I'll now turn it over to my colleague MP Zuberi.

The Chair: MP Zuberi, the floor is yours.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Minister, thank you for being with us today. Thank you, as well, for the work you do.

[*English*]

As a member from the Montreal area and as a Quebecker, I'd like to ask you about the REM, also known as the Réseau express métropolitain, and about the station that's being built at the Montréal-Trudeau International Airport.

In addition to that, could you comment on what's happening with the proposed high-frequency VIA Rail train along the Montreal-Toronto corridor?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Chair, I thank my colleague for his work and his question.

Let me first state the obvious. The REM project is incredibly important. It enhances public transit in the Montreal region, and it is in sync with our objectives of increasing the utility of public transit and reducing greenhouse gases.

The Department of Transport and I are involved in discussions with the Montreal airport, the Government of Quebec and the Canada Infrastructure Bank on reaching a joint solution to support this station that will connect REM to the airport. It's very important. We're working. We're doing our part and we're active in reaching a solution regarding this station.

As for the question about high-frequency rail, this is something that the Prime Minister included in my mandate letter. Our government feels strongly about this. That's why our government invested in a joint office between VIA Rail, Transport Canada and the Infrastructure Bank to study this initiative thoroughly and to do the feasibility analysis. We are certainly following up on that work, and I look forward to the next step.

• (1555)

The Chair: Mr. Zuberi, you have one minute.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: I'll return it to my colleague Helena Jaczek.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Zuberi.

Ms. Jaczek.

Ms. Helena Jaczek: Thank you so very much again, Minister, for having come here twice since you were first made minister.

In terms of the zero-emission vehicles, I think there's great potential to actually improve the supply. You talked about the supply and demand issue.

To date, some of the real growth in vehicle purchases, at least in my neighbourhood, is in light utility vehicles. I'm certainly hoping to see zero-emission vehicles in that category.

Are you aware of movement in that direction at all in terms of progress in this area?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Chair, my colleague is right. Canadians love their utility vehicles.

In my conversations with, first, my colleague Minister Champagne, the Minister of Industry and then with many stakeholders

and with automakers, there is a recognition that the supply of zero-emission vehicles needs to be increased.

I have heard a commitment by the auto sector, by the automakers, to increase supply in those categories. We look forward to working with them on finding ways to enhance and increase the adoption of these vehicles among consumers and businesses when they come out.

Ms. Helena Jaczek: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Jaczek.

Thank you, Mr. Zuberi.

We're now going to move to Mr. Barsalou-Duval of the Bloc.

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, the floor is yours.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval (Pierre-Boucher—Les Patriotes—Verchères, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, Minister.

Normally when ministers appear before the committee, I'm all smiles. I tell them how glad I am to have them here and that they should come back more often.

Although it is true we would love to have you more often, unfortunately, I cannot say I'm very glad to see you. Let's just say, this time around, my enthusiasm has waned some. Customers have been waiting to have their plane tickets refunded for a year now.

Do you think that's acceptable?

[*English*]

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Chair, I'm not sure if the translation missed something, but let me thank my colleague for his question and for being happy to see me.

The department, my office and I have been working tirelessly to address the priorities of Canadians and the priorities of Quebeckers. We know we are going through a pandemic right now—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: What I am asking you, Minister, is whether you think it's acceptable for customers not to be refunded when they purchased tickets for services that were not rendered. The situation has gone on for a year now.

• (1600)

[*English*]

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Chair, if my colleague is asking about support for the aviation sector, let me take this opportunity to talk about the support that the aviation sector has received so far from our government.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: That wasn't what I asked the minister, Mr. Chair.

For the third time, my question to the minister is whether he thinks it is acceptable that, a year later, customers still have not been refunded for plane tickets they purchased.

[*English*]

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Chair, thank you. Finally, my colleague is able to highlight exactly the question.

By the way, my colleague would be interested in knowing that earlier this week, I met with the Quebec Minister of Justice just to speak about the refund for air passengers, because he, I and others agree that we need to find a way to refund passengers who had to cancel trips because of the pandemic. We are working with the airlines as we speak. I can assure you that the issue of refunds is an integral subject of this negotiation.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: You are confirming, then, Minister, that, a year into the pandemic, you still have not found a solution to the problem of airlines not refunding passengers for their plane tickets.

A committee member pointed out earlier that this was your second appearance before the committee. I would add that this is also the second time you've come here empty-handed. Indeed, workers in the aviation sector have been asking the government for help for a year now.

For the past year, whenever we have spoken to you or your predecessor, we got the impression that support was just around the corner, on the verge of being provided. Every time, though, we have been disappointed.

Can you assure us that, the next time we see you, or even in the next few days, our disappointment in your government will end?

[*English*]

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Chair, let me also say that I understand why my colleague is pushing for this. It is important for many Canadians not only in Quebec, but across the country and in my riding. This is an important issue, and I appreciate why my colleague is pushing for it. I wish I could give him a specific date on when and if we're going to have an answer to his question.

However, it's a priority for me and I am working with my colleague, the Minister of Finance, the Deputy Prime Minister, on making sure that we reach an agreement as quickly as possible.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Minister, an Air Canada employee by the name of Sean Fitzgibbon who worked for the airline for 32 years lost his job because he was blind. However, he had been working for Air Canada for 10 years while he was blind. He certainly wasn't next in line to lose his job given his place on the seniority list, so it seems pretty clear that he was fired because he was blind. The union spoke out about it.

I am wondering whether you plan to call Air Canada and say how ridiculous it is to fire people for having a disability even though they can do their job.

What do you think of that sort of thing?

[*English*]

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Chair, again, I thank my colleague for the question.

I'm very much aware of the challenges and difficulties that many workers in the aviation sector have been facing over the last few months. There have been a significant number of layoffs that break my heart, and it is the driver behind the—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: I'm talking about Sean Fitzgibbon's case, Minister.

[*English*]

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Chair, my colleague knows that I can't talk about individual cases. I'm happy, by the way, if he wants to talk to me about an individual case, to look at the case after the call, but I can't publicly speak about individual cases for privacy concerns.

Having said that, let me speak in general. It is very important—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Can you at least commit to looking into his case?

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval, and thank you, Minister. The time is up. I do apologize. I have to move on to the next speaker.

Mr. Bachrach, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here today. I want to start by asking you the question that's the subject of the motion I hope to pose later, which is, would you be willing to visit this committee on April 13 alongside the Auditor General to talk with us at more length about the specific topic of rail safety?

• (1605)

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Chair, to you and my colleagues, having been a member of Parliament for many years, I very much respect the work of the committee. The committee gets to decide on which motions to pass. I hope I've already demonstrated my desire to come back to see you, committee members. I've been in this job for just over two months, and I'm back here for the second time. I don't know if I can commit to a specific date, but I'm certainly happy to entertain any invitation by the committee.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Minister, rail safety is something that is on the minds of people in northwest B.C. these days given the already increased amount of dangerous goods being transported along the rail line between Prince George and Prince Rupert. There are also several terminal projects that, if completed, would increase the number of cars with dangerous goods going through the corridor by over 100 cars per day. Therefore, people are very concerned.

They're also concerned having heard the environment commissioner's report and the Auditor General's report and having seen a number of derailments along the rail corridor. A number of local governments and other organizations have written to you on this topic. These include the Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako, the North Coast Regional District, the Town of Smithers, the District of Houston, the Village of Burns Lake, and most recently the Northwest Regional Hospital District.

These folks are asking for you to conduct a regional risk assessment under the powers given to you by the Railway Safety Act. They want to know about the accident frequency and the responses since the year 2000. They want to know about evacuation plans of emergency response services for businesses and the public within dangerous goods evacuation zones. They want to know about the response times. They want to know about what role local fire departments will be asked to play. There are so many unanswered questions.

The Railway Safety Act, as I mentioned, gives you specific powers to conduct an inquiry into public interest matters related to rail safety. Given all of these factors, given the derailments, given the Auditor General's report, given the massive increase in dangerous goods being transported through our region, are you, as minister, willing to initiate and conduct one of these assessments?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Chair, let me repeat what I said in my opening remarks.

Rail safety is a top priority of mine. By the way, the Auditor General's report did clearly say that Transport Canada has made meaningful and important improvements on rail safety in follow-up to the 2013 audit. I understand there is further work that needs to be done, and we are committed to doing that work. Let me mention some of the things we've done over the last few years.

We've adjusted our inspection system to risk-based inspection. Instead of inspections being transactional, they are now risk-based. There are 35,000 safety oversight activities happening every year. We've increased the number of personnel, inspectors, by almost 50%. We've increased the number of inspections. We've added new regulations regarding fatigue. We've added new regulations regarding speed control. We've added new regulations regarding hazardous materials that are being transported by train. We've made significant improvements, including to emergency braking, by the way.

We've made significant improvements. We accept the fact that this is ongoing work. There is still more that needs to be done, and let me commit to you and to my colleagues on this committee that we are committed and determined to do everything we can to maintain rail safety.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Mr. Chair, through you to the minister, I don't deny that progress has been made, but I think most people would find it shocking, given the stakes, that after eight years not every recommendation in the original audit has been addressed. This is not acceptable.

I'd like to ask you a question, Minister, about a specific aspect of the Auditor General's report. It concerns something called safety management systems. These are systems that the companies them-

selves put in place. What her report shows is that Transport Canada was checking to see whether those systems existed but wasn't actually checking to see whether they ensured safety, whether they resulted in a safer environment. She called the safety management systems, quote, "a big loophole".

What is the minister going to do to close that loophole and protect communities?

• (1610)

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Chair, as I stated earlier, we are committed to implementing the Auditor General's recommendations.

Let me also let you and my colleagues know that I met personally with the Auditor General about her report. I committed to her personally that we are going to work on these recommendations. I accept what she's recommending. I've asked my department to see if there are other jurisdictions that are doing these extra measures that the Auditor General is doing. We couldn't find any jurisdictions that we could learn from.

That does not mean Canada cannot be the first in the world to do this. We will do this, and we will make sure that rail safety is a priority for everyone.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Alghabra, and thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

We're now going to move to our second round.

First up for the Conservatives we have Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Shipley, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Doug Shipley (Barrie—Springwater—Oro—Medonte, CPC): Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister, for joining us today. I know your time is valuable. We appreciate it.

Minister, I've been recently speaking with Mr. Craig Drury of the Associated Equipment Distributors. This association represents over 420 Canadian locations, over 27,000 workers and approximately \$8 billion in sales. They're having a slight issue that I promised and committed to them I would relay to you.

In this industry, there is a significant use of light-duty or pickup trucks that are registered as commercial vehicles and are required to operate under the hours of service regulations similar to those for long-haul truckers. These are light-duty trucks that are a long way from being for long-haul trucking. They're used for sales, service and construction—a great difference.

The association's question is, with the electronic logging device regulations that are currently being developed in your ministry, is there an opportunity to consider that the hours of service regulations not apply to light-use trucks?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Chair, thank you to my colleague for this question.

Let me talk first about how important it is, again, that we protect drivers and that we make sure safety remains paramount. That is one of the reasons we've implemented the electronic logging devices for truckers, for vehicles: to make sure that drivers are protected, to make sure that we avoid using written documents and to make sure that we use a seamless electronic logging devices.

This is something that the industry celebrated. This is something that the industry supported and that certainly drivers are embracing. We are now at the initial stages of rolling it out.

My colleague Mr. Shipley is asking a very specific question. I am happy to receive correspondence from him or from the company he's speaking about and to look at it, but I just want to remind him and everybody else that safety will always remain a priority for us.

Mr. Doug Shipley: Thank you, Minister. This association agrees too. It's not a matter of safety with them. They are all for the electronic devices. It's more just a matter of how they've been lumped in with something and they don't really fall into that category. I will follow up with you with some written questions in regard to this and also questions from Mr. Drury. I would appreciate a response to that, and so would his association.

I'd like to move on now to the cruise ship industry.

Minister, the cruise ship industry has been decimated, as you know, through this pandemic. I'll give you some numbers and hopefully you're aware of these. In 2019 the Canadian cruise industry comprised 29,000 jobs paying \$1.43 billion in wages. That same year, the industry generated a total of \$4.25 billion in economic activity.

The federal government has banned cruise ships from docking in Canadian ports until February 2022, obviously greatly impacting this industry. Why has that been put out so long? The cruise industry has done everything they can possibly do to make it safe. They've enhanced all their cleaning, their medical, their inspections and their testing. Could you please explain to me when this will be lifted and how this is going to be going forward?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Chair, I thank my colleague for this important question.

I'm quite aware that several communities benefit greatly from the business of cruise ships. When we made this decision, it was not easy, but it's consistent with all our decisions from day one.

As a government, we have told Canadians we will do whatever it takes to protect Canadians. We are in the middle of a pandemic. My colleague may recall what happened on cruise ships last year at the beginning of the pandemic, how easy it was to transmit COVID, and how difficult it was for people, but I know the industry knows this, and they are doing their best to protect future passengers.

Let me assure my colleague the reason we did this until next year is that we wanted to make sure we took the time to base our decisions on science and data. Today, infection rates and hospitalization rates are still high. We wanted to give a signal to the sector because if we said six months, they would be selling tickets two months from now, and we may have to change that decision if we discover it's too soon.

We wanted to give a sense of stability to the industry. Having said that, if data and science and public health advice tell us we are in a better place, we might be able to change that, but for now it is really important to have a clear and decisive decision for the protection of Canadians' health and safety.

• (1615)

Mr. Doug Shipley: Thank you, Minister.

Chair, do I have time for a very quick follow up on that?

The Chair: Not really.

Mr. Doug Shipley: And here I thought you were in a good mood today, Chair.

The Chair: You just took it with that preamble. I'm sorry, Mr. Shipley, but we have to move on.

Thank you, MP Shipley, and thank you, Minister Alghabra.

We're now going to move to the Liberals.

Mr. Bittle, you're up for five minutes.

Mr. Chris Bittle: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I know you discussed the Auditor General's report, but I was wondering if you would like to add anything else and advise the committee about your conclusions.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Chair, let me take a moment to thank my colleague Chris Bittle. I am losing him as a parliamentary secretary, and I am sad to see that happen, but I'm happy for him. He's moving to the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change. Minister Wilkinson has just gained a new and incredible parliamentary secretary. I'm sad to see Mr. Bittle move on, but I'm happy for him. I have also gained an incredible parliamentary secretary.

The Auditor General's report was very important. Let me take a moment to talk about the importance of the role the Auditor General plays in our society, in our government and in our system of government.

It is important to have a watchdog who constantly assesses and re-evaluates the progress and performance of governments and other agencies. I have a huge amount of respect for the Auditor General and her team.

We accept the findings of the Auditor General. She and her team have done a good, thorough job, and she acknowledged in her report that significant improvements have already occurred. She offered six recommendations. Those recommendations are important. We are committed to implementing them as stated in the report.

Mr. Chris Bittle: Minister, is the railway system in Canada safe?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Chair, yes.

By the way, the railway system in Canada is the longest in the world. It carries the fifth-most volume in the world, especially during this year. Because of COVID and the adjustments in our economy, the traffic and the volume the railway system has been carrying have seen a significant increase, yet we have seen railway workers, railway companies, shippers all step up and play their role.

We are seeing improvements in accident rates. Having said that, we should not stop pursuing and enhancing safety. As long as we have one accident, one is too many.

Mr. Chris Bittle: Minister, how does Transport Canada intend to measure the effectiveness of Transport Canada's rail safety oversight program?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Chair, we typically measure safety through the measurements of the transactions or the number of accidents that happen per volume. When you compare the number of accidents per volume, you see a decrease.

The Auditor General has also made some recommendations about doing another layer of assessment based on risk safety management, so we will be looking at adding other measures and other layers of assessments of our safety.

Let me repeat that our system is safe. It's world class and the world looks to Canada's safety system as an example.

• (1620)

Mr. Chris Bittle: Minister, can you provide some reassurance to travel agents? I did hear concerns from a number in my riding on the collapse of the industry. Can you provide some reassurance that their commissions will be protected as part of the assistance package for the air sector?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Let me tell you what the important elements of the discussions with the airlines are right now. We're talking about passenger refunds, about the restoration of regional routes and about jobs, but we're also talking about protecting the commissions of those independent travel agents.

Mr. Chris Bittle: Minister, would you like to comment on the decision by WestJet to resume operation in a number of cities in Atlantic Canada and Quebec?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: I am cautiously optimistic about these decisions. It's really important that... Look, we have to maintain vigilance when it comes to travel and when it comes to the number of infections. We are today being told by public health experts that we are probably at the beginning of a third wave, especially with the introduction of variants. It is really important that we continue to monitor the health measures.

I also know how important it is to maintain the connection of communities, all communities, with their neighbours and other regions of the country. I would say I'm cautiously optimistic. It's important to connect everyone. I look forward to hearing more decisions and more progress from the aviation sector and from airline companies.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Alghabra and Mr. Bittle.

We'll now move to Mr. Barsalou-Duval for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, the floor is yours.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I'm not sure whether you are aware of the dire situation involving the Cap-aux-Meules wharf, on the Magdalen Islands. The wharf's capacity has been significantly reduced. About 80% of catches go through the wharf, so the entire season for Magdalen Island crabbers who set out from Cap-aux-Meules is at risk, all because of a Transport Canada decision.

According to the papers, your own Liberal member for Gaspésie—Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine said that Transport Canada had handled the matter poorly.

Can you tell me whether you have a solution in mind to make sure Magdalen Island fishers do not lose their entire season?

[*English*]

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Let me assure my colleague and all people who live on the Magdalen Islands of how aware I am of this important and urgent situation. From day one my colleague Minister Lebouthillier has expressed her concerns about the situation. She helped arrange for a phone call with the mayor of the island. She arranged phone calls with other stakeholders on the island.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Minister, I don't want to know what the member has done. I want to know what you are going to do to fix the problem.

[*English*]

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Just so that my colleague and others know, we received a report that told us that the integrity of the wharf has deteriorated and the safety is at risk. We have to act. Having said that, we are working currently as the Ministry of Transport with the Ministry of Fisheries and Oceans and with local stakeholders to make sure that we have minimal impact on fishers and on local residents and to do our best to protect for safety but also make sure that people are affected as little as possible.

• (1625)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: If I understand correctly, then, you don't have a solution yet, but you are looking into the problem. We hope you come up with one very soon; the situation is dire, after all.

Shortly after you gave the Air Transat deal the go-ahead, it turned out that Air Canada might not be so keen to go through with the deal. Do you think you may have made the wrong decision since the company you approved to buy Air Transat might walk away? Nevertheless, you had been told that it was not a good idea.

[English]

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Chair, when I made the decision for the merger between Air Canada and Air Transat, I first had to make a decision on the file that was before me, on the acquisition that was before me. I made a decision based on all the information available to me and in the best interests of Quebecers and Canadians.

I cannot tell what the future is going to hold, but I feel confident that we as a government made the best decision for Air Transat, for Air Transat workers and for passengers in Quebec and across the country.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Alhabra, and thank you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

We're now going to move over to Mr. Bachrach for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Bachrach, the floor is yours.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, on the topic of support for airlines, we've heard from several of Canada's smaller regional airlines about the challenges they're facing, which in many ways are different from the challenges faced by the big airlines. Understanding that the negotiations are ongoing and that there are aspects of those you can't share with us, I wonder if you could share with us in broad terms the kinds of solutions you're considering in order to support these smaller regional carriers.

In particular, we've heard from carriers such as Air North about the importance of regulatory steps such as interline agreements with the larger air carriers. Could you tell us if that's something that's being considered?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Chair, regional airlines are incredibly important, because they connect remote communities. In some situations that's the only connection they have to the rest of the country. That's why our government has already provided support to regional and remote airlines and northern airlines, including Air North. We very much believe in the role that these regional small airlines play when they carry passengers to remote and northern areas.

We are certainly also talking about support for airports, and not just talking, we've committed to support for airports. I know that will also help small airlines.

Mr. Chair, I just want to assure you and my colleague that we're very much on top of this. We're working with small airlines to continue to offer support in the way it's needed to make sure that Canadians who live in these remote areas have the service they need.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I'm just wondering.... I didn't hear any mention in there about regulatory approaches.

Specifically, what we've heard about from Air North is the need for these interline agreements with the larger carriers, and the need for the government to step in and ensure residents of Canada's north and in remote communities have access to a competitive market and these smaller airlines are able to survive in the recovery from the pandemic.

Could you speak specifically to interline agreements? Is this something that you're aware of or understand?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Chair, I want to thank my colleague for also recognizing in his first question that I'm not able to speak about the ongoing discussions that are taking place with the major airlines and some of the details that are taking place. Having said that, I agree with him. We need to find a way to accelerate and enhance competition, particularly in remote and regional areas of our country.

Our government from day one has been working on supporting entrepreneurs in the aviation sector on finding regulatory ways to enhance competition, so yes, I am open to ideas to continue to enhance competition in the aviation sector, and I'm happy to.... By the way, I'm also in discussions with many stakeholders, including smaller airlines, on how we can do so. I invite my colleague to make submissions to my office about his ideas on how we can do so.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

Thank you, Minister Alhabra.

We are at 4:30. Minister Alhabra, I understand that you have to move on to your next appointment. On behalf of the committee, I do want to express our sincere appreciation to you for coming today. I think we had a great discussion, with a lot of questions asked and a lot of questions answered, plus more. Minister, I do appreciate your attendance here today.

Members, we're now going to move to our second hour.

Mr. Clerk, do we need some sound checks done or is everybody all taken care of? Everybody's all taken care of. I see the thumbs-up.

Okay. We're going to move into our second hour now.

We have with us, as was mentioned before, from the Department of Transport, Michael Keenan, deputy minister; Craig Hutton, director general, strategic policy; Anuradha Marisetti, assistant deputy minister, programs; Kevin Brosseau, assistant deputy minister, safety and security; Ryan Pilgrim, chief financial officer and assistant deputy minister, corporate services; and finally, Michael De-Jong, director general, rail safety.

We do have our list in the second round, as presented to me by the clerk. We're going to start off with Mr. Michael Kram.

Michael, you have six minutes. The floor is yours.

• (1630)

Mr. Michael Kram (Regina—Wascana, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for joining us today.

On January 26, Transport Canada issued an advisory circular regarding the designation of international airports in Canada. It came as a surprise to some that the airports in Regina and Saskatoon had lost their international designation. I was wondering if the witnesses could speak to how they came to the decision that the Regina and Saskatoon airports were to lose their international designation.

The Chair: Mr. Keenan, are you going to start us off?

Mr. Michael Keenan (Deputy Minister, Department of Transport): Sure. I'd be happy to, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for the question from the member. It's a good question.

The purpose of the circular was to update information on international airport designations. I would say we recognize that we caught a few people by surprise, and we're continuing to consult on that. In fact, we're seeking information from any airport or aerodrome regarding its activities aligning to this definition under IATA. We anticipate advancing those consultations and issuing a more comprehensive list of airports. It was simply a reflection of the fact that we didn't have all of the information, so we're continuing to consult on that.

I believe officials from the department have reached out to partners in the airport sector to highlight the fact that we would welcome information from them to build a more complete and updated list.

Mr. Michael Kram: Is it typical to change these designations without a consultation process beforehand?

Mr. Michael Keenan: Quite frankly, no. I think in this case we thought we had all the information in from the airports, but we didn't. We are basically going out to them and working through the process of consulting to build a more comprehensive list. In part, the process of developing the list ended up being misconstrued as the list itself, and for that I think we just take responsibility. We were unclear in our communications and unclear in our process.

We strive to work very closely with our partners in the air sector, and occasionally we don't quite get it right in our consultation process.

Mr. Michael Kram: Moving forward, can you elaborate on the process that airports will have to follow for reapplying for this designation?

Mr. Michael Keenan: I'm going to turn it over to the assistant deputy minister of safety and security, Kevin Brosseau, to talk a little bit more about the process on that.

Mr. Kevin Brosseau (Assistant Deputy Minister, Safety and Security, Department of Transport): Mr. Chair, there is a process, and in fact what an airport would have to do is submit documentation to Transport Canada hitting on the elements identified in the International Civil Aviation Organization convention. Those requirements will be, and in fact already have been, communicated to the implicated airports. As I understand it, the process to submit that documentation has already begun, which identifies the requirements for such things as customs services and policing services. Those are but two examples. There is a long litany, but that process has already begun.

• (1635)

Mr. Michael Kram: Can the witnesses speak to the timeline of this process? Is it a matter of submitting some documentation and then getting the rubber stamp, or does it take many weeks and months?

The Chair: Mr. Keenan or Mr. Brosseau.

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: I can follow up, Mr. Chair.

The process would depend on the extent of the details and the volumes of documentation that are submitted, but the department understands that this is an important issue. As we review all such documentation received from a regulated industry, we would in fact review that apace. I can't commit to how long it would take precisely, but I would say that it would be something we would undertake with haste.

Mr. Michael Kram: Finally, I would like to follow up on Nav Canada's study to close several of this country's air traffic control towers.

It's my understanding that at the end of this study the transport minister will have the ability to order Nav Canada to keep a tower open if the minister is of the opinion that the order is necessary for aviation safety or for the safety of the general public. Can the witnesses offer any insight as to how the minister will come to this final decision regarding the closure of the towers?

The Chair: Gentlemen.

Mr. Michael Keenan: I'll start that, Kevin, and then you may want to pick up on it.

Mr. Chair, the question is very topical.

NavCan has launched consultations and studies looking at adjusting the level of service for a range of aerodromes. The process by which the minister comes to a view as to the safety of it is a process that is carried out completely by the safety experts in the civil aviation directorate at Transport Canada.

NavCan has to submit studies fully assessing the implications of any proposed level of service change, and there's a very careful review in the civil aviation directorate. If there's an issue with respect to aviation safety, they will deny the proposed level of service change.

While in legislation it says the minister, as I said, it's a technical safety assessment carried out by civil aviation officials.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Keenan, Mr. Brosseau and Mr. Kram.

We're now going to move on to the Liberals with Mr. Sidhu having the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu (Brampton East, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being with us today.

I've heard from many of my constituents who are interested in ZEVs, zero-emission vehicles. With the government investing in charging infrastructure, it's making the switch to zero-emission vehicles a little more streamlined. This may have been touched upon; however, I'll go back to it just in case.

Back in 2019, \$700 million was provided for many federal measures to encourage the uptake and adoption of ZEVs. This funding was supposed to last three years. How long did it take for Canadians to use up this funding, and is there funding in the estimates for the ZEV program?

Mr. Michael Keenan: Mr. Chair, I'll answer the initial part of that and then turn it over to Anu Marisetti, who's responsible for the program, to give a bit more detail.

There are monies in the main estimates for the ZEV program. We've seen that the program has helped facilitate a fast take-up of the purchase of zero-emission vehicles. As a result, the government added additional resources to the program to extend its duration. The increase in the overall main estimates for Transport Canada in 2021-22 compared to the main estimates of the year before is largely due to the additional resources for zero-emission vehicle incentives.

I'll turn it over to Anu to complete what that means in terms of exact dates.

Ms. Anuradha Marisetti (Assistant Deputy Minister, Programs, Department of Transport): Mr. Chair, as was correctly pointed out, in 2019 funding was provided for the ZEV program and it was supposed to last for three years, but we ended up exhausting it by December 2020. Now in the fall economic statement, another \$287 million has been allocated and that will be used to continue to provide this incentive program to both individuals and businesses for the next two years.

• (1640)

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you for that information.

We all know that transportation accounts for a large portion of our emissions. This program, as you said, is very popular. A lot of the funding was used up and \$287 million is allocated to it now. What is the potential for programs like these and the transportation sector as a whole to contribute to Canada's overall GHG reduction targets? I know it's very important as well for my kids and for future generations.

Mr. Michael Keenan: It's a big question. At Transport Canada we're spending a lot of time looking at it. The committee member is right; the transportation sector writ large is the second-largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in Canada, at about 25%.

We have seen in recent years advances in technology that are assessing economically feasible changes in transportation systems to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We've seen it in passenger vehicles. Zero-emission vehicles are still a bit more expensive than internal combustion vehicles, but the gap is closing. The incentives are driving switchover. We're seeing opportunities in large commercial vehicles, particularly ones that actually work locally in a city and return to base, to use zero-emission battery electric technology and perhaps clean hydrogen technology. I think the tougher ones will be aviation, but even there we're seeing opportunities to reduce carbon emissions from aviation that didn't look feasible even a few years ago.

We're quite optimistic about the ability to drive through a series of initiatives. I think there are some out there on the street already, and there are some where the government is actively considering additional initiatives under the enhanced climate plan, to drive a fairly significant transition to a lower-carbon transportation system in Canada.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you for that. I'm happy to hear that many initiatives are under way. We heard our infrastructure minis-

ter talk about the need for lowering emissions in our transit system. I'm happy to see the announcement from our government for the billions of dollars to help cities and transit authorities switch over to electric vehicles. That's a very positive sign. I know there was very good feedback.

Ms. Marisetti, is there anything else you want to add in terms of the ZEV program? I have about 30 seconds left.

Ms. Anuradha Marisetti: Mr. Chair, I'd just like to add that the program reached about 3.7% market share in 2020, up from 3% in 2019, so it continues to show good progress.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Marisetti and MP Sidhu.

We'll move on to Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd like to take this opportunity to put forward some motions; either I have not had a chance to move them yet or the committee has not yet had a chance to discuss them.

On October 26, I gave notice of the following motion:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(1)(a), an Order of the Committee do issue for correspondence between Transport Canada, including the Minister of Transport and his staff, and the Canadian Transportation Agency regarding cancelled plane tickets and the right of air passengers to be reimbursed, and that these documents be provided to the Committee Clerk within 15 days following the adoption of this motion.

I would like to discuss the motion now, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'll stop the time.

To our witnesses, I do apologize. We're going to digress to a motion right now.

Mr. Clerk, do you have that motion handy?

• (1645)

The Clerk: Yes. It was just sent to the committee. We'll do a quick distribution to everyone in one moment.

The Chair: Just in terms of the time, Mr. Clerk, can you read it out?

The Clerk: Sure. It reads, "That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(1)(a), an order of the committee do issue for all of the studies of the last five years, from"—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Sorry to interrupt, Mr. Clerk, but that is another motion. For the one I just read, I gave notice on October 26.

[*English*]

The Clerk: Oh.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

Mr. Clerk, go ahead.

The Clerk: It will take me just one second. I'll have to dig that one up. He just submitted a different motion, so you'll have to bear with me for about a minute while I locate the other one.

The Chair: Members, stand by. I'll take a moment to allow the clerk to try to search out that motion. It has been passed on to you by the clerk in both official languages, I understand.

Mr. Bittle, did you have a question?

Mr. Chris Bittle: I can wait for the clerk.

The Chair: Okay, thank you, Mr. Bittle.

We'll suspend for about a minute.

• (1645) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1645)

The Clerk: The motion reads:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(1)(a), an Order of the Committee do issue for correspondence between Transport Canada, including the Minister of Transport and his staff, and the Canadian Transportation Agency regarding cancelled plane tickets and the right of air passengers to be reimbursed, and that these documents be provided to the Committee Clerk within 15 days following the adoption of this motion.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Clerk.

It has been so moved by Mr. Barsalou-Duval. The motion is on the table now. Do members of the committee have any questions or comments?

I see one hand up.

Mr. Bittle, you have the floor.

Mr. Chris Bittle: Mr. Chair, again we're into one of these production motions. It seems the goal is designed to make the department fail to try to produce potentially hundreds, if not thousands, of documents, translate them and bring them back to the committee within 15 days. I think we're dealing with several holidays around that time as well.

I'd like to get an opinion from the opposition. The minister is usually entitled to advice from his exempt staff. I'm concerned that this is getting to areas that Parliament hasn't delved into before in terms of correspondence between.... Maybe it's just a matter of clarification. Maybe Mr. Barsalou-Duval is just looking for correspondence between the Transport Canada minister and his staff with the Canadian Transportation Agency rather than correspondence between the minister and his staff. That clarification is important. I think we need to make sure that's not on the table.

• (1650)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bittle.

We're now going to Mr. Rogers, and then Ms. Jaczek and then Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

Mr. Rogers, the floor is yours.

Mr. Churence Rogers (Bonavista—Burin—Trinity, Lib.): Chair, this is a motion that would require an extensive amount of work to produce these kinds of documents, and besides, aren't these kinds of documents between the staff and the minister supposed to

be confidential information that we're requesting? I would certainly not support that kind of motion.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rogers.

Ms. Jaczek.

Ms. Helena Jaczek: Chair, the minister has said over and over again that any assistance package is dependent on the reimbursement of passengers. I'm agreeing with my colleagues on the confidentiality of the correspondence, the toing and froing. Since you posted your motion, we have a result. We know the minister is committed to ensuring reimbursement. I'm wondering what practical effect this will have going forward.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Jaczek.

Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, honourable members, for your questions and clarifications.

I put forward the motion because I wanted the committee to adopt it back in the fall, when I first submitted it. Unfortunately, that was not possible. I believe there was opposition to the 14-day deadline. If members find that deadline too tight, I am amenable to changing it, depending on what members feel is a reasonable deadline. Perhaps 21 days would do the trick.

As for Mr. Bittle's comment about the correspondence, I want to make clear that the correspondence in question is between the Canadian Transportation Agency and Transport Canada, and between the Canadian Transportation Agency, the minister's office and the minister, himself. Obviously, I am not trying to capture correspondence between internal office staff.

I would be shocked if there were thousands of pages of documents. In fact, my feeling is that anywhere close to 20 emails would be a lot. The agency is supposed to be entirely independent, making its own decisions. As far as I can tell, this kind of correspondence exists, given that we saw similar exchanges after receiving documents related to other motions for the production of papers. It may not have been a lot, but it did exist.

Nevertheless, when a member of my staff made an access to information request, we were told that there was no such documentation. That is surprising because the opposite is true. The committee received documents, but there were none according to the response to the access to information request. Something is wrong there, so I think it's important to set things straight.

That is why I am asking the committee to adopt the motion.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

Go ahead, Mr. Sidhu.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Mr. Chair, I do agree with some of my colleagues here on the timeline, with the sensitivity around this. We do know that the government is working hard and diligently toward an agreement. I've spoken to many of my constituents as well. Part of the agreement...the refund for passengers is part of that.

With the Easter long weekend coming up, we're not going anywhere, but I think the department also deserves to be respected, and we need to be considerate of that as well for the department.

Those are some of my thoughts, but I would also like to hear what our Conservative friends or our friends from the NDP think of this. It would be nice if they were to weigh in as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sidhu.

Next is Mr. Bittle.

• (1655)

Mr. Chris Bittle: Mr. Chair, again, I appreciate the update from Mr. Barsalou-Duval, and perhaps we should start working on some of the changes. Perhaps it isn't many.

There's another concern I have if we're dealing with airlines and with refunds and potential correspondence. My concern comes back, and I know we discussed.... I forget what the issue was going back to the fall. Perhaps it was this very motion itself, if we've debated it before. I think we did debate another motion for the production of documents, but it was on the issue of commercial sensitivity.

If we're going to go forward with this.... I know we agreed to that before in terms of how it's something that, hopefully, we can agree to. Hopefully, we can ensure, because we don't want to put the airlines in a negative position.... I shouldn't say "negative position", as I'm not too worried about putting the airlines in a negative position in terms of having to answer questions of Parliament and parliamentarians, but it's in terms of having commercially sensitive information released in a public setting that may have been shared with the minister's office or the Canadian Transportation Agency.

Those are the further concerns that I have.

I see that a couple of hands are up. I would like to hear from Mr. Bachrach what he has to say on the issue.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bittle.

Mr. Bachrach.

You're on mute, Taylor.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: That was my best material, Mr. Chair.

Thanks, Mr. Bittle, for asking what my thoughts are on what I see as being a very reasonable motion.

We too would be very interested to see the tone and content of any conversations that took place between the minister's office and Transport Canada and the CTA. Before and after the statement on vouchers, what was the tone of those conversations? How much coordination was there between the arm's-length CTA and Transport Canada and the minister? Maybe there was very little, in which case it would set our minds at ease. However, with so many questions about how things transpired and why thousands of passengers have not yet received the money they're owed, I think it would really benefit this committee's work to have that information.

It seems entirely appropriate to me, so I'll be supporting the motion.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

Ms. Kusie, go ahead.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Chair.

[*Translation*]

I want to thank Mr. Barsalou-Duval for his motion.

The Conservatives are always for transparency, so we will vote in favour of the motion.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kusie.

Mr. Sidhu.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: I was just going to add here that many companies share information with the government and they consider it to be confidential. I just want to throw that out there.

I also think we could be discussing rail safety here. It's very important to many of the members here, but here we are discussing another subject.

The Chair: I do want to be clear that one of the reasons I thought this motion was already dealt with at a previous meeting is that it was on the table and we had shut it down, basically. Now we're just resuming debate on the same motion.

With that, I will move to Mr. Bittle.

Mr. Chris Bittle: Again, we're in the same boat. I hear the opposition and the desire to move this forward. I think Monsieur Barsalou-Duval did state that the timeline may be open for some movement. With Easter and Passover coming this week and with restrictions potentially increasing in Ontario.... I hear things are doing much better in Quebec, but unfortunately they're not doing much better in Ontario, and that is a real challenge, as we know. I think there's only one member sitting in the committee room today. As much as we would like to keep things open and keep our workplaces going, the virus is in charge and the virus controls these things. I don't want to put us in a position where, despite the good faith efforts....

I guess I'm a little disappointed, because we really could have asked the officials. The people who will be in charge of this process are sitting here with their cameras off, waiting to carry on and talk to us about fundamental issues like safety and like COVID-19 and the impact on the sector. It could have been a good opportunity to ask them.

I guess what I'd like to do, as I'm rambling on a bit here, in terms of simplification.... I know it's a political statement and I don't want to get into the issue in terms of the right of air passengers to be reimbursed. I don't know if that adds a level of complexity, and that's not the hill that I necessarily want to die on today. I know that no one believes this, but as lawyers we like to keep things as simple as possible, despite many of the things you've seen from your own lawyers.

Just as an issue of clarification to remove that line.... Hopefully, these can be friendly amendments, but to remove that line just for clarification.... Perhaps we could also simplify—it may just be a translation issue from French to English—and maybe just tighten up the language in terms of the “correspondence between Transport Canada, including the Minister of Transport” and his office. Get rid of that and the “staff” portion and “the Canadian Transportation Agency” and increase the time to 30 days.

Again, Mr. Bachrach could be right. It could be a few documents. It could be hundreds of documents. We don't know.

I don't know, but given COVID-19, given the inability to necessarily freely go into the office and the right of parliamentarians to have documents in both official languages, those are my thoughts for clarification purposes. We would be fine to move forward on that.

• (1700)

The Chair: That said, MP Bittle, are you making that as an amendment?

Mr. Chris Bittle: I didn't put anything very specific in there. My apologies to the clerk. I don't know if he can piece together an amendment from my ramblings. If we even just said “do issue for correspondence between Transport Canada and the Canadian Transportation Agency”, and again, this is just for clarification, not to try to avoid the minister's office having to comply with this. The minister's office is part of Transport Canada.

It's just to clarify that line, because that's the line that worries me, so to clarify: “That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(1)(a), an order of the committee do issue for correspondence between Transport Canada and the Canadian Transportation Agency regarding cancelled plane tickets, and that these documents be provided to the committee clerk within 30 days of the adoption of this motion.”

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bittle.

I'm going to take that as an amendment. I'm going to be asking members for discussion on the amendment.

Mr. Clerk, are you clear with the amendment?

Thank you.

With that, are there questions or comments on the amendment?

Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

• (1705)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am open to the member's amendment. One thing concerns me, though. If it says “Transport Canada”, does that include the transportation minister and his office?

I am not so sure the minister's office is considered part of Transport Canada.

I am open to the rest.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

Before I go back to Mr. Bittle, Mr. Rogers, do you have a question?

Mr. Churence Rogers: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair.

My question was around a confidentiality piece as well—and Mr. Bittle covered that—and around the time frame, because I thought the time frame was much too short to get something done here, to put that kind of request in front of staff given the time we have and with Easter break coming up and all the rest.

I'm still not comfortable with the motion, but I think if the amendment Mr. Bittle has put in there is doable, then perhaps I could consider supporting it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rogers.

Mr. Bittle, the floor is yours.

Mr. Chris Bittle: With regard to the minister's staff, Monsieur Barsalou-Duval is right that we should probably have something specific in there.

Perhaps then, I will withdraw my motion, if that's allowed. I don't make a lot of amendments. If I'm allowed to withdraw my motion, I will try this again, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Chris Bittle: Thank you.

The motion then is as follows: “That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(1)(a) an order of the committee do issue for correspondence between Transport Canada including the Minister of Transport's office and the Canadian Transportation Agency regarding cancelled plane tickets, and that these documents be provided to the committee clerk within 30 days following the adoption of this motion.”

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bittle.

Mr. Clerk, do you have that?

That's good.

Are there any questions or comments on that amendment?

I have Mr. Barsalou-Duval followed by Mr. Sidhu.

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, the floor is yours.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you.

I just wanted to say I would support the amendment with that wording.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

Mr. Sidhu.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Definitely my colleagues make a great point. I think the timeline of 30 days would be helpful to many in the department. We do know, as my colleague was saying, that we're into our third wave. I think here in Ontario there were over 2,000 cases today, which is a record, so it's not simply going into the office to print a few documents. There are certain restrictions we all have to abide by, so I think it's important that we give proper timing to the department to prepare the documents. Probably some of them have to go through translation on top of that. That would involve more folks in this. I think the 30 days would be very helpful.

I'm happy that my colleague agrees that's a good condition to go on. I think there are many other things in terms of the documents that need to be discussed as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sidhu.

Mr. Bittle.

Mr. Chris Bittle: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

I was worried that I wasn't going to get much of an opportunity to speak in my last committee appearance, and that many of you would be disappointed by that, but I'm glad I'm able to remedy that.

I would like to thank Monsieur Barsalou-Duval. He's right, it is an issue of transparency, and I believe Mr. Bachrach mentioned that as well. We should move forward on it.

I appreciate Monsieur Barsalou-Duval's comments with respect to supporting the amendment. I know Mr. Bachrach did appreciate that I wanted to know his thoughts on the previous issue. I would also like to extend that again. I was hoping to hear the views of our friends in the NDP and the Conservative Party, and if this is acceptable, provides the department enough time to process this request, but at the same time it meets with issues of transparency and accountability. If we could hear from them, I would be more than happy to stop talking and move on to the next point.

I see Mr. Bachrach's hand is up, so I will stop talking and hopefully we can get a consensus on this amendment that removes the line about staff and changes it to 30 days.

I appreciate the committee listening.

• (1710)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bittle.

Mr. Rogers.

Mr. Churence Rogers: Mr. Chair, as Mr. Bittle said a minute ago, if we could follow the amendment and remove "staff" and go to "at least 30 days", then I think it might be something I could support, because I still think, depending on production of documents, that is not an extensive amount of time.

I certainly couldn't support the original motion.

I want to be clear that the amendment is to remove "staff" and to go to "at least 30 days". I want some clarification on that, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rogers.

You are correct. We are looking at having it go back to "30 days", as well as "staff" being removed.

With that, I am going to move to Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have no trouble with this amendment, especially since the mover seems to be okay with it.

I am a little confused by removing the reference to staff since I would imagine that reference to "communications by the office" would logically include communication by staff of that office. However, I'm not quite sure where Mr. Bittle is going with that, but the timeline seems like a good compromise. I'm willing to accept that, and I think we should move on to a vote.

The Chair: Mr. Bittle, do you have any further comments?

Mr. Chris Bittle: Yes, very quickly, and I don't want to worry Mr. Bachrach that I'm up to something, though perhaps sometimes I am, but today is not that day.

It appeared to be an awkward construction, and if we're including the Minister of Transport's office, that includes his staff. I don't want correspondence between staff and the minister to be included, and we've agreed that it isn't, so again, perhaps we'll hear from Ms. Kusie and I'll shut off my mike.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bittle.

Ms. Kusie.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

If Mr. Barsalou-Duval supports the amendment, we do too.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kusie.

With no further questions or comments, I'm now going to move to the vote on the amendment.

(Amendment agreed to: yeas 11; nays 0)

Thank you, Mr. Clerk, and thank you, members.

We're now going to move to the main motion as amended.

(Motion as amended agreed to: yeas 11; nays 0 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

Thank you, Mr. Clerk, and thank you, members.

It is 5:15 and the lights in my house have yet to start flashing so there's no vote yet. With that said, members, do you want to proceed past this point in time and wait for the bells to start or do you want to adjourn?

What's your call on that, members?

Mr. Bachrach, go ahead.

• (1715)

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: My preference would be that we continue. I think, as we did last time, there's plenty of time to make our virtual way over to the virtual chamber and virtually vote.

The Chair: Thank you for that intervention, Mr. Bachrach. I appreciate that.

Are members all okay with that? Okay.

When the bells do start, we're going to need unanimous consent to continue, so I will be asking for that at that time.

With that, we do have our witnesses still in the room. If I remember correctly—Mr. Clerk, correct me if I'm wrong—Mr. Barsalou-Duval had the floor.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Since my motion took up a bit of time, other members can have the floor to question the witnesses.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

With that, we are going to move to Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Bachrach, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome back to the committee, Mr. Keenan. It's good to see you again.

As you're probably aware, on February 11 a small tugboat sank near Kitimat, B.C., in an accident that claimed the lives of two men, Troy Pearson and Charley Cragg. It was a really tragic maritime disaster. There are a lot of questions being asked. I appreciate that there is a Transportation Safety Board investigation ongoing.

The family of one of the men has launched a petition to have the boat raised. That petition has received over 11,000 signatures to date. Could you speak to whether Transport Canada is pushing to have the boat raised, or whether that's something you're willing to consider? What role does Transport Canada play in that question? What are some of the other considerations in terms of ensuring a fulsome investigation and getting the families of these two men the answers they need for closure?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

Before I go to Mr. Keenan, I now see the bells are ringing. I will need unanimous consent by the committee to continue.

Do I have that unanimous consent?

Mr. Chris Bittle: No. Rather than being a complete jerk and denying unanimous consent, can I propose, with unanimous consent, that we go another five minutes, or however much time is left, to allow Mr. Bachrach to finish his question? We'd bring the clock down rather than just ending it fully.

The Chair: Is everybody okay with that?

That's fine. Okay.

Mr. Keenan, the floor is yours.

Mr. Michael Keenan: Thank you for the remarks from the honourable member, Mr. Chair. There are several parts to the member's question.

First and foremost, I just want to echo that our thoughts are with the families and that we appreciate the great pain they're in as a result of the loss of their loved ones in such a tragic manner. The circumstance in terms of it being one of the first jobs for somebody new in the industry is just a terrible tragedy, which is why we work so hard in Transport Canada across every mode to try to make sure we're doing everything we can to reduce the risk of these kinds of tragic accidents. That's the first thing.

The second thing is, as the member correctly pointed out, the TSB has launched an investigation into the causes that led to this. They do really good work. As a matter of priority, we take into account the results of their investigations in evolving safety regulations and oversight activities, so we are waiting to see what will happen and what will come of their report.

When there is an incident, we always do fact-finding to assess what happened and to determine whether or not we should launch an investigation. It's difficult to provide any material update on that, because it's sort of a very careful legal process that is currently in an oversight activity.

On the issue of raising the tug, under the Canada Shipping Act, there is a set of rules in terms of determining when sunken wrecks need to be raised or some action taken against them. In the legislation and in the regulation, the focus is on the threat to the environment, for example, if it's leaking oil or if it is a threat to navigation.

There are very difficult circumstances like this where the remains of loved ones are in wrecks. There is no authority or mandate to raise the wrecks in those circumstances, but there's a discussion that goes on between the RCMP and the Coast Guard to take into account the exact conditions and the situation they're in.

• (1720)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Keenan.

Go ahead, Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Keenan.

I'll direct some communications to the Coast Guard and the RCMP in that case.

I did speak with the ILWU, which, as you know, represents a number of tugboat crew up and down our coast. They have real concerns about these smaller tugboats and the regulatory system that's in place to ensure their safety, particularly for commercial vessels under 15 tonnes.

This isn't the first incident involving this class of vessel. I'd like you to speak a little bit to the steps your department is taking to ensure that, in the future, when workers go out to work at sea in these vessels, they come home to their families at night.

Mr. Michael Keenan: Just to add one point to the previous question in terms of raising the tug, I think one of the key challenges and issues in this particular circumstance is the depth of the water that the tug is resting in. It's quite deep, which puts people at risk bringing it up. It's a situation where these factors have to be taken into account by the Coast Guard.

In terms of the issue of incidents with tugs, it is an area where Transport Canada has taken note of the fact that there are incidents that happen and that it's an area where we have increased our oversight activity in recent years as part of what I would call a risk-based oversight system in which we're always looking at where we see incidents and then try to move our oversight activities to address them.

I may turn to the ADM of safety and security, Kevin Brosseau, to speak a bit more about that.

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: That is indeed the point from a risk-based perspective. As the member mentioned, Mr. Chair, this is a vessel of a certain weight, and the regulatory posture at Transport Canada under our regulatory regime is based on the size or the weight of the vessel. In fact, regarding the safety management system regulations that are required with respect to those vessels, we are engaged in consultation with industry stakeholders, including the Canadian marine advisory council, with respect to that and to advancing potential changes to our regulations looking at the fall, and it's a very important piece. Obviously, as the member mentioned, the safety of seafarers, including those on tugs, obviously, is a critical element of our risk-based oversight posture at Transport Canada.

• (1725)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brosseau.

You have time for a quick question, Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Well, I certainly appreciate the responses.

I suppose my question is whether the current risk-based regulatory system is adequate to ensure that incidents like this don't happen. To my understanding, from discussion with the ILWU, some of these smaller vessels, under 15 tonnes, are being used in ocean conditions in which they are not necessarily appropriate; the inspections aren't necessarily frequent, and people are going to sea in situations where they aren't as safe as they could be. The question is really what specific improvements the department will be making to ensure that workers are safe at sea.

The Chair: Gentlemen.

Mr. Michael Keenan: Go ahead, Kevin.

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: I would say that we are currently reviewing a risk-based system, Mr. Chair. In fact, if shortcomings are identified, then we'll adjust accordingly as we do and as we carry out our oversight activities with respect to these vehicles.

I will say that the tug industry in B.C. has been leading on safety management for many years. We'll continue to adjust if, in fact, we find any deficiencies that need to be addressed.

Mr. Michael Keenan: Just to build on Mr. Brosseau's comments, we have seen a pattern of incidents among the small tugs, as the member has indicated. Those are the ones below 15 tonnes. The bigger the vessel, the more stringent the rules get.

We've done two things. We've done a fair bit of outreach in terms of promoting compliance. As well, we're actually launching a small-vessel compliance program for tugs, and we're looking at bringing in a safety management program for these small tugs. We would agree that it's an area that merits additional oversight and additional enforcement and programming; I would say not just enforcement but also raising awareness and requiring safety management in that small vessel class.

We believe with these actions we have started to undertake and will be undertaking, we can reduce the risk we see in the activities of the small tug class. They're small vessels, but there are a lot of them, particularly up and down the west coast.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Keenan and Mr. Brosseau and the entire Transport team. We truly appreciate your participation in today's meeting.

It was a great meeting, with a lot of information given out, a lot of questions asked and a lot of answers provided, so to everybody, including our members on the committee, I say, great job today. It was very productive.

Before I adjourn, I'd be remiss if I didn't take the opportunity to also extend congratulations as well as appreciation to two members of our committee who will be leaving us.

Mr. Bittle is now taking on a new role.

Chris, thank you for your participation in our meetings. We truly are going to miss you. Our loss is going to be someone else's gain. Thank you for your time here.

Mr. Sidhu, you have taken on a new role, a new PS role. To you, congratulations. We're not too sure when you're going to be departing, but I understand it probably is going to be within the next three weeks. Again, we congratulate you and thank you for your participation with our committee. You as well will be truly missed. Again, someone else's gain is going to be our loss.

We are expecting to have two new members on the committee. We'll be welcoming them here, I'm assuming, within three weeks, at our next meeting.

Finally, I want to say, to the minister and the members of the Transport team, that we do appreciate a lot of what you're doing, especially as it relates to the aviation sector, and, of course, your efforts to try to come up with a deal with the aviation sector. I think some of the comments that were made today give us a lot of comfort. More importantly, beyond us there are those who are out there expecting refunds for tickets that were purchased, as well as the travel agents, who have heard today from the minister himself that those are on the table, and of course being discussed within these negotiations. That is truly going to mean a lot less anxiety for those who are affected.

Again, I express my sincere appreciation.

With that, members, we will now adjourn. Have a great evening.

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