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of Prince Edward Island**

**Responses to Questions and
Oral Question Period**

(Preliminary Proceedings)

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No. 16

The Honourable Sidney MacEwen, Speaker

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[1:19 p.m.]

[Hon. S. MacEwen in the chair]

Responses to Questions Taken as Notice

Questions by Members

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Tourism season is right around the corner, and despite this government's effort to credit the NHL for the success, Islanders know it's our world-class operators who deserve the praise.

Tourism inspections

Question to the Minister of Tourism: How many inspections of tourism operations and properties were completed in the last calendar year?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Fisheries, Tourism, Sport and Culture.

Hon. Z. Bell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I don't have that number offhand, hon. member. I will bring that back to you. I do know that we have about 4,500 tourism operators across the province, so I'll have to get you the exact number back, but I will bring that back.

Thank you.

[1:20 p.m.]

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Hundreds of tourism operators are inspected each year, and most pass without any issue, but some require a little extra effort to meet the standards.

Can the minister tell us how many inspections last year resulted in a fail or required corrective action before a pass was issued?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Fisheries, Tourism, Sport and Culture.

Hon. Z. Bell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Again, I do apologize to the hon. member for not having that number on hand with me right now. Of course, we do want to make sure and assure anyone that is visiting our beautiful province that safety is paramount. The inspection process is extremely important. It's a great part of tourism. Of course, anyone that travels wants to know that they are safe and that they are going to have an enjoyable time while here.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I do agree with the minister on that.

Minister, for years, our tourism inspections have been carried out by Quality Tourism Services, a respected, independent organization that ensures fairness and integrity in the process.

Does the minister believe that the independent oversight should continue, yes or no?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Fisheries, Tourism, Sport and Culture.

Hon. Z. Bell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I believe I know where the hon. member is going with his line of questioning. This is something that we have discussed – if that is where the hon. member is going with his line of questioning today – about the inspection services for tourism and tourism operators in the province.

We have been internally looking from the legal point of view, from the risk management point of view, about bringing that service in-house. One of the main things that has come to our attention is most of the government inspection services – for example, fire or health inspections – are done in-house.

So, to answer the hon. member's question, the legal and the risk management side would say yes, we should be bringing it in-house.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

We've heard from nearly a dozen tourism operators who are really worried about this government's plan to bring inspections in-house, and they've raised some very serious concerns about trust, transparency, and quality.

So, I'd like to ask the minister: Why is the minister moving forward with a plan that undermines a proven system and puts our tourism reputation at risk?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Fisheries, Tourism, Sport and Culture.

Hon. Z. Bell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I do thank the hon. member for the questions.

I've found in this role that you do find out something new every day. One of the things that I found out being the Minister of Tourism is that ultimately, that does lie with the minister. For example, if there is an issue with an inspection, and something transpires from an inspection that maybe didn't get done or wasn't done to the specifications, it does lie with the minister.

So, again, I'll reiterate that legal as well as risk management have suggested that this be brought in-house, and I am taking the advice of the risk management and the legal.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

But you should be also listening to the tourism operators who have concerns on this.

Inspections have remained outside government for a reason. Bringing them in risks political influence. If an inspection doesn't go well, an operator could feel pressure to call their MLA, expecting a different outcome, and we know that can happen.

How does the minister intend to safeguard against political interference under this new plan?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Fisheries, Tourism, Sport and Culture.

Hon. Z. Bell: Hon. member, I would hope that that is not the case, and you're saying that it is. I would highly suggest that that would not be the

case because at the end of the day, as I mentioned earlier in my remarks, the safety of our guests is paramount. That is one of the underlying things. You want a visitor who will be safe. Anyone who has ever travelled, that is one of the main things that you want when you are travelling. You want to know that you're staying in a safe area, staying in a safe location, and staying in safe accommodations.

I don't agree with the hon. member's preamble. I do feel that anyone who is doing the inspection service would do it to the best of their ability, keeping in the back of their mind that the end user is the visitor who is going to be affected by the inspection.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Obviously, he's not getting out and speaking to Islanders because definitely, they contact their MLA when there is any issue within this government.

First, the minister credited the NHL for our tourism success here on Prince Edward Island, and now he's prepared to turn inspections into a political football. Islanders see what's happening.

[1:25 p.m.]

Will the minister commit today to keeping inspection services with Quality Tourism Services rather than going ahead with this half-baked internal takeover?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Fisheries, Tourism, Sport and Culture.

Hon. Z. Bell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Again, I'm going to revert back to comments that I made earlier with regards to fire inspections and health inspections. You know, these are people who do their job every single day. They want to make sure that at the end of the day, safety is paramount. I cannot state that enough.

As I have told you, hon. member, we are in the process of bringing this in-house, and we will continue down that road.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Some Islanders are now relying on bottled water because of high levels of forever chemicals – PFAS – in their wells. In the Hazelbrook area, for example, nine households have been affected. That's nine that we know of, and that's unacceptable.

PFAS in drinking water

Can the Minister of Environment confirm how many residents in the Hazelbrook area are affected and how many other homes in the area have been tested thus far?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Hon. G. Arsenault: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The team that we have at the Department of Environment – I've got to start by complimenting them for the work that they have done with the PFAS situation we're dealing with in Hazelbrook. We have 10 residents there in Hazelbrook who are experiencing higher volumes of PFAS in the ground due to sites that were around there.

We've gone the extra step – actually, we're probably ahead of the game here, and probably two years ahead of the game of the federal government in going from every site that we could find to do most of those investigations for community facilities. One of them was at Hazelbrook, and we've been going door to door to those residents to make sure that they are looked after. We're going to keep supporting them and making sure that we have a solution for them on a long-term basis.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

That was a partial answer, so I'll ask it again. How many other homes in the area have been tested thus far?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Hon. G. Arsenault: I'll go back to my staff and get you all those details. There's been door-to-door knocking and information going out on an individual basis. I would assume that they all have been checked. Every one of them is getting bottled water at this time and we are moving forward in trying to get a permanent solution for those residents.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Mr. Speaker, these chemicals pose a real health risk to Islanders, and Islanders deserve lasting solutions, not just bottled water deliveries.

What action is this minister taking to provide permanent access to clean drinking water?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Hon. G. Arsenault: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

As I've stated before, our staff are working directly with those residents, and we are putting a plan together to make sure that we do have a long-term solution. It is not something that we enjoy and that we want to see in our drinking water. Like I stated, the level of PFAS has been put up by Health Canada and we were on top of the game. We were probably two years ahead of the process here, and we're going to make sure that we're going to look after those Islanders and we're going to put a very thorough plan together to make that they're looked after.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I'm not sure; you're two years ahead, but yet, you're still looking into doing a plan. So, it's a little bit confusing there.

This issue extends beyond Hazelbrook. Residents in Slemon Park have been left with filters and jugs for weeks with no clear timeline for resolutions.

Why hasn't the minister prioritized a long-term fix for these families, especially those in his own backyard?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Hon. G. Arsenault: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

As I've stated before, because of the seriousness of this issue, we've been on top of the game. We've looked at investigating whatever was done throughout our school communities, with our community organizations, and these here are in residential areas. We will continue to work with them. We've met with the residents. We worked with the City of Summerside as well, as Slemon Park is considered under that jurisdiction as well, and we will continue to do that.

We want to make sure that Islanders are well protected and we have a very thorough plan. To do that, we want to make sure that everything's looked after and we're going to make sure that everything in this plan will be answering to what can be in that long-term plan for all the residents of PEI if they are experiencing those levels of PFAS in their system.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

So, the minister keeps saying that they're on top of it, they're on top of it, on top of it, but there is no plan. This government has left Islanders drinking from jugs for weeks now. Even by this minister's standards, that's unacceptable.

[1:30 p.m.]

When will clean, safe drinking water be restored to every affected Islander, and why has this not been his top priority?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Hon. G. Arsenault: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Like I've mentioned, we are looking at a long-term water treatment system. That's something

that doesn't occur overnight, so we will continue to work with them. Our staff are on site. They've contacted the individuals. They've done door-to-door knocking with the people involved. They did public meetings as well in Slemon Park and in Hazelbrook.

We're happy to move forward with a water treatment system that will be on a long-term basis to make sure it meets the needs of those Islanders.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Every day, more and more Islanders are finding themselves without a safe place to sleep, and yet this government continues to drag its feet. The shelters they rely on still shut down during the day, forcing people out into the cold, rain, and uncertainties.

Question to the Minister of Social Development.

Minister, you are responsible for protecting the most vulnerable Islanders. You heard from advocates, frontline workers, and people with lived experience. They've told you what they need: shelters open 24/7. And yet this government still refuses to commit. We saw this yesterday from your government.

24/7 shelter access

Question: Why are you not standing up inside Cabinet to demand what people you serve actually need?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Seniors.

Hon. B. Ramsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for that question.

I'm very saddened when people don't have a place to live, but I'm also very aware of the amount of money spent by this government. Just in Summerside alone, there was just millions and millions of dollars spent to put an emergency shelter up in Summerside. That one is considered an emergency shelter. There's a shelter for women that's open 24 hours a day. There's also a men's shelter open in Summerside 24 hours a day. Then, of course,

there's an emergency shelter that just was opened about six months ago.

As far as the direction that we're headed, I'm very pleased at this point.

Thank you very much.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Mr. Speaker, this isn't theatre, this is real life: many living with trauma, chronic illness, and compounding effects of poverty. Getting pushed out of the shelter every morning doesn't help anyone get back on their feet; it just adds to more instability.

Question to the same minister: How do you expect someone to rebuild their life, find a job, attend appointments, and manage their health when they're forced to carry every possession they have on their back and wander the streets for hours until beds open up again the next night?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Seniors.

Hon. B. Ramsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I guess I will talk about our shelter here in Charlottetown, where they have a 12-hour service, but just across the parking lot is another 12-hour service, a day program where those folks could go to. You could actually leave your emergency shelter in the morning, go over to the other day program, spend the 12 hours there, and then go back to the emergency shelter in the evening. I'm very pleased that we have that.

We're going to work on that in Summerside as well, but we just got our shelter up there about six months ago. We're going to continue – and for all Islanders, not just Summerside and Charlottetown. I hope we can expand that. I wish the Minister of Housing was able to speak on that today, but that's not possible. But I appreciate the question, member.

Thank you very much.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Mr. Speaker, opposition just wants to know where this government stands.

Here's a direct question to the minister: Do you support Island shelters operating 24 hours a day, yes or no?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Seniors.

Hon. B. Ramsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As I just stated, I'm very appreciative for where we are today. Can we do better? We can always do better. We can always do better. But I'm very pleased with where we are. We're going to continue to work towards making the most vulnerable Islanders as comfortable as we can. We're going to continue to do that.

I thank you for that question, member.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: I don't know how comfortable you can be when you don't have a place to live.

Summerside, the minister's own community still doesn't have the shelter open 24 hours a day. People are being turned out in the morning with nowhere to go. If the minister won't fight for the unhoused in her own backyard, what message does that send to the rest of the province?

Question: Why is the Summerside shelter still not open 24 hours a day? Are you ignoring the needs of vulnerable Islanders in your own community?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Seniors.

Hon. B. Ramsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[1:35 p.m.]

If I could take a moment just to speak on what happened in Summerside with the women's shelter, LifeHouse – I worked very hard on that project, and I'm very pleased to see that that's just expanding from one home to the next to the next, where now folks are going to be able to go into LifeHouse for a certain amount of time, move into an apartment for up to a year, and then move to permanent housing with their children; mothers and children. We also have the Winter Street Shelter for men, where they can stay as long as they need the help.

I'm always fighting for the next step. We just opened the emergency shelter six months ago. We're getting there, but it takes a little bit of time and a lot of money. It's hard to have it both ways, but we're doing the best we can, and we're going to continue to do that.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: You delayed that shelter for two years, minister. It was delayed, and we had to push on this side to get it open, in your own community.

We've heard this minister say that she's listening, but it's not enough to listen; you have to act. Islanders are not seeing any evidence that this minister is using her position to fight for the people she is supposed to represent. You're not the Minister of Housing, but you have a very important role to play when it comes to supporting the unhoused community in our province.

Minister, if you agree that people deserve a warm, safe space at all hours of the day, why haven't you brought forward a plan or advocated publicly within Cabinet for shelters to operate 24 hours a day?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. R. Lantz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I want to thank the Minister of Social Development and Seniors for being gracious enough to stand up and answer questions that are actually the responsibility of the Minister of Housing, Land and Communities. There have not been any questions asked of the minister responsible for this file practically this entire sitting, and it's unfortunate that he can't answer those questions here today.

But as a former minister of that department, I'm proud to stand up and say we've dealt with a very difficult file in this province over recent years. We've spent enormous amounts of money on shelters, outreach centres, and services. Much of that was done in a very scrambling way, I will admit, as a very acute crisis fell on this Island.

I want to thank everyone in this room who had a hand in responding to that crisis. We continue to respond to that crisis with services and shelters,

and we have a plan to move forward to improve those services. The minister himself has talked about his Housing First model. He is, at this moment, doing research on how to unroll that program and provide further services for the unhoused in Prince Edward Island.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: You created this mess. You had no plan. After six years, you scrambled around. You didn't know what you were doing with this file. A lot of money went into it. It could have been half as much, and we could have gotten a better plan out of this. The point-in-time numbers have more than doubled, approaching tripled. This is a disaster.

Mr. Premier, what are you doing and what plan are you following that you're talking about? Housing First is six to seven years away at best. What are you following for people who need shelter tonight?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. R. Lantz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Again, I look forward to the minister being able to respond to these questions. It is indicative that the opposition doesn't want to ask him those questions.

We do have a task force of community members and partners from all across the province who meet on a monthly basis, who are devising a plan for moving forward and responding to the needs of Islanders with complex needs. We have a plan to move forward. We'll continue to invest, but emergency services are just that. They are for emergency services.

We have a long-term plan to house people in appropriate housing so that they can move on with their lives with dignity, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Thank you for that, Mr. Premier, but back to the Minister of Social Development.

When we're talking about housing and social development, this is exactly what happens. People fall through the cracks and the fissures that you've created along the way.

To the minister: As the lead on social supports, what exactly are you doing to ensure vulnerable Islanders aren't falling through those said cracks in housing and the shelter system? Because this is about people first. It seems that you're watching from the sidelines. What actions are you taking to help the people of Prince Edward Island get out of the position that they're in right now?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Seniors.

Hon. B. Ramsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[1:40 p.m.]

Thank you for that question because it gives me an opportunity to just say how great the staff are at Social Development and Seniors, and the empathy that they have working with these individuals on a regular basis.

We're doing everything that we can, and we will continue to do that, member.

Thank you for that question.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Over the last couple of weeks, I have been hearing from parents of Dr. Jovan Vuksic's patients who are terrified for their children. These children and their families have received no assurances at all from this government that they will be cared for now that Dr. Vuksic is leaving. One mother told me that her son with autism and ADHD refuses to meet with anyone except for Dr. Vuksic, who has built the trust and relationship needed to support him. She ended her email with these simple words: "Please help."

Pediatric complement (further)

To the Minister of Health: How can you justify losing a physician who was providing a much-needed service?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We've touched on this topic in the House before. I don't want to comment on personal matters,

but we have hired 51 physicians without any issue. We have a process to do this. Pediatricians remain a priority for our recruitment team, and we will continue to work on pediatric care on PEI.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

K. Bernard: He is highly specialized, and by this action, you are showing us that this is not a priority for your government.

Before finding Dr. Vuksic, one Island family faced paying over \$6,000 out of pocket, or waiting over three years for provincial support for their child with complex need. A three-year wait – that's unacceptable and shows that we absolutely need more pediatricians and doctors for children with mental health challenges. This parent said: "This care literally means the difference between a successful future or not for my child."

To the Minister of Health: Why are you allowing this specialized doctor to be driven away when the successful futures of these children are at risk, literally?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Obviously, at Health PEI, we have a standardized process for hiring, appointing, and privileging physicians. We know that. We've talked about our relationship with the College of Physicians and Surgeons on PEI who do licensure. We have the Medical Society who represents those physicians on PEI. Those three organizations work together as we move through the hiring process, and we continue to rely on our partners as we move through each and every hiring process.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

K. Bernard: Completely avoiding the questions.

There's such big talk from this government about upstream, preventative supports, but actions show this is simply not a priority. This is not just about one physician; it's about a

systemic failure that continues to push away the very people we desperately need.

This parent told me: “I am aware there are always multiple perspectives in situations like this, but rigid policies and bureaucratic red tape have once again taken precedence over the needs of our most vulnerable population, our children.”

To the Minister of Health: We simply can’t lose any more frontline mental health support for children. What are you doing to fix the rigid bureaucracy within Health PEI that is putting our children’s lives at risk?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

In her preamble to her question, I think it’s very important to say there are multiple perspectives to every situation, and again, I am not going to comment on a personal matter within this House. We do have a process that we move through in conjunction with the Medical Society and the College of Physicians. We always adhere to those procedures in the hiring process, and again, we’ve had 51 physicians sign on to practice on PEI in the last 16 months.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from New Haven-Rocky Point.

P. Bevan-Baker: Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker.

Spring is a time of great anticipation and excitement, and the natural world begins to wake up and the cycles of life start all over again. At least that’s the way it should be, but look under the waters of any Island bay or estuary and that bright hope of new life has a very large cloud in the shape of an MSX parasite casting a very dark shadow over the oyster industry.

Oyster industry (further)

A question to the Minister of Fisheries, Tourism, Sport and Culture: What are the latest data telling us about the prospects for the wild oyster season that starts in just a few days?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Fisheries, Tourism, Sport and Culture.

Hon. Z. Bell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I’ll say to the Member from New Haven-Rocky Point that he painted a very good picture of what it’s kind of like right now. The early numbers that we have been collecting – there are 37 sites across the province. We are hoping to have all of the wild bed sites complete by the end of the week.

[1:45 p.m.]

I will tell the hon. member that the Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke had asked the question earlier this week – where are the areas that we are seeing a higher prevalence of MSX? – and they are in the areas of the Lennox Channel, Percival, Enmore, and Bedeque Bay, which again, is the bulk of where a lot of the wild fishery takes place.

But I will say, though, too, that there have been some areas that are very low prevalence at the moment, but we are continuing to test those sites.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from New Haven-Rocky Point.

P. Bevan-Baker: Thank you.

I’m going to start by thanking the minister; a very direct and fulsome answer to the question I just asked.

A situation that went, last summer, from concerning to deeply troubling by the end of 2024 has emerged in ’25 as potentially devastating, and early excursions into Bedeque Bay – the minister has just mentioned that, which of course, is ground zero for MSX here on Prince Edward Island – present a very alarming picture with really heavy mortality and absolutely no chance of a viable fishery there.

To the same minister: How is your department going to accommodate the dozens and dozens of fishers who would typically have their dories in the water out in Bedeque Bay in a week or so and will now have to find an alternate location to make a living?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Fisheries, Tourism, Sport and Culture.

Hon. Z. Bell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I do appreciate the hon. member's questions.

I had a meeting recently with the PEI Shellfish Association, and that was one of their worries as well, hon. member, was that with an area like Bedeque Bay not being open – as I mentioned in my previous answer, the bulk of the fishers are there.

I heard Bob MacLeod this morning on the radio. Bob is a great advocate and he's done a great job. He's wanting our department – as I mentioned in the previous answer, our department is continuing to test these other sites.

The one area of issue that the fishers are worried about is the fact that if – again, there are so many that are used to being fishing in the Bedeque Bay area, where they are going to be spread out across the Island. So, again, we're going to be relying on the numbers. What we would like to see is that those fishermen and the fishers will be dispersed to different areas and that the prevalence of MSX won't be high in those areas.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from New Haven-Rocky Point.

P. Bevan-Baker: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

When I attended the Aquaculture Alliance event a few weeks ago – which, of course, the minister attended also and spoke at – presenter after presenter painted a really bleak picture of what lies ahead for the Island oyster industry. In his remarks, when the minister spoke, he talked about many initiatives that this government is taking, many really good initiatives to assist the industry, like data collection/research and funding into new facilities like nurseries and hatcheries.

But one thing that was conspicuously absent from his remarks that day was any mention of a compensation plan for fishers, buyers, and processors.

To the same minister: As the clock ticks on and signs of a potentially catastrophic season loom even larger, when are fishers – and actually anybody who's involved in the oyster industry

and who may be affected by this major disruption – going to see details of a proper and comprehensive compensation plan?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Fisheries, Tourism, Sport and Culture.

Hon. Z. Bell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Again, just (Indistinct) off the questions asked earlier this week from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke, the contingency money that we do have in the budget.... As I've told – I've met with fishers and I've met with the harvesters, and some of the buyers as well – that is money that is going to be used for all facets of it, whether it is compensation for product loss, whether it is for research and development. We're going to be putting that towards hatcheries. We are one week from today that the wild fishers will be going out on the water.

The other, second part of that: I do want to let the hon. member know that we are still encouraging all fishers – the data collection piece of it. Of course, the fishers aren't on the water yet, so we're starting to see some of the early results from some of the growers who have brought their cages to the water, and we're seeing some mortalities there.

We will be there. We've been supporting the industry before. We will be there to support the industry. We just want to know, because again, it is going to be a case-by-case basis.

As I mentioned earlier in my response, there are some areas where the prevalence of MSX is lower, so there might be a different application for a person who isn't seeing the same mortality as maybe a fisher who is out of Bedeque Bay.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

B. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Wetlands are a crucial part of healthy Island ecosystems. Our watershed groups are really experts, and do the critical work in many cases, sometimes to restore but definitely to maintain wetlands.

In the case of the Summerside golf course project that happened recently, a compensation payment of over \$400,000 was made for the

destruction of more than 27 acres of wetland. The PEI wetland policy emphasizes a “no net loss” approach, prioritizing avoidance.

[1:50 p.m.]

Island watersheds

Question to the Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action: Can the minister confirm whether any portion of this compensation has been directed towards supporting the work of watershed groups or the PEI Watershed Alliance in restoring or protecting similar wetland habitats?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Hon. G. Arsenault: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, hon. member, for bringing that to the floor of the Legislature.

As you stated, there is no doubt in my mind that the watershed groups are doing phenomenal work for this province. We had a great working relationship with the alliance and with the watershed groups.

I have to state, as well, that I have 13 nieces and nephews, and I think half of them worked, at one point, through the watershed groups on the summer projects. So, I’m very aware of the kind of work that they do and the phenomenal work that they do.

To your question directly, to the amount of – we’re standing at an all-time high of investment that we’re providing as a Province. Over \$2.1 million is distributed through the watershed groups on an annual basis to do the work, in collaboration with our department.

Our department is working very closely with them, and we will continue to support the watershed groups.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

B. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I, too, am very proud of the way our government has supported the watershed groups over the years. I’ve been an advocate. We’re at an all-time high because watersheds are so important

to our Island; they’re foundational. I mean, without healthy watersheds, what happens to our farming, our fishing, our tourism, not to mention our health and our wellness? They’re very crucial.

Watershed groups across the Island are taking on more projects and responsibilities every year. Yet, there is a growing concern that core funding through the Watershed Management Fund has not kept pace with inflation or workload.

We’re at an all-time high, but a question for the minister: Can the minister tell this House whether the Watershed Management Fund has been indexed to inflation this year or increased to take into account inflation, and if not, will the minister commit to doing that?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Hon. G. Arsenault: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

As I have stated, it is at an all-time high. We have a great working relationship. We will continue to listen to the groups and to the Watershed Alliance to make sure that they have what they need to do the work. It’s very important work that they’re doing on behalf of all Islanders, and also in conjunction with my staff at the Department of Environment.

We will continue to work hand in hand with them, and to make sure that they have the appropriate funds to do the work that they’re conducting.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

B. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I want to thank the minister for his dedication to helping watershed groups.

The PEI Watershed Alliance has asked government to fully implement all recommendations of the Forestry Commission’s final report. We heard about that yesterday in questions. The partial implementation, they say, really won’t achieve the goals identified by either the commission or the watershed groups who have contributed extensively to this work.

Question for the minister: Can the minister explain how the voices and the deep expertise of watershed groups really on the front lines will be meaningfully integrated into the next steps of forestry policy development?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Hon. G. Arsenault: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I'd like to start by thanking the staff in my department and the work that they have done with the Forestry Commission and the department, or the sector of fisheries – Fish and Wildlife, especially – that have been working very hard on this report. They've started implementing those recommendations.

I will assure the hon. member that I will coordinate a meeting with my staff and the Watershed Alliance to make sure that they're onside with what's happening with the commission report and that they're aware of what's happening, and that we can move forward with that report.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere.

S. Dillon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

For many years, university education was regarded as a pathway for securing a successful future for a family, often overshadowing the trades; however, it's become evident that trades – now in high demand – offer substantial income opportunities.

Trades programs and careers

Question to the minister of immigration, advanced learning and population growth: Given this shift in the job market and the increased demand for trades programming, how is your department supporting trade education in PEI?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce, Advanced Learning and Population.

Hon. J. Redmond: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for the question.

[1:55 p.m.]

We all know how crucial it is to help support those students studying in many sectors, especially those of our trades. From our department's perspective, some of the supports that go in would be funding around apprenticeship training, we certainly help support those that go off into colleges, but also, supplying funding to organizations like Skills Canada PEI. When they have a chance to try that trade and compete and figure out their passion, it's certainly a great investment in the trades.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere.

S. Dillon: Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

Young people today are greatly influenced by social media, what is taught in school, and exposure to opportunities. We are seeing a growth in females entering into the trades and I hope to see that that continues.

Question to the same minister: Does your department support promotional efforts to continually raise awareness about the opportunities available through careers and trades programming?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce, Advanced Learning and Population.

Hon. J. Redmond: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you again to the hon. member for the question.

One of the areas that we do support investment in, especially in encouraging women to get into trades, is through Trade HERizons. I had the great opportunity this morning to attend a graduation ceremony where 10 amazing, powerful women graduated and are going to advance into the trades world through programming and some right into the professional field.

We certainly work hard within our schools to show students opportunities and invite students to come to our various programs within our post-secondary institutions. In fact, I have a niece graduating this May from welding, and we're very excited for her next steps in that career. I would encourage anyone interested in trades to reach out.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere.

S. Dillon: Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

It would seem that effort is being made to increase awareness of the opportunities in the trades, and it's working. The trades currently offer high school programs such as carpentry, welding, electrician, and automotive, and these programs have become very popular, creating waitlists to get into the courses.

Question to the Minister of Education and Early Years: With the increased interest in trades programming, is your department looking into how to support our Island schools with programming that meets the demands for Island students?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education and Early Years.

Hon. R. Croucher: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for these questions.

I love this topic, and I know there were questions asked here in the House last month, maybe, about females in the trades. We're seeing a huge growth in that. In fact, the sister of a young man I'm going to be speaking about here tomorrow is actually enrolled in the welding program in Georgetown, and that's a direct result of the exposure that she's had at Souris Regional School to the welding program.

As a Holland College grad myself and a small business owner who has dabbled in some of those trades like welding and automotive repair and a little bit of carpentry, I absolutely have a keen interest in this topic, member.

I'm going to be doing an upcoming across-the-Island school tour and it's absolutely going to be one of the areas that I'm going to be speaking to faculty and staff about, how we can grow that programming. I'm going to work with my colleague here at Workforce, Advanced Learning and Population on how we can collaboratively increase the exposure to the trades.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

A question to the Minister of Education.

Bullying has always been an issue in our province. It happens with kids all the time and we've got to put an end to this somehow, minister. We're seeing it prevalent in school systems. I'm very worried about this, and so are parents.

Bullying

Minister, what are you doing to take action on bullying in Prince Edward Island?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education and Early Years.

Hon. R. Croucher: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I do thank the member for speaking about this very, very important topic. The member knows how passionate I am about this, and I know his passion as well because we've had some good conversations about it.

Any incident at any of our schools is concerning to me, and the wellbeing of our students has to be of the utmost concern and consideration. So, I'm engaging with our school authorities and encouraging them to engage with me and my department as well on how we stem what seems to be a rising trend.

I'm working, I assure you, diligently with our department and our school authorities, to get a handle on this and try and start moving in the right direction. Again, member, I know you're passionate about it; my door is open anytime you want to sit down, and we'll brainstorm.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty, final question.

G. McNeilly: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I appreciate that, minister.

[2:00 p.m.]

Kids need to learn how to play, and they need to learn how to play together, and that's an active way that we can do that. The problem with this is that your government will not fund playgrounds, and they won't come to the aid of people needing the playgrounds updated and school repair. They don't fund the full cost of it.

School playgrounds

Minister, I'm asking you – Sherwood School right now has to raise a lot of money for their playground – will you step in right now at this time and fund their playground at Sherwood School?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education and Early Years.

Hon. R. Croucher: Thank you, member.

I believe we're the first government ever to fund playgrounds in the way that we do. I've been engaged with the Sherwood Home and School foundation. We've had some really good conversations over the last week or so. I encourage everyone here to attend their fundraiser that's happening – is it Friday night, Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere?

S. Dillon: May 2nd.

R. Croucher: May 2nd, thank you. I know the Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere and I are going to attend that.

Right now, we have a \$25,000 fund for playgrounds. They're quite expensive. We have some really great home and school foundations throughout the province that are doing really great work in advocating and fundraising. We're going to continue to support them in every way we can to get more playgrounds at our Island schools.

Thank you.

[End of Question Period]