

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, February 24, 2003**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2003/02/24

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. O Lord, we give thanks for the bounty of our province: our land, our resources, and our people. We pledge ourselves to act as good stewards on behalf of all Albertans. Amen.

Hon. members, would you please remain standing for the singing of our national anthem. It will be led today by Mr. Paul Lorieau.

Hon. Members:

O Canada, our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!
From far and wide, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.
God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.

The Speaker: Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Visitors**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly Mr. Ben Heppner, the MLA for Rosthern, Saskatchewan, and opposition Justice critic in Saskatchewan. Mr. Heppner is also one of the founding members of the Saskatchewan Party. I had the pleasure of meeting with Mr. Heppner earlier today to discuss justice issues. He expressed an interest in our single trial court project, the collaborative law project that's being spearheaded out of Medicine Hat in Alberta, and many other issues that we find in common relative to justice. I'd ask Mr. Heppner to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of our Assembly.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

Mr. Vandermeer: Mr. Speaker, it's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the Members of the Legislative Assembly 37 students from John Barnett elementary school. Joining the students' visit to the Legislature are teachers Mr. Tony Kimble and Mrs. Pat Robinson and parents Mrs. Denise Hugman and Ms Aurelia Hough. I ask them to please stand at this time and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon Member for Lacombe-Stettler.

Mrs. Gordon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am very proud today to introduce to you and through you some 30-plus students from Canadian University College, located near Lacombe. As students of sociology they are keenly interested in social sciences, social institutions, and social relationships, so what a good place to be today. I would ask that they rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Highwood.

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am delighted today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly three people who are very interested in Bill 201: Cheryl Bradley of the Alberta Native Plant Council, Tom Cameron of the Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks and Wildlife Foundation, and Linda Duncan. They're in the members' gallery, and I would ask them to stand and receive the warm traditional welcome of this Assembly.

head: **Oral Question Period**

Natural Gas Prices

Dr. Nicol: Last week the Alberta Liberals tabled a petition signed by 1,500 Albertans demanding relief from the government for high utility bills. Today we'll be adding another 400 signatures. We'll continue to table petitions, which are available through our web site at ataliberals.ab.ca, until this government provides Albertans with some relief from their high utility bills. Mr. Premier, it's cold out there. A lot of people are trying to make choices between paying their utility bills and buying food and paying their rent. To the Premier: since this government has missed an opportunity to provide Albertans with natural gas rebates at the time when they need them most, what actions will the government take to protect Albertans from the recurring spikes in their heating bills?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, you know, the opposition continues to ask for natural gas rebates. I would like to explain the bill and the regulations attached to that particular piece of legislation. First of all, the government's rebate program is designed to ensure that when prices are high enough for long enough to translate into increased royalty revenues, those royalties would go back to Albertans in the form of rebates.

To ensure that the revenues are there, the government relies on the average reference price over the fiscal year. I would ask the Liberals to look at the regulations. There's no secret to this; it hasn't been hidden from anyone. If the Liberals would look at the regulations under the Natural Gas Price Protection Act, they would say that it states this very clearly. I quote section 2.

The Alberta price is determined by the Minister of Energy based on a forecast of the annual average of the Gas Reference Prices prescribed under section 6(1) of the Natural Gas Royalty Regulation, 1994.

Mr. Speaker, I can assure Albertans that when the money is there and the need is there, the rebates will be there.

Dr. Nicol: The regulations sure don't reflect the debate that went on when the bill was passed.

To the Premier: why are Albertans, who own the resource beneath their feet, paying more for the cost of fuel – and I stress: cost of fuel, not delivery charges – when they pay \$7.53 per gigajoule in the south and \$7.19 per gigajoule in the north when Torontonians are only paying \$6.03?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't know what Torontonians are paying. I know that we're the only jurisdiction in Canada with a natural gas rebate program, and when the annual average of the gas reference prices prescribed under the section of the legislation and firmly entrenched in regulation reaches \$5.50 a gigajoule, then we will convene a cabinet meeting and consider at that time whether a rebate from royalty revenues is warranted.

I'll have the hon. minister supplement.

Mr. Smith: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition refers to a price of natural gas that is being charged today. He does

not go through a 12-month average. In fact, if he would go through a 12-month average, he would find that Toronto prices are in the neighbourhood of 30 to 35 percent higher than those prices charged in Alberta today.

Dr. Nicol: To the Premier: given that your budget contains no line item indicating a contingency plan for natural gas price spikes, does that mean that you never intended to provide Albertans with relief from high utility bills?

1:40

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, there is no line item, but you will find out later today, when legislation is introduced, that the provincial government will be establishing a stability fund, and perhaps that fund – and I don't know for sure – can be used to provide rebates if and when they are needed. But I'm advised by the Minister of Energy that it probably will be a long time, unless there is a dramatic increase in natural gas prices, before we will reach the average of \$5.50 a gigajoule.

Utility Costs for Schools

Dr. Nicol: To the Premier. Given that many school boards are already facing a deficit and unpredictably high utility bills and these high utility bills are making the situation worse, what action will this government take to ensure that spikes in the price of natural gas do not negatively affect the programs and services offered by these schools?

Mr. Klein: Again, I will stress that we are the only province, the only jurisdiction in this country with a legislated program to provide rebates. Mr. Speaker, again, when the average annual price reaches \$5.50 a gigajoule, then in accordance with the regulations the minister would ask cabinet to implement a rebate program under the royalties that we receive and that would be returned to Albertans.

Dr. Nicol: Mr. Speaker, we're the only province that doesn't build risk management into our pricing structure, so that sets us apart as well.

To the Minister of Infrastructure: given that regular maintenance of furnaces in schools helps to keep heating bills down and given that children in an Edmonton area school were sent home last week because there was no heat in their school, why has this government deferred furnace maintenance in some schools, creating a situation that prevents schools from reducing their utility bills?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, each year we provide the school boards with a sum of money, about \$40 million, that goes to a program called BQRP, building quality restoration program. That program is administered by the school boards. To make sure that the plants are operating, can operate, and will operate, the money from the BQRP is there for them to use as they see fit in their schools.

Dr. Nicol: And they reduced the amount, Mr. Speaker.

To the Premier. In 2001 you provided schools with funding to offset higher than anticipated heating costs. What action does the government plan to take this year to help schools pay high fuel bills?

Mr. Klein: I would remind the hon. leader of the Liberal opposition that in 2001 gas prices reached an all-time high. Extraordinarily high. If I recall correctly, we were nearing or perhaps even over the \$10 a gigajoule mark. We aren't anywhere near that, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Enron

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The generosity of this government knows no limits during an election year, but two years later this government is very mean – very, very mean – with the citizens' own natural resources. My first question is to the Premier. What was the grant of three-quarters of a million dollars for given to Enron during the election year? What was that three-quarters of a million dollars to Enron for?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I have no idea what the hon. member is talking about. I know that I certainly didn't sign a cheque to Enron, and I don't think anyone else did in executive committee or in the government, but perhaps some hon. member can shed some light on the question. I don't know.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the documents from the last Public Accounts that have been tabled in this Assembly indicate that Enron Direct Limited Partnership received three-quarters of a million dollars in a grant from this government, why was the three-quarters of a million dollars given to Enron then in the form of a rebate, I assume, and now, two years later, you have no money from the natural resources of this province for the citizens that need it the most? Heat in this province is not a luxury.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, again, I have no idea what the hon. member is talking about. If he would be courteous enough to send the information over or to discuss the situation with the hon. Minister of Energy or perhaps the Minister of Finance or the Minister of Revenue, maybe we can get to the bottom of this. But I can tell you that he used the word "grant." We did not give a grant to Enron or any other company, for that particular matter. To do so would be a violation of the Financial Administration Act, and we're not about to violate our own acts of this Legislature.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: did this government audit the grant payment of three-quarters of a million dollars that was given to Enron to make sure that it was accurate and that the taxpayers were not throwing money up in smoke, so to speak?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I'm advised, sort of indirectly, that the hon. member is the chair of Public Accounts. You know, he should know, but I have no idea. Is there anyone here who can shed any light on this particular situation? I have no idea what he's talking about.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Electricity Costs

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Energy has been telling anyone who will listen that the reason Albertans have to pay the highest power bills in the country is to avoid the large debt load of power companies in regulated jurisdictions. The minister is also claiming, incorrectly as it turns out, that this debt is taxpayer supported. However, what the minister is not saying is that Alberta power companies owe a total of over \$10 billion and that Albertans' power bills reflect this fact. My question is to the Minister of Energy. Why is the Minister of Energy suggesting in a February 19 release that Alberta power companies have zero debt or, alternatively, that this debt has no impact on the bills that Albertans have to pay every month?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, there is no debt guaranteed by this government by any power company in this province.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, why does the minister continue to claim that the debt in other provinces is the responsibility of taxpayers when he knows full well that it is electricity ratepayers that support this debt, the same as here in Alberta?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, this voodoo NDP accounting clearly indicates – the primary shareholder of a Crown corporation is, in fact, the Crown. Therefore, the governments of those particular jurisdictions where there are Crown hydro companies have a responsibility to honour the debt. In fact, if the member would pursue it further and deeper, he'd find out that when these companies, because of their attachment to the provincial governments, owe hundreds of billions of dollars of taxpayer-guaranteed debt across this country, their bond rating issues are higher.

Mr. Speaker, it's very clear in Alberta that there is a line between what is published in terms of debt by the companies that they're responsible for. This government does not support the tremendous amount of debt for artificially lower electricity prices across Canada that these other jurisdictions have.

Mr. Mason: Very interesting, Mr. Speaker.

So why does the minister, then, continue to tell this Assembly when he knows or should know that billions of dollars of Alberta power company debt was guaranteed to be repaid by power customers when the cabinet approved the power purchase arrangements regulation back in July of 2000?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, I continue to put forth what is the truth of the structure of the electrical industry in Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

1:50 Access to Crown Land

Mr. Knight: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There has been much media attention given to a dispute involving contractors, the energy industry, and First Nations in northern Alberta. As a northern MLA I am concerned and so are a lot of my constituents about media reports over the past few weeks of extortion, of bribery, and of roadblocks on Alberta's Crown land. My question is to the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. Minister, could you tell us exactly what the situation is?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Calahasen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First of all, the Premier asked five ministers to come together in order to address this concern, and they are the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development, the Minister of Energy, the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, the Minister of Justice, and of course the Solicitor General.

Since that time, Mr. Speaker, we've worked on a premise of consultation versus confrontation, and we've put together a plan. Our number one plan was to ensure that we clarified the position relative to payment of access fees, and we've also clarified the position of the involvement of aboriginal people in the economy. Thirdly, we've also looked at meetings to address this issue with First Nations, with chiefs that are impacted, as well as with the energy companies that are also part of the solution. We've also had

my deputy contact a subcontractor group to offer to meet with them to address the situation. As a matter of fact, as of today there is going to be a meeting this week. We've also looked at continuing to ensure that we'll work with the stakeholders and continue to have meetings.

Mr. Speaker, the Solicitor General's department has also met with the RCMP, and we are making sure that they understand the government's position. We have also looked at different ways to be able to address this concern that has been asked, which is to make sure that companies with leases and permits have a valid right to work on Crown land without interference. Let me add here that industry should not be paying access fees on Crown lands – that's very important – and, most of all, that any allegations of criminal activity should be reported to the RCMP. That's the proper process to utilize.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Knight: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll direct my first supplemental question to the Solicitor General. If there are claims of bribery and extortion, why are the RCMP not doing anything?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hon. member has brought up a good point, and if anyone is aware of a crime that has been committed, they should contact the RCMP. The RCMP will fully investigate complaints of extortion or threats, as they would any other complaint about any criminal activity. I want to let the hon. member know that we checked this morning and there have been no formal complaints filed. The RCMP have put in place a policy to deal with issues such as blockades to the areas in question, and if a member of the public makes a complaint about a blockade not allowing access, the RCMP will investigate.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Knight: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplemental. Notwithstanding the formal complaints, we certainly have had in my riding a number of complaints lodged at the office with respect to this issue. I would like to ask the minister relative to consultation. We've had a number of cases to the Supreme Court of Canada, three in particular, that deal with this issue, and the matter of overall consultation with aboriginal people on resource matters . . .

The Speaker: I'm sure there's a question in all of this, hon. member.

Mr. Knight: . . . seems to be going on an awfully long time . . .

The Speaker: I agree.

Mr. Knight: Yes, I agree. . . . without resolution. I'd like to ask the minister . . .

Ms Calahasen: Well, thank you, hon. member. First of all, that was a long question. Alberta is certainly committed to a consultation process, and we have to look at a number of things. One, we have to look at what adheres to evolving case law; very important. Secondly, we have to address the concerns of aboriginal people. Thirdly, we must provide certainty for industry in the development on Crown lands. Those are the kinds of things we have to look at.

Court rulings have been saying that the Crown should consult where activities on Crown land may impact treaty or aboriginal

rights around traditional land use such as hunting, fishing, and trapping. We're certainly developing a process of meaningful consultation with First Nations, and all parties will have an ability to be able to have input into this process as we move forward, but that's going to be between First Nations and the Alberta government.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Children's Services Adoption Web Site

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government is now in damage control to rectify the errors in the hasty and ill-conceived adoption web site. It seems that each time the Department of Children's Services gets into trouble, an employee is hung out to dry. My first question is to the Premier. Legal responsibility for the web site rests with the Minister of Children's Services. Why is another public servant now under fire and not the minister?

Mr. Klein: Well, first of all, I'm going to have the hon. minister respond, Mr. Speaker, but as the hon. member knows, the Privacy Commissioner has released his report on the adoption web site. He found that Children's Services is within its authority to disclose the children's personal information for the purposes, the commendable purposes, I might add, of finding adoptive homes.

Relative to the disciplinary action that was taken, I'll have the hon. minister respond.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Premier. Mr. Speaker, the situation where a worker was found to have not followed through with the process and protocol of talking with the children and assuring that they had fully understood that they were consenting to be involved, that worker – and that's an internal matter with the director of child welfare – was spoken to by the director or someone acting on his behalf, and a letter was filed.

Relative to whether or not the minister acted within the purview of the ministry, I should quote from the summary of findings of the Privacy Commissioner's report. He states in para 26:

The Public Body is authorized under section 40(1)(c) and section 40(1)(f) of the FOIP Act to disclose the children's personal information on the website, for the purpose of finding homes for children who are available for adoption.

Secondly, in para 27:

The initial descriptions of the children contained more personal information than was necessary. The revised descriptions are in compliance with section 40(4) of the FOIP Act.

Mr. Speaker, that is his ruling.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second question is to the Minister of Children's Services. She's absolutely right, and when will the Child Welfare Act be revised to protect the privacy of children from future blunders by this department?

Mr. Klein: Would you prefer to have those children in foster homes?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, you know, exactly the point. Would we leave these children languishing in the closets and hidden in the homes of foster parents who never release them to provide them an opportunity for loving homes? Let's not retreat to this kind of old-fashioned mentality where we don't use good communication devices.

The Child Welfare Act is up for amendment in this session. I'm sure that the hon. member can bring forward, if he finds it is at fault in any way, his own ideas. But could I point out for this Assembly and for the people of Alberta that not once is there a record that this minister has of this member's address to the *Wednesday's Child* program, which has been successful in adopting 70 percent of the children on that site annually.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: has this minister just accused foster parents of keeping children in the closet? Is that what I hear?

Ms Evans: You know, Mr. Speaker, no, but I should never be surprised at how low they can go.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

2:00

Lehigh Inland Cement

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Recently a number of constituents in my area appeared before the Environmental Appeal Board to oppose the decision of Alberta Environment allowing Lehigh Inland Cement to convert from natural gas to coal within its cement kiln. The Alberta Environmental Appeal Board's decision was to allow them to convert to coal; however, they have to implement baghouse technology. I understand that they have recently begun their conversion, and my first question is to the Minister of Environment. Why is Inland Cement allowed to burn coal within its kiln before the baghouse is implemented?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The recommendation from the EAB, which I concurred with and which I signed off on, says that the Inland Cement plant has up to 20 months to install the technology the gentleman is referring to as baghouse technology. Now, that was when the decision was made. It's now down to 19 months. But if the Inland Cement plant has more than what we call six dusting incidents in a one-year period, then Alberta Environment can arbitrarily reduce that time as it goes down every month – as I said, it's now at 19 months – to make it more immediate, and Inland, in fact, may have it installed before the expiry of their date.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My supplemental is to the same minister. If baghouse technology is, in fact, the best available technology, why did Alberta Environment not put that on it as a stipulation before the conversion to coal was allowed to take place?

Dr. Taylor: Well, let me first of all state, Mr. Speaker, that when the existing technology at Inland Cement works, there's not a problem, and that was one of the issues. There were some problems with the number of times that it tripped, as it's called in the industry.

Now, I will say that in making environmental decisions, Alberta Environment does not determine the technology. We don't specify technologies that companies have. What we do is set standards, and we will continue to set standards, and it is then up to the company to determine which technology will meet the standards that Alberta

Environment sets. The problem, of course, is that if Alberta Environment determined technology, you'd be favouring one technology over another technology over another technology, and that's not the position of this government or any government. It's a matter of us setting appropriate standards. So as we go forward, Mr. Speaker, as I've said, if the existing technology doesn't work – they have six or more dusting incidents within the period of one year – then that baghouse will have to go on immediately.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate both of those answers, but I'm curious to know: what is Alberta Environment doing in the interim to ensure that the air quality standards within the Edmonton-Calder constituency are maintained?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Taylor: Thank you. Well, as part of the approval Inland Cement was required to put more in-stack monitors right in their plants, so as the monitors monitor and as we do spot checks on the monitoring situation that we have there, we'll be able to tell if they're exceeding their limits. The other thing we have as Alberta Environment is what we call ambient air monitors in that particular area out there. So we'll be able to tell as well on our own monitors, the ambient air monitors.

I will say that the air quality in the area of Inland Cement is good. In fact, the air quality in Edmonton is good and improving. Every year it gets better, and Alberta has some of the best air quality and some of the most stringent standards in the country, Mr. Speaker, and we'll continue to monitor the situation.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Problem Gambling

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In 1998 eight Alberta communities voted to prohibit VLTs due to the perceived social costs associated with them. However, an injunction has prevented the removal of these machines since that time. Three weeks ago the Supreme Court ruled in the case of Manitoba that if a community voted to remove VLTs due to perceived social costs, they were completely within their rights. My questions are to the Minister of Gaming. Now that we have a Supreme Court decision, when will this government remove VLTs from communities that chose to prohibit them?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since 1998 there has been an injunction in this province granted by the Queen's Bench of Alberta in an action commenced in this province. That matter is scheduled for trial on April 28 of this year. The matter had been adjourned pending a decision of the Supreme Court of Canada from another jurisdiction, namely Manitoba, because the facts in that case were similar. It has turned out that the facts are indeed very similar and will be of great assistance in ultimately resolving the matter when it proceeds to court on April 28, but I anticipate that this matter will be resolved by the court at that time.

Ms Blakeman: Given that we know that drug addicts will commit crimes to feed their habit, what concrete steps has this government

taken to address the issues and costs of gambling addicts committing crimes to feed their addiction?

Mr. Stevens: Mr. Speaker, this ministry is charged with the control and management of gaming in a socially responsible manner, and accordingly there are a number of things that we are doing in order to address the issue of problem gambling. One example of that would be the funding of AADAC and its services for problem gambling and its education of the public. Some 4.2 million dollars annually is provided to AADAC, and my department works closely with them. I can advise you that a recent survey indicates that 95 percent of Albertans are aware of the problem gambling services that AADAC provides, so from my perspective that is a very good example of one of the ways in which we are addressing that problem.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Well, to the same minister: why aren't those AADAC programs which deal with the social problems of gambling given a fixed percentage of the gambling revenue? The higher the gambling revenue the higher the problems. Why aren't you connecting them?

Mr. Stevens: The process with respect to funding AADAC, Mr. Speaker, is that AADAC provides a budget through the appropriate ministry, which is, in fact, the Ministry of Health and Wellness. To my knowledge AADAC has requested certain amounts of money in the last several years, and they have been provided with the funds that they have requested to meet the issues. So we look to AADAC, who, in fact, in Alberta are the experts in addiction treatment, to provide us with guidance, and we have followed that to date.

Natural Gas Prices

(continued)

Mr. Shariff: Mr. Speaker, lately I've had several calls from my constituents expressing concerns about their gas bill prices. My questions today are for the Minister of Energy. In 2001 the Alberta government implemented the Natural Gas Price Protection Act to protect Albertans from high natural gas prices. As of February 1 ATCO Gas North is charging customers \$7.19 a gigajoule and ATCO Gas South is charging consumers \$7.54 a gigajoule. My constituents want to know: based on the average price to date, can Albertans expect a rebate at the end of this fiscal year?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, in order for the Natural Gas Price Protection Act to kick in, the price for the balance of this year, from February 24 onwards, would have to increase to about \$16.60 per gigajoule and remain there for the balance of February and March in order to reach the \$5.50 trigger price.

Now, Mr. Speaker, what makes this year different from the year 2001 is, one, there were abnormally lower gas prices during the first nine months of the fiscal year. In fact, the average of the natural gas at that time was about \$3.89. So it would take a real spike, an incredibly high spike, up to the \$16 and \$17 level, for at least six weeks for this to kick in.

So the way the act is structured, that charge would have to be incurred and then the Alberta reference price would collect the royalties of the amount of gas sold, and that takes place over a two- to three-month period of time. There would then be the amount left in government accounts that would be available for our government rebate.

Mr. Shariff: My supplementary is also to the same minister.

Because our natural gas resource comes from Alberta, why should residential users in Alberta have to pay not the same price but more than the people in Chicago, Toronto, and Kansas City?

2:10

Mr. Smith: Well, firstly, Mr. Speaker, let me thank the member for crystalizing the issue in a far better sense than the opposition did earlier. The issue at hand here is that today those people in Toronto or Kansas City or Chicago would indeed be paying less than the rate that they'd be paying in Alberta. That's over a one-day period. Over a 12-month period there is no way that these cities would have a lower gas price than Alberta. However, Albertans have said since 2001 that they want the opportunity to make decisions about buying contract gas, and in fact we want to be able to provide them with that opportunity so that they can pay a level price over the period of 12 or 24 or 36 months.

Government Contracts

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, this government constantly reminds us of the Alberta advantage, how Albertans are more innovative, flexible, and efficient. The Official Opposition says: let's better support the Alberta advantage by making sure Alberta companies get a fair chance at receiving government contracts. To the Minister of Infrastructure: why is it that in some areas such as information technology systems over 90 percent of the money paid in contracts goes to large international corporations while smaller Alberta firms who can provide the same service at comparable prices get next to nothing?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, when we're awarding contracts, they're handled in a variety of manners, but usually if the contract is of any substance and if, in fact, there are a number of companies able to handle it, we will send out a request for proposal. In some cases we simply put out a tender, and the tender would be a situation where the contract is not too complicated, there are a number of companies that are interested, and it could be that it's in a location where there's no need to call for a request for proposal. So those are the various ways they're handled, and if it turns out that it happens to be a large company that gets the contract, well, that's a fair and open competitive marketplace.

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: are there any rules for the large corporations that Alberta government contracts out to that state that they must give an equal opportunity to Alberta companies that vie for subcontracts on projects?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, there are a number of different situations that we can run into. Certainly, when a large firm is winning a contract, we may encourage them, but we have to be careful. When you start talking about directing that they take certain firms on, that then starts to get into a very shady area, and I would resist that in a lot of cases. Furthermore, under a number of agreements we don't have the liberty to direct. As a matter of fact, the interprovincial trade agreement that the hon. minister of intergovernmental affairs has worked on talks to the fact that you have to be open and allow for the competition to work, not direct.

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, to the Minister of Economic Development: given the minister knows that the best place for Albertans' tax dollars to go is back to Albertans, when is he going to establish a contract-awarding policy whereby, other things being equal, Alberta companies are given preference to others?

Mr. Norris: Well, Mr. Speaker, clearly the contract awarding has been described by the hon. Minister of Infrastructure, but I would remind the hon. member opposite that one of the tenets of this government is the free marketplace and competition, and never on this watch are we going to operate by giving contracts that aren't based on total open-market fairness and transparency. So I don't know if the member is suggesting that we should start giving contracts to friends who can't quite do the job as opposed to getting the best dollar for the taxpayer, but we're never going to go down that road.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Natural Gas Rebates

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week and over the weekend just past temperatures dipped to the minus 30 levels and perhaps went even lower as Alberta saw typical winter weather hit us hard. As it happens, ATCO Gas bills also hit the mailboxes last week, and consumers are wincing hard. One bill that I received for a modest home in Edmonton is for \$175, and another homeowner with even a smaller home will pay \$211. My questions are to the Minister of Energy. Why is it that when the last provincial election was imminent, gas prices only had to spike for one month for the government to give rebates, but today, after three months of sky-high bills, the minister stonewalls Alberta consumers?

Mr. Smith: Well, I hate to take up all the time correcting the member's preamble, Mr. Speaker, but the prices have not been high for three months. We have seen an increase in bills; there's no denying that the price of natural gas is increasing. The Minister of Finance will be reporting later on today what happens when we sell 75 percent of that natural gas. We use only 25 percent inside Alberta. In fact, I would say that Albertans receive a natural gas rebate every time they buy something at a store and are not charged provincial sales tax.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that it's Albertans who own the resource, why should Albertans have to wait a full year before this minister and this government give rebates to protect them from sky-high home heating costs?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, now we're getting towards cash flow and accounting questions, which, I know, challenges the other 50 percent of the third party opposition. What happens is that we do not have the money available to pay for a rebate until we collect the royalty money on behalf of all Albertans. Now, that is not the rate that they see in their gas bill. It is the Alberta reference price, which is the price that we collect from oil and gas companies who sell their gas not only to Albertans but to all parts of North America.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My last question to the minister: will the minister acknowledge that his legislated program is useless in that it leaves consumers hurting and introduce amendments to the existing legislation in this House that relieve Albertans from the burden of high gas bills? Will the minister make the commitment to the people he claims to serve right now?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, as the member knows, there were rebates paid in the year 2001. There was no Natural Gas Price Protection Act. In order to respond to what Albertans asked for, legislation was developed, which these members were a part of and voted on and debated, and then we were able to put that legislation in place. In fact, we are caring about Albertans. We are concerned about what happens with any increase in prices. We also know the great benefits that accrue to Albertans through the sale of their resources called oil and natural gas.

Mr. Speaker, we're always reviewing every piece of legislation. We're always reviewing the price of natural gas, and we're always ensuring that Albertans get top value, top dollar, for the natural gas they produce and they own.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Market Enhancement Recovery Fund

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. Alberta has long enjoyed relative labour harmony, a credit to employers, employees, and the unions involved. However, there are a few anomalies that have the effect of skewing the balance so as to be unfair to non-union employers. One such anomaly is the market enhancement recovery fund, referred to as a MERF. This is where unions subsidize union employers to underbid non-union employers, thus creating work for union members. My question: if it is illegal for employers to make direct financial contributions to unions, why is it not also illegal for unions to make direct financial contributions to employers?

2:20

Mr. Dunford: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's a very good question. On the surface it seems like we're, you know, connecting a couple of dots here as one follows from another, but I think it's necessary to put on the record the context of the items in the question. In the area of labour relations it's extremely important that we have a true reflection of the interests of the parties, so it was deemed necessary in labour legislation – and it probably is all across this country – some time ago, I guess, longer than the hon. member and I have been in politics. You can't have a union recognized by a Labour Relations Code that is dominated by the employer, so there was legislation put in place so that an employer could not provide financial contribution to a union in order then to destroy that separate vested interest that each would have.

Now, when we get into the area of the market enhancement recovery funds, we're not talking about an employer/employee relationship. The Merit Contractors Association, who made a presentation as recently as last week on this particular item to myself and to others, I think are connecting those two particular dots, and I think we have to look into this from that relationship of a competitive bidding operation rather than an employer having influence over its own actual union.

Mr. McClelland: My supplemental is to the same minister. As we continue, then, to connect the dots, since most of Alberta's mega energy projects are union projects, whereby employers are contributing to MERFs through the unions and those funds then are used in smaller institutional projects, are we not indirectly promoting unfair or unreasonable labour practices outside of the megajobs?

Mr. Dunford: Well, certainly the allegation is made that that is actually happening. There is nothing illegal about that in terms of

the Labour Relations Code or other acts that I'm responsible for. Let's accept for the purposes today that it is true. If, in fact, this is happening, again, in the current legislation there would be no illegal activity that's been involved. In fact, one of the discussions that is currently ongoing is whether or not MERFing is a labour relations issue under a provincial jurisdiction or whether or not it is some sort of a competitive issue that might come under the federal government. In any event, it follows along the general point, that was made decades ago, that employees should have more say and should have more direct involvement in what their employer is doing. Many companies have tried to provide stock-option purchase plans for employees, and I'm not so sure that this is not another reflection of that.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you. To the same minister, Mr. Speaker. While it's obvious that the intent of legislation decades ago is not being followed through today as individual union members do not contribute to MERFs – contractors contribute based on hours worked – is this, therefore, not in contradiction to our present labour laws?

The Speaker: I hope hon. members appreciate that it's against the rules to ask for legal opinions.

Hon. minister, proceed very quickly.

Mr. Dunford: Well, very quickly, at a recent presentation on this matter this allegation was, in fact, made. I've asked to see that legal frame of reference, and I await it as we speak.

Calling Lake Fish Stocks

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government clearly doesn't believe in transparency or accountability, as the Calling Lake issue continues to identify. The Minister of Sustainable Resource Development opened up a lake, his lake, for fishing. This lake has collapsed and has vulnerable fish populations. For the past few weeks his ministry has denied the existence of a memorandum from senior department biologists that states that the pilot project on Calling Lake may cause the irrecoverable collapse of fish populations there. All of my questions are to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. Why does his ministry continue to refuse to release this memo?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Yes. Mr. Speaker, of course, the Liberal way would be to close everything down. That's the Liberal way. We don't operate that way. This is a very innovative project. It's working well. Again, I'd like to stress the fact that it is a five-year project.

An Hon. Member: How long?

Mr. Cardinal: A five-year project. We are monitoring it very closely. It's very well accepted by the department staff, the biologists. It's very well accepted by the public, Mr. Speaker. In fact, this Friday I announced the opening of an additional 16 lakes where you can now catch and keep a fish. That recommendation is coming from the biologists in the department working with us.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, the Liberal way would have been to properly manage fish stocks for the past 10 years in this province.

Given that senior department biologists in the memo say that there is scientific evidence this pilot project is causing irreparable damage to Calling Lake, will the minister just commit to ending this project?

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, I assume that if the Liberals were to take over, they'd end all the projects in Alberta, but this side of the government will not do that. This project is working very well. The report hasn't been released yet. The report will be coming forward, and I'm not scared to file the report in the House and put an action plan behind that report. What they would do is close the province down.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, given that fish stocks are at this particular point in time and have been for some years collapsing in this province, why does the minister continue to refuse to make his decisions based on scientific evidence rather than the whim in his own neighbourhood?

Mr. Cardinal: No, Mr. Speaker, it's not the whim of the neighbourhood. The issue of sport and commercial fishing is a major issue to Albertans. The commercial fishing industry is about a \$5 million industry. The sportfishing industry is about a \$350 million industry. There is a challenge to keep the balance between having the commercial fishery viable and also having the stocks that these sports fishermen will utilize in Alberta. It's simple, but it's challenging to manage it. The only way we're going to do it is to be very, very innovative, and it's one of the most innovative projects you've seen.

The Speaker: Hon. members, before we proceed with Recognitions, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(*reversion*)

Mr. Tannas: Mr. Speaker, I'm delighted to introduce three more guests who are interested in Bill 201. They're in the members' gallery: Jay Woosaree, Alberta Research Council; Laura Ferguson; and Louise Perkins. I'd ask these people to please stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development.

Mr. Norris: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a real delight to take this opportunity to introduce to you and through you to the members of the House a great friend of agriculture in Alberta and one of the wisest fellows I know: he sold his farm and moved into the wonderful constituency of Edmonton-McClung, where he now resides and is a good friend. I'd ask Brian Heidecker to please stand and be recognized in the House.

2:30

The Speaker: Hon. members, there's a new face at the Clerk's table today, a visitor from the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba who's here with an exchange program, Mr. Rick Yarish. He's the Clerk Assistant and Clerk of Committees for the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba. He'll be here with us for the rest of the week taking part in the ambience of this very esteemed parliament.

This evening, as well, hon. members, the Eid Al-Adha ceremony. All hon. members are invited at 5:30 with a reception to follow in the rotunda.

head: **Recognitions**

Art Smith

Ms Kryczka: Mr. Speaker, I'm very pleased to recognize an amazing native Calgarian, Arthur Ryan Smith, CM, DFC, best known as Art Smith to Calgarians, Albertans, and Canadians. Art recently received the Order of Canada award in recognition of his exceptional record of lifelong public service. He was also inducted into the Alberta Order of Excellence in 1997.

Art Smith is one of a few Canadians to have served as a city alderman, member of the provincial Legislature, and three times elected to the House of Commons. He also represented Canada as the delegate to the United Nations in 1959, 1960, and 1961. Art Smith was founding chairman of the Alberta Economic Development Authority and founding co-chair of the Calgary Economic Development Authority. He was also founding president and CEO of the Calgary Homeless Foundation and remains the only honorary lifetime member.

Art was also an executive member of the organizing committee for the World Energy Congress; chief of protocol for the Calgary Winter Olympics; president of the Calgary Chamber of Commerce; president of the Air Cadet League of Canada; and board member of the Asia Pacific Foundation, the Calgary Airport Authority, and the Alberta Cancer Foundation.

Mr. Speaker, it is most fitting that Art Smith's exemplary public service commitment continues to be honoured.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Collaborative Law

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I would like to take this opportunity to recognize a group of lawyers in Medicine Hat who are continuing to break ground in their promotion and practice of collaborative law. Medicine Hat is leading the nation in the growth rate of cases resolved through collaborative law.

The collaborative process is a client-centred process. The two collaborative lawyers are hired by their clients as settlement counsel to focus on settlement from the beginning of their retainer, to assist their clients in negotiations based on the clients' interests, to provide legal advice to their client to collaborate first and consider court as only a last resort.

Most traditional lawsuits are resolved before trial. The collaborative process is quicker, cheaper, and more amicable. Clients control the result and have a great deal of control over the cost and timing. Doesn't it only make sense that everyone agree not to go to trial in the first place? With constant pressure on the courts to deal with criminal matters, civil and family dispute resolution outside the court system is not only more effective for the client, it has tremendous potential to fundamentally change the way we operate courts in Alberta.

Congratulations to Janis Pritchard, David Carter, and over 30 others who are committed to practicing collaborative law in Medicine Hat.

Lakewood Community League

Dr. Massey: The Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie and I congratulate Lakewood Community League in Edmonton-Mill Woods as they mark their 25th anniversary. Over the years hundreds of community volunteers have served on the executive and along with others have been involved in providing a rich and wide variety of recreational, educational, and community service programs.

At the annual volunteer appreciation night on February 22 a number of awards were presented. Merit awards for outstanding and dedicated service were presented to Lisa LePage, Mike Bauer, Lyndon Bradshaw, Carrie McIlveen, and Peter Schenk. Merit awards for outstanding service and bingo volunteering were also given to Carol Badin, Wayne Robinson, Kim Hodda, and Neil Shewchuk. Six volunteers, Gwen and Keith LeClerq, Catherine Hunt, Nikki Bradshaw, Lorna Gallant, and June Sauer, were given a special 25th anniversary recognition award for having served five consecutive years as board members. Volunteer of the year was Nikki Bradshaw.

For 25 years Lakewood Community League volunteers have enriched the lives of Edmontonians in this part of the city. They have built and maintained facilities and instituted an enviable tradition of service.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Emerson Drive

Mr. Graydon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise and recognize Grande Prairie's country rock band, Emerson Drive.

About seven years ago in Grande Prairie there was a high school talent show. That show began forming what would become Emerson Drive. Brad Mates, Patrick Allingham, and Chris Hartman played together for the first time. They decided to form a band and started practising in the Mates' family basement. Since that time they've gone on to several awards. They won the *Billboard* magazine top new country artists award, and from the Canadian Country Music Association they won the rising star award and the group of the year award.

Those who had the opportunity to see them or hear them at last year's Grey Cup will appreciate why the Peace region is so proud of Emerson Drive.

Thank you.

Peace Activism

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, last Friday evening I joined over 300 concerned citizens at the Canadian Islamic Centre, which is situated in the constituency of Edmonton-Glengarry, to listen to Jane MacKay Wright and Louis Schmittroth speak on the topic of Iraq and Palestine: Views from the Ground.

In 2002 these courageous Canadian grandparents traveled to the Middle East to observe the reality on the ground for civilians caught in the tragedies of war and social conflicts. Jane, a former professor of media arts, participated in a delegation to Iraq cosponsored by Christian Peacemaker Teams and Voices in the Wilderness to witness the effects of 12 years of sanctions and bombings on the civilians of this country. Louis, a retired computer science professor, took part in a journey to Palestine organized by the International Solidarity Movement to witness the reality of life in refugee camps and under military occupation.

The theme for both presentations was: in wars it is the civilians that suffer; let us look for alternatives to violence. It is because of their brave and valiant efforts that this important message is being spread and supported.

Thank you.

Scott Tournament of Hearts

Rev. Abbott: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to pay tribute to Deb Santos, Alberta's Scott Tournament of Hearts representative, and to Drayton

Valley, which hosted this year's Alberta Scott Tournament of Hearts from January 22 to 26, 2003.

Ms Santos won Alberta's tournament in Drayton Valley and ably represented our province at the national finals in Kitchener, Ontario, this past weekend. Against tough competition, Deb ended with a five and six record. The national tournament was won by Nova Scotia's Colleen Jones for the third straight year.

Mr. Speaker, curling is an important part of prairie life. It seems that as the nights grow longer and the days grow colder, the curling rink is where you go to find the spirit of community. In Drayton Valley our curling rink is filled with that spirit, both in the warmth of our volunteers and spectators as well as the camaraderie of competitors. This year's organizers did a first-rate job in ensuring that Alberta's Scott Tournament of Hearts was a success. They deserve a big pat on the back for their tireless efforts.

It's in mentioning events like this that I am truly proud to represent the people of Drayton Valley-Calmar, and so I ask all MLAs to stand up and give our curling volunteers, as well as Ms Santos, the recognition of this House.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head: Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Mr. Magnus: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise in my place to present a petition signed by 1,644 firefighters representing about 75 percent of every available full-time urban firefighter in Alberta. The petition asks that the Legislative Assembly

amend the Worker's Compensation Board Act to create presumptive status for six cancers that have been conclusively shown to disproportionately affect firefighters as a result of the dangerous conditions in which [they] work.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head: Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Bill 2

Financial Statutes Amendment Act, 2003

Mrs. Nelson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I beg leave to introduce Bill 2, the Financial Statutes Amendment Act, 2003. This being a money bill, Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, having been informed of the contents of this bill, recommends the same to the Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 2 contains amendments necessary to move forward with a new fiscal framework that is designed to bring predictability, sustainability, and continued discipline to the budget planning process.

[Motion carried; Bill 2 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

2:40

Bill 203

School (Compulsory Attendance) Amendment Act, 2003

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce a bill being the School (Compulsory Attendance) Amendment Act, 2003.

This is a bill to raise the school leaving age of Alberta students from 16 to 17 years, thereby increasing their educational opportunities to better meet the demands of the 21st century.

[Motion carried; Bill 203 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

**Bill 204
Insurance (Accident Insurance Benefits)
Amendment Act, 2003**

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce a bill being Insurance (Accident Insurance Benefits) Amendment Act, 2003.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 204 would amend the Insurance Act to increase the limit on section (b) medical benefits delivered to those who have been in an automobile accident to \$25,000 over four years from the current level of \$10,000 over two years. As well, Bill 204 would include provisions for a dispute arbitration mechanism between insurance companies and claimants receiving section (b) medical benefits.

[Motion carried; Bill 204 read a first time]

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment.

Dr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week in the House the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie made some unfounded comments about Climate Change Central, so today I'd like to table in the House the appropriate number of copies of a number of Climate Change Central documents. Their actual progress reports and actions accomplished are in here, and I'd encourage the member before she makes those kinds of comments in the future to perhaps look at the information, and she would get more information.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Highwood.

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table five copies of letters supporting Bill 201, the Emblems of Alberta (Grass Emblem) Amendment Act, 2003. These are from the organizations as follows: Sandy Cross Conservation Foundation, Prairie Conservation Forum, Alberta Fish and Game Association, Alberta Native Plant Council, the Lethbridge Naturalists Society, the Alberta Wilderness Association, the Red Deer River Naturalists, Alberta office of the Nature Conservancy of Canada, Southern Alberta Land Trust Society, Vince Petherbridge, Karen De Groot, Shirley-Jean Mascherin, Lois Argue, Laura Ferguson, and the Western Stock Growers' Association.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table five copies of a letter from an Edmonton-Centre constituent, Janice Hoover, directed toward Dr. Jeffery Anderson, who's the chairman of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts. It's referencing the Artstrek program, which is now in its 43rd year, and that it produces the next generation of actors, playwrights, directors, and designers, ensuring that the theatre community remains vibrant and substantial, and urging Dr. Anderson to reconsider the cuts to the funding formula for this program.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I have three tablings. The first one is on behalf of the Leader of the Official Opposition. It's a letter to the Prime Minister with an attachment which is a

resolution opposing unilateral military action against Iraq which was passed by the Official Opposition of Alberta.

My second tabling is a letter from Barry Breau with the Alberta Environmental Network talking about forest certification and what a great project it is and how this government needs to pay a little more attention to it.

The third tabling is from Dean McQuay from Edmonton who is very concerned that the Alberta government is not keeping its promise to protect a critically important wilderness area being the Bighorn wildland recreation area.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table for the benefit of all members of the Assembly photocopies of the natural gas petition that reads, "We, the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government to reinstate natural-gas rebates immediately." These forms can be found at altaliberals.ab.ca. This group of concerned Albertans is from Round Hill, Edmonton, Spruce Grove, Legal, Acme, Donnelly, Lethbridge, Calgary, Elk Point, Kitscoty, and Riley, just to name a few.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table five copies of a letter that I received from a resident of Ponoka who's a proud farmer, and he informed me that his electrical energy costs have increased by over 50 percent between 2000 and 2002. He puts a very tough question to me. He says:

If deregulation and subsequent price increases justified rebates to consumers in 2001, what is the rationale for not providing similar ongoing concessions until the deregulation debacle gets sorted out?

I don't have the answer. Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today. The first tabling is a letter from a senior citizen whose electrical bill has more than doubled and fluctuates each month. This letter is addressed to me and states: "I am a pensioner, living in my own home, on a fixed income. How can I budget on such ridiculous fluctuations?"

The second tabling is a letter from a resident of Leduc, dated February 11, 2003, regarding natural gas rates. This letter is also addressed to me and states, "The amount of \$727.63 is preposterous for a 2400 sq. ft. house with two (2) new furnaces."

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Written Questions**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Proper notice having been given on Thursday, February 20, it's my pleasure to move that written questions appearing on today's Order Paper do stand and retain their places.

[Motion carried]

head: **Motions for Returns**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Proper notice having been given on Thursday, February 20, it's my pleasure to move that motions for returns appearing on today's Order Paper do stand and retain their places.

[Motion carried]

head: **Public Bills and Orders Other than**
Government Bills and Orders
head: Second Reading

Bill 201
Emblems of Alberta (Grass Emblem)
Amendment Act, 2003

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Highwood.

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm honoured to move second reading of Bill 201, Emblems of Alberta (Grass Emblem) Amendment Act, 2003.

Last February the Prairie Conservation Forum approached me to sponsor a private member's public bill to amend the Emblems of Alberta Act to have rough fescue designated as Alberta's provincial grass. I was asked in part because Highwood contains a considerable portion of the remaining rough fescue grassland, which includes both the plains rough fescue and foothills rough fescue. Today I'm asking all hon. members of this Assembly to support the Prairie Conservation Forum and myself in amending the Emblems of Alberta Act to designate rough fescue, Latin name *Festuca scabrella*, as Alberta's provincial grass.

This rough fescue complex may also be recognized as three varieties or, as some taxonomists would prefer, three separate species, known as plains rough fescue, which is Latin *Festuca hallii*; foothills rough fescue, which is *Festuca campestris*; or the third one, northern rough fescue, *Festuca altaica*. Alberta is the only area that is home to all three members of the rough fescue complex.

Rough fescue is a long-lived, perennial bunch grass with deep fibrous roots which tap soil nutrients and bind soil particles. It is a self-curing, nutritious native grass and a major component of the rough fescue grassland, which makes excellent winter grazing. Its relatively high protein content provides good forage for wildlife as well as livestock, and its deep roots facilitate water penetration and act as a water retention factor in the watershed. A tussock of rough fescue has a life span of over 100 years, and consequently it produces few seeds each year with the occasional heavier seed sets every four or more years.

2:50

Range management conscious ranchers practise moderate grazing with their livestock following the 50-50 rule of thumb of leaving 50 percent and permitting 50 percent to be grazed each year. Rough fescue is also a decreaser when the grassland is overgrazed. Overgrazing decreases plant variety; however, zero grazing also results in less varied plant life than that of a moderately grazed grassland. Rough fescue has long been admired by the ranchers and cattlemen of Alberta and has provided a base for horse and cattle raising in Alberta since the 1880s.

You may ask, "Why a provincial grass?" to which I would respond: rough fescue is a very worthy symbol of our prairie heritage of rich grasslands and fertile soil, soil that was the gift of the grasslands to the first homesteaders and remains a gift to our farmers and our ranchers today. The prairie and foothills grasslands sustained the buffalo and Plains Indians for thousands of years before the ranchers and homesteaders arrived.

In the late 1980s a number of naturalists, conservationists, ranchers, government officials, both provincial and federal, agricultural groups, nongovernmental organizations, academics, researchers, and others developed a prairie conservation action plan to mobilize prairiewide efforts to conserve and manage native prairie species' communities and their habitats. As the Prairie Conservation Forum's chair, Cheryl Bradley noted in the 2001-2005 Alberta action plan: in as much as most prairie people today live in urban centres, the challenge is "developing a shared understanding of the prairie ecosystem, including recognizing the opportunities it provides and the limits it places upon us, and learning to care for our prairie home." In this recent action plan it's stated under goal 4, objective 4.1.2:

Implement a process to select a Provincial Grass that will be a symbol of our prairie heritage and convey a sense of prairie as home . . . for many Albertans. Design the selection process to raise awareness among Albertans about the ecology and value of native grasses and native prairie.

In early 2001 the Prairie Conservation Forum sent ballots to interested Albertans asking them to select one of five commonly widespread native grasses, and many MLAs who were here before the last election will remember receiving a letter and a brochure explaining the goal and the process. I had asked earlier for our pages to distribute copies of the Get a Grass ballot. The vote was announced in May of 2001, with the most favoured grass being rough fescue.

The choice of rough fescue as a prairie grass emblem or symbol for Alberta is supported, then, by associations and organizations who are members of the Prairie Conservation Forum, including, but to name a sample of its members, the Alberta Cattle Commission; Alberta Fish and Game Association; Alberta Native Plant Council; Alberta Wilderness Association; Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society; Ducks Unlimited; the Eastern irrigation district; Federation of Alberta Naturalists; the government of Alberta, including the departments of Community Development and Sustainable Resource Development; the Natural Resources Conservation Board; under the government of Canada the Department of National Defence, Canadian Forces Base Suffield; the Canadian Wildlife Service; Nature Conservancy of Canada; Shell Oil; Society of Range Management; and the universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge.

Just as biologists, botanists, naturalists, environmentalists, and many others have for some years supported the protection of the tropical rain forests, members of the Prairie Conservation Forum wish to draw attention to the biodiversity of the remaining native grasslands, which have a unique ecosystem of their own. Our native grassland is not well suited to resisting the invasion of weeds and introduced plants when the grassland is plowed or disrupted by roads, canals, pipelines, or other disturbances. Such disturbances in today's remaining native grasslands areas compel us to advocate for increased research on how to repair and regenerate native plants in the disturbed areas.

With today's interest in the evolving Kyoto accord it is worth noting that an expert from the Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada research centre in Lethbridge and many other scientists as well feel that the native prairie grasslands are equal to the tropical rain forests as effective carbon soil sinks. Rough fescue's root mass and constant shedding of its deep rootlets make it an important component of carbon sequencing.

For thousands of years, then, rough fescue lands were the fall and winter mainstay not only of buffalo but of elk, deer, bighorn sheep on Alberta's plains, hills, and mountain valleys. These grasslands were the builders of the soil which sustains Alberta agriculture to

this day. I believe that it is fitting to recognize a suitable grass species such as rough fescue to help Albertans understand the importance of native grassland as an ecological unit, unique in its own right, and a grassland which is of major cultural and economic value to our province.

Rough fescue is found today in the southern two-thirds of Alberta: from the Cypress Hills in the south to the Grande Prairie plains in the north and in our foothills and mountain valleys as well as across Alberta's prairie lands. It has provided good winter feed for our native mammals. I mentioned the sheep, deer, elk, and bison, and today cattle and horses would be added to the list of beneficiaries.

No other state or province in North America has designated rough fescue as its official grass, and Alberta today has the largest remaining rough fescue grassland, which, while not endangered, is at risk. Making rough fescue our provincial grass emblem would, I believe, be an appropriate step to help Albertans recognize the importance of native grassland that is worthy of our respect and to preserve it for future generations.

I look forward to your comments and ask for your support on Bill 201.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, thank you very much for this opportunity to speak in support of Bill 201, and I thank my colleagues in the House for accommodating me to speak at this time. First of all, I want to commend the Member for Highwood for introducing this bill to the Legislature and to say at the outset that I consider rough fescue an excellent selection as Alberta's provincial grass and, of course, appreciate the support that the Provincial Museum of Alberta has given this grass as well in determining it most appropriate. I would gather, as the Member for Highwood has indicated, that a majority of Albertans that took the time to fill out the ballot also concur. Certainly, it is the first choice of Albertans.

I wanted to just mention quickly the significance of emblems because I think they are significant. First, I would want to comment on our provincial colours – the blue and the gold represent the sky and the prairies – and our provincial tree, the lodgepole pine, which had a very significant part in this province's history. It was used to make railway ties in the very early years, and it continues to play a very major role in our forest industry in manufacturing poles, posts, pulp, plywood, mine timbers, and other lumber products. So I think rough fescue as a grass would be a great addition to this. I think it clearly indicates the importance of grass and agriculture to the development of the prairies and to the continuance of our province's economy.

This designation when passed – and I'll be the optimist in this – would make Alberta the second province in Canada, I understand, to designate a provincial grass, Saskatchewan being the first one. Maybe because we're prairie provinces we understand quite clearly the importance of grass.

Mr. Speaker, the agricultural history of our province does need to be preserved. It is the foundation of our province, and it will continue to play a vital role, and designation, I believe, will help ensure that our public understands what an integral role grasses play in the ecology and the environmental area of our province.

3:00

When the Prairie Conservation Forum set out in 1999 to select a grass emblem, I believe it was the Minister of Community Development that approved the project, and I would want to add my thanks to him. Certainly, one of their goals was to ensure that Albertans had a greater understanding and appreciation of the beautiful native

grasses that adorn our Alberta landscape. We're very pleased in Alberta Agriculture with this choice. We believe that of the more than 135 native grasses that could have been considered, rough fescue best meets the criteria of being widespread across Alberta as the hon. member has indicated. It's very easily recognized. It has a very high ecological significance. It's culturally important and economically important to our province.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

It was very vital to the survival of the pioneers who first settled this province in the 1870s. It provided the basis for most of the grazing for those homesteaders' livestock when they arrived. It's very hardy and can withstand the coldest of winters, and I thought that with the temperature hovering in the minus 30 degrees in the last couple of days, this would be something members would want to take into consideration. Without the sustainability of grasses like this, certainly agricultural development in our province would have been hampered and maybe just would have been unlikely.

I guess the most important thing to all of us who care a lot – and I believe it is all of us – about our native grasses, our native flowers: it continues to be a very, very important forage in the prairies and parklands of our province. It's still vital for the grazing of cattle, certainly horses, other animals, but it continues to be incredibly important for our wildlife whether it's our bighorn sheep, deer, elk, or bison.

The last thing I wanted to just comment on is that Alberta is the only province with all three species of rough fescue growing within its borders. I think that by recognizing it as our native grass we'll continue to ensure that all of those species continue to thrive and survive. This is an excellent step in preserving the heritage of Alberta and educating our public about the important role that wild grass species have played and will continue to play in our province.

So, again, my thanks and congratulations to the Member for Highwood for the foresight and insight to introduce this bill, and I look forward to hearing and reading other members' comments on it.

Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, I believe that two other members from the government side will go first.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is with great pleasure that I rise today and speak in support of Bill 201, the Emblems of Alberta (Grass Emblem) Amendment Act, 2003. I commend the MLA from Highwood for bringing this legislation forward for discussion and debate. It is apparent that this is a valuable bill and one to which I will be offering my support.

Bill 201 would amend the Emblems of Alberta Act to include a provincial grass. Rough fescue would become the official grass of Alberta, representing our prairies' heritage, culture, and tradition. Our provincial emblems symbolize the history, the people, the natural features, and certainly the values that together make what Alberta is. Each emblem embodies an integral component of our province's identity. Grasslands are a part of our history, our character, our economic wealth, and our environmental health. By designating rough fescue as an official emblem, we would acknowledge and celebrate the importance of prairie grasslands. Rough fescue would join other provincial emblems such as the great horned

owl, petrified wood, the lodgepole pine, the wild rose, and the colours blue and gold in symbolizing our province's heritage.

Mr. Speaker, with the passage of this bill Alberta would join Saskatchewan and several U.S. states in designating a provincial grass. Other jurisdictions have recognized the importance of having a symbol to reflect their history and culture and thus adopted provincial or state grasses as official emblems.

This province has over 135 different native grasses; however, rough fescue was chosen as the best candidate for a provincial emblem of Alberta. This grass represents our province's natural history, our province's role in agriculture settlement and development and economic importance, cultural significance, and historical heritage. While I recognize that this selected grass grows in only two-thirds of the province, Alberta is the only jurisdiction in North America that is home to all three subspecies of the grass. Designating rough fescue as our provincial grass would produce a very important benefit. It would lead to a heightened awareness of the importance that this native grass and native grassland species have had and continue to have on our province. The prairies are an extremely significant element of Alberta's past and present, and I believe that by officially recognizing rough fescue, we would indeed elevate the collective level of consciousness of Alberta's historical and cultural heritage.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to focus the remainder of my remarks on the importance of native grasslands to the Alberta prairie. The prairie is a fundamental aspect of our province's tradition, ecology, and heritage. The Alberta prairie grasslands as we know them were formed through geological processes in the course of millions of years. The prairie landscape has been and continues to be altered further by fire, flood, drought, wind, erosion, and even grazing. Each of these processes are dynamic and vary greatly in terms of time, space, and intensity. The alteration among these processes is a critical component of prairie biodiversity.

Eventually grass became the dominant vegetation of the prairies. Perennial grasses, various annual grasses, and many forbs thrive on the Alberta landscape. They have played a prominent ecological role in Alberta's past, and they continue to do so in the present. Prairie vegetation once covered over 14 percent of our province. Following the withdrawal of the glaciers, periods of drought caused many survival problems for the postglacial vegetation. The prairie plants grew complex root systems extending deep into the soil to find available water and nutrients. These deep-rooted grasses and drought-resilient plants prevailed to form the native vegetation of the land.

Mr. Speaker, our province is committed to the conservation of prairie grasslands. This government works in conjunction with other agencies to manage and preserve our native vegetation, while the conservation of prairie grasslands in community pastures relies on land managers, farmers, and ranchers who realize the value of and care for our natural prairie. Alberta's rural community has a deep sense of responsibility and stewardship towards the land, and this can be recognized through the passage of Bill 201. Designating rough fescue as the official grass of Alberta would heighten the awareness of our natural ecology. This designation would help to educate individuals about the importance of this grass species to our province. Albertans would develop a greater understanding and appreciation of native grasses. It is hoped that this could strengthen the efforts of conservation, preservation, and management of this vital ecological component of our ecosystem.

Our province's prairie grasslands are an integral part of our ecosystem, whose significance can be seen all the way from vegetation to consumer. Native grasses provide nutrition and sustenance for the livestock and wildlife that graze on the land.

Rough fescue in particular has a high protein and digestible carbohydrate content. Therefore, it is in the interest of the ranching industry to assist in the preservation and management of our natural habitat.

An increased awareness of the values, significance, and importance of the Alberta native grassland and parkland ecosystem may arise from official designation as a provincial emblem. As a direct consequence such a designation could highlight land use management practices and productive strategies that sustain diverse ecosystems across the whole prairie and parkland landscape. Our province has one of the largest terrains of grassland in the world. It is only appropriate for the province to embrace an emblem reflecting this prairie component. Rough fescue symbolizes the natural diversity across the province, spanning from the flat plains to the rolling foothills to the pristine Rocky Mountains. Albertans need to ensure that our native prairie with its wild plants and animals survives in our province and is conserved for its intrinsic values from which this and future generations can benefit.

3:10

Mr. Speaker, this provincial emblem would be more than just a grass. Indeed, it would be a symbol by which to acknowledge and reflect on the importance of our prairie heritage, tradition, and ecology. I strongly support this act and encourage all my colleagues to vote in favour of Bill 201, the Emblems of Alberta Amendment Act, 2003.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Mr. Hlady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The purpose of Bill 201, the Emblems of Alberta (Grass Emblem) Amendment Act, 2003, which I'm glad to have a chance to speak to this afternoon, is to designate a provincial grass. The species that has emerged as the favoured one is rough fescue.

The selection process for a provincial grass began in the fall of 1999 when the Prairie Conservation Forum took on the mission to get the government to designate a provincial grass. In April 2000 a group composed of individuals with expertise in native plants, range management, soil conservation, communications, and education was formed to spread awareness of and make the case for why Alberta should designate a provincial grass.

Alberta is graced with more than 135 different native grasses. The criteria used to select the five shortlisted species included widespread distribution throughout Alberta, ecological significance, cultural and social importance as well as economic importance. Furthermore, the grasses had to be attractive, easily recognized, and have socially acceptable common names. The five shortlisted provincial grasses, Mr. Speaker, included blue grama, green needlegrass, June grass, rough fescue, and western wheatgrass.

The goal, however, was to find the grass that best symbolized Albertans and our past. With this in mind the council left the final decision up to the people who knew best, Albertans. Over 2,000 Albertans from all over the province voted by mail-in ballot and e-mail from January to April in 2001. Alberta already has six natural emblems: wild rose, great horned owl, bull trout, bighorn sheep, lodgepole pine, and petrified wood. Garnering 37 percent of the vote, rough fescue was obviously the choice of people across the province as the provincial grass.

The rough fescue is described as a characteristic native grass of Alberta's grasslands. Mr. Speaker, all classes of livestock, particularly horses and cattle, as well as bighorn sheep, buffalo, elk, and other wildlife certainly use the rough fescue as a main feeding source

through the year. It is grazed in all seasons and retains a considerable amount of nutritive value after maturity. Its high spring protein and digestible carbohydrate content is extremely valuable to many species. During the winter season snow becomes trapped in the large clumps that form at the base of the grass, moistening and softening the foliage, thereby allowing good winter utilization. Rough fescue is the ideal forage for livestock and wildlife during the winter months.

Alberta is the only jurisdiction where all three subspecies of rough fescue can be found. Aside from limited colour differences and flowering characteristics, there is little that sets the three subspecies apart from one another. In terms of geographical distribution, plains rough fescue is prevalent in west-central Alberta, foothills rough fescue can be in the foothills region of Alberta, and northern rough fescue can be located in the Rocky Mountains region. Recently I did a tour through the foothills region of Alberta and got to see some of the wonderful placings of the foothills rough fescue and the importance to the elk as they migrate through the foothills. Alberta has the largest area of rough fescue grasses in North America. Rough fescue has earned the nickname "the queen of grasses."

Mr. Speaker, what I'm giving to you now are some comments from Albertans who had spoken when they were choosing a grass, and one of the quotes was:

In the summer and fall, I have often admired the fragile blooms of [Rough Fescue], but not until this winter while cross-country skiing, did I appreciate the beauty of those heads in winter as well. Because we did not have a heavy snowpack, I happened across a patch of their dried, rusty gold heads, still standing tall and strong, reflecting delicate shadows on the sparkling snow below. Truly a beautiful sight.

Anyone who says that Albertans don't have a poet in them just doesn't know very many good Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, another Albertan mentioned, "We depend on it for late fall and early spring grazing for our cattle." "Rough fescue is a high production palatable forage. Excellent quality winter feed." Upon the arrival of European settlers in the 1870s rough fescue provided sustenance to livestock which in turn provided food and income for the homesteaders. As agriculture and ranching grew in significance to Alberta, rough fescue played a major role in allowing ranchers' herds to survive the harsh winters in the early years. In the early stages of ranching there were no feedlots available at which ranchers could buy feed. Ranchers relied strictly on fattening their herds through open-range grazing from late spring to early fall. Doing so ensured that the herd would survive the harsh temperatures and the lack of grazing opportunities during the winter season.

Rough fescue has had the ability to adapt to the natural fluctuations in our prairie ecosystems. Rough fescue, however, does not have the ability to survive the changes initiated by man. The biggest change to the prairies since the 1880s is the change from native grasslands to cultivated crops, Mr. Speaker. It's well known that about 4 percent of the land, especially in southern Alberta, which is irrigated produces 20 percent of the crops here in Alberta. It's wonderful effectiveness, but at the same time we have lost some of our native grasslands to this. Lush grasslands were changed into crops to support human and livestock consumption. Researchers estimate that only about 20 percent of Alberta's prairie parkland region is in a condition which approaches its native state.

Allowing livestock to overgraze the land causes grass to not grow back as it would have had it been left alone for a sufficient period of time. Also, urban development, oil and gas development, and road construction have all played a part in the decline of our native grasses. New practices in range management are keeping grasslands healthier, however. There is a growing consensus among ranchers, ecologists, and biologists that native grasses are tremendously

important for ranching, the environment, and our economy.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 201 will ensure that rough fescue will remain an integral part of our great prairies and grasslands. Rough fescue is rooted in the land. Its roots can extend from four to six feet into the soil. The high nutritional value of rough fescue is due to its ability to dig deep and find the nutrients and resources and bring them to the surface. Rough fescue is a beautiful grass, tall and sturdy. It survives the winds of southern Alberta and stands ready to provide for another day. The spirit of all Albertans can be seen in rough fescue: strong and resilient, providing for each other through the riches that have been bestowed upon us by the land we live on, proud of our province and its people.

Mr. Speaker, I'm glad to support Bill 201, and we can proudly proclaim that we are as Albertans rooted in this land as well. Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise this afternoon and support Bill 201, Emblems of Alberta (Grass Emblem) Amendment Act, 2003. It's nice anytime in this Assembly when we see issues of the environment and particularly the sustainability of the environment taking the forefront in discussion. Certainly, designating a grass and designating this particular grass gives us a focus on the importance of taking a look at the competing interests we have in this province at this time and recognizing how important the environment can be.

There is quite a bit of pressure on this particular grass, as there is on all regions of this province that are under environmental pressure, to be sustainable in the long run. This particular grass is a very hardy grass and is persistent, but under heavy grazing pressures or other kinds of frequent disturbances it also can become extinct or hard to cultivate. This grass grows on black, fertile soil, and it's, of course, a habitat preferred for cultivation in this province, so it's gone from much of the former range in central Alberta, particularly on the more level areas. Also, because it grows on fertile, black soil, it's under pressure from development, be that residential, urban kinds of developments or commercial developments, because we tend to populate those areas that have been successful in the past as farming areas. That also causes, then, fragmentation of the areas with roads and subdivisions, and it makes it susceptible to invasion by nonnative species.

3:20

Having said all of that, this is a perfect time to take a look at protecting this kind of grass, and designating it as one of the emblems of Alberta is a good way to do that. We do have some challenges facing us in terms of being able to keep this grass available and sustainable over the coming generations since we have had more than two-thirds of mixed prairie grassland regions being destroyed by cultivation. So the challenges that we see, really, as Albertans are to be able to commit to sound stewardship of the remaining grasslands so that this can be a living emblem forever in our province and to restore this rough fescue to lands where human-caused disturbances have resulted in the elimination of it or a significant decline. By doing that, we will contribute to the sustainability of ecosystems throughout the province. Grasslands are a basic building block for the sustainability of animals and other kinds of habitat.

So this is a timely time for this bill to come forward. It is a nice kind of legacy for this member to have in terms of all the kinds of good work he's done in this Legislature over the years, and we are very happy to support it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am very pleased to have the opportunity to join my colleagues in support of Bill 201, the Emblems of Alberta (Grass Emblem) Amendment Act, 2003. I believe that this bill is extremely important to our province. Our provincial emblems help us define who we are. They symbolize our past, where we've come from, and allow us to see ourselves as we are today so we can see our path into the future. While Alberta has other natural heritage emblems, none symbolizes the importance of the prairies and agriculture to the province as the provincial grass emblem, and to me the rough fescue is the best grass to symbolize our province.

The gold heads of the rough fescue, standing tall, waving in the wind with roots that are deep, tenacious, and adapted to our prairie climates, reflect the heart and grit, the strength of the province and our people. Rough fescue was vital to the survival of those who settled Alberta, providing the basis for grazing when homesteaders first arrived. When people came to the prairies, it was because the grasslands offered the sustainability that the settlers needed for their livelihood. When my grandfather and before him my great-grandfather homesteaded here, the grassland was the stability of the family. It was essential to the development of the rural landscape.

We would most likely not have been able to sustain agriculture without the existence of rough fescue. It was extremely valuable as pasture grass for cattle and winter forage for wild animals. Due to its high nutritional value year-round, rough fescue has remained the most important forage on the prairies. In the same way, Alberta's and Canada's agriculture and agri-food sectors have been and continue to be key contributors to the high quality of life enjoyed by citizens across our province and country. I believe agriculture is our most important renewable resource and a major contributor to our economy in Alberta. I really believe that the longevity of agriculture on the prairies has a direct correlation to our stewardship of the land and the grasses.

Our challenge as the province continues to grow and prosper is to find a balance between economic growth and environmental protection. In many areas of the province we have changed the landscape and the ecosystems from native grassland to cultivated crops. As well, stop for a moment to consider the volatility of the grasslands in a drought. We have to be exceptionally cognizant of how fragile this resource is and how important it is to nurture it, to protect it, and to look after it for the security of our future as Albertans.

As Dr. MacEwan wrote in 1969, "I believe I am an integral part of the environment and, as a good subject, I must establish an enduring relationship with my surroundings. My dependence upon the land is fundamental." He also said, "I believe the biggest challenge is in being a helper rather than a destroyer of the treasures in nature's storehouse, a conserver, a husbandman, and partner in caring for the Vineyard." As a farmer and a rancher I have been dependent on the land for my livelihood and know firsthand the benefit and the value of living in harmony with the land.

As in so many areas, the successful balance can only be reached with the involvement of all partners: government, business, and the public. New practices in range management are keeping grasslands healthier, and I think that this legislation is an excellent complement to these efforts.

Designating rough fescue as our provincial grass emblem will raise awareness about the importance of Alberta's native grasslands. It will provide opportunities for Albertans to develop a greater understanding of and appreciation for the ecology of native grasses, the grasslands, and their cultural and economic importance. Al-

berta's grasslands are an important part of our heritage. They are so vital to the survival and existence of our agricultural industry. They are also a source of rejuvenation for our spirit, maintenance of our soul, fulfillment of our hearts, and enhancement of the beauty of our province.

By contributing to our evolving knowledge of the value of our grasslands, Bill 201 will help ensure that this precious natural resource is maintained and enhanced for generations to come. Then and only then will we be able to echo Dr. MacEwan when he wrote, "I am prepared to stand before my Maker, the Ruler of the entire universe, with no other plea than that I have tried to leave things in His Vineyard better than I found them."

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, am pleased to support Bill 201, Emblems of Alberta (Grass Emblem) Amendment Act, 2003. The Member for Highwood, who brought the bill forward, along with a number of other speakers has made the case for choosing rough fescue very well. It's interesting because the selection of rough fescue joins a long list of other emblems that this Assembly has adopted in the past, and that includes the bighorn sheep, petrified wood, the bull trout, the wild rose, the great horned owl, the lodgepole pine, along with the tartan and the flag of the province and, of course, the very first emblem, our coat of arms.

3:30

The last few selections have gone fairly unchallenged. I note with interest that there was a vote on the choice of this grass, and rough fescue was the choice, but in the past some of the emblems chosen by the government have been challenged. It was right at the beginning, when the province was first instituted, in 1907, when the first Premier, a Liberal Premier, Rutherford, put forward a proposal for our coat of arms. In petitioning the Crown, they described it as "azure [in a] range of snow mountains with blue green coloured foothills, to a lighter green prairie into a golden wheat belt." This was based on a design that Mrs. MacCully from Lacombe had put forward, and it wasn't received very well by the College of Heralds in London. Initially they were quite critical, calling it "of the poorest class of heraldry" and indicating that it was inadmissible.

The road to emblem-naming since then thankfully has been much easier, and we've been able to change the provincial coat of arms over the years without similar interference or concern, as we have our flag. In 1967 the government proclaimed the official flag of Alberta, settling on the arms with a background of royal ultramarine blue, which was said to represent our unpolluted skies. In 1980 the government sought to beef up the coat of arms for the 75th anniversary of the province by adding a pronghorn antelope and some wild roses. They added the pronghorn antelope because Manitoba had already taken the buffalo.

I guess the point I'm making, Mr. Speaker, is that the selection of an emblem, something that stands for our province, is an important piece of work. In the past there's been a lot of time and effort put into choosing and bringing forward proposals, much as there is for this proposal, and I congratulate the individuals and the associations that have been involved in putting forward the proposal we have before us today. As I said, I'm pleased to support the bill that we have in front of us.

I think that with those comments, Mr. Speaker, I'll conclude. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Certainly pleased today to rise and participate in the debate on Bill 201, the Emblems of Alberta (Grass Emblem) Amendment Act, 2003. I would like to note that as a third-generation rancher in southern Alberta whose grandparents came to that area about 1900, I certainly appreciate the importance of good grass and can tell all hon. members that without grass, ranches do not succeed. I've often tried to visualize in my mind the stories my grandfathers told me as a child, where they rode into that country and all they could see was grass up to their stirrups. That must have been a great sight and something that those of us who live today will never be able to see.

I think it's important, Mr. Speaker, that a society recognize the historical significance of its past. Therefore, I think it's important that we do this remembrance of this important grass to our history and our heritage. So I would like to take a moment and express gratitude and appreciation to the hon. Member for Highwood for all the effort he has put into making rough fescue our province's official grass.

Like all the official symbols of the province of Alberta the recognition of rough fescue as our provincial grass is as Albertan as the wild rose flower, the big horn sheep, or the lodgepole pine. Each of these emblems depicts a significant piece of our heritage and exemplifies our rich diversity and history. Although critics may dismiss the process of choosing rough fescue as the official grass of the province, it was in fact a process that involved the contributions of many, many Albertans. Mr. Speaker, I believe it's important to note that the hon. Member for Highwood facilitated this democratic process of choosing rough fescue through the Prairie Conservation Forum. This process included the participation of all Albertans in choosing rough fescue as a potential addition to our provincial emblems. It truly exhibited the great process of democracy we have come to hold so dear to our hearts in this Assembly.

Provincial emblems represent more than simple mementos for promoting a particular piece of our province. Provincial emblems are a special way of showing both the citizens of Alberta and the visitors to Alberta what our province is about. Nowhere, Mr. Speaker, is this more evident than with the long history of rough fescue and its importance to our agricultural community. Ecologically it would be hard to argue for a better grass to represent Alberta. Rough fescue has a wide geographic range in Alberta, covering the foothills, the montane, and the prairie regions of the province. The grass known as rough fescue consists, as others have said, of three closely related species that have between them adapted to the diverse habitat found in Alberta. Of all the western provinces only Alberta has all three rough fescue species within its boundaries. This is truly an Alberta grass.

Agriculture has been the backbone of our economy for over a century now, dating back to well before our province had its inception. Long before the oil and gas industry ruled the economic landscape here, agriculture was the leader that provided the majority of our families in Alberta with a living. As the dominant grass occurring in many first-settled areas of Alberta, rough fescue played an important role in agricultural development. Not only did it provide critical winter feed for livestock, but it ultimately sustained pioneering farms and families from the hardships incurred during the settling period.

The prairies of southern Alberta were viewed as a barren, hard, and lonely landscape by many settlers who arrived here in the 19th century. To many European immigrants the prairies provided a stark contrast to the seemingly more hospitable environment of their homeland, but the settlers also saw the prairie as a land of opportunity, a wilderness frontier which had to be tamed. These early perceptions of the prairies have significantly influenced the forma-

tion of many positive societal attitudes about acceptable human interactions within the prairie landscape and its value to us as Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, Albertans have long held a strong spiritual and philosophical value toward the prairies and rough fescue as an integral part of these core values, the values of family, community, and deep sense of heritage. The Alberta prairie landscape is a part of our cultural history and a significant aspect of our Canadian identity. Many aboriginal people and farmers and ranchers who live in close contact with the prairies have strong emotional ties to the land and its creatures. They feel a responsibility to be good stewards of the land. People who are highly dependent on the land for their livelihood inevitably come to realize the benefit and value of living in harmony with the land. The prairies are a source of aesthetic pleasure, and certainly rough fescue contributes to that appeal. Some people find beauty and inspiration there. It appeals to their eyes, hearts, minds, and imaginations and inspires writings and works of art. Just knowing that there are still native prairies provides an intangible though powerful source of spiritual refreshment. For people seeking escape from urban life, the prairies provide opportunities for solitude and reflection, a retreat where one can experience the natural world.

Some people believe that prairie species and the prairie ecosystem have an intrinsic right to exist in the same manner as other species and natural communities. Therefore, it is important for the province to recognize rough fescue as one of our provincial emblems and protect this vast prairie resource with extreme care and diligence.

3:40

As well, Mr. Speaker, beyond the social and philosophical value of the prairies and the habitat that it supports, the prairies of Alberta also hold a scientific and biological value. As one of the major ecosystems of North America the prairies are rich in biodiversity and genetic resources. Drought, grasshoppers, infestations, prairie fires, floods, and other natural processes have dramatically altered the landscape over a period of many thousands of years. Although it has experienced significant pressure and change, the prairie ecosystem as a whole has survived. Prairie species have at different times either flourished or have had to cope with population declines. Species that were uniquely adapted to the prairies were able to survive and pass on their genetic code to a new generation.

In our recent past human use and development of the prairie has resulted in the decline or demise of several plant and animal species. As a result, many people are concerned about human activities that lead to the extinction of prairie species. Bill 201 speaks to these concerns, Mr. Speaker, and highlights the importance that we place on our prairie resources. Because we know so little about how complex ecosystems work, we don't fully understand the function and value of individual species within the larger prairie ecosystem. We have only recently come to realize that it's wise to conserve as much of the planet's genetic material as is possible both to perpetuate natural systems and to provide future benefits to the human race. This is particularly true in our technologically advanced society, where research in genetic manipulation and the development of new hybrid species have progressed rapidly, leaving many ethical questions unanswered.

A large number of useful hybrid species have been developed from native grasses. Studies have shown how native prairie plants may be more efficient at soil erosion control, nutrient recycling, nitrogen fixation, and keeping insect and weed species under control than tame grasses and other crops. Native rangeland, with its broad diversity of plant life, including rough fescue, may have greater value as cattle feed than hybrid barley, corn, and forage crops, all of

which are grown predominantly as a single monoculture crop. Recent studies have shown that cattle which are finished for market on native grass rather than on domestic feeds produce meat with a higher conjugated linolenic acid content. Conjugated linolenic acids are antioxidizing and anticarcinogenic agents which are important to human health.

Mr. Speaker, with the recognition of rough fescue as the official provincial grass, it is in the province's interest to protect its native landscape and one of its provincial emblems from extinction. The economic and social value of the prairie landscape are also significant assets that are an important part of our economy.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, you've run out of time.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise this afternoon to participate as well in the debate in second reading of Bill 201, Emblems of Alberta (Grass Emblem) Amendment Act, 2003. After listening to the previous hon. members of this Assembly in their endorsement of this legislation, it is certainly noteworthy. It is noteworthy that this Assembly would consider another symbol for this province with our centennial coming rather quickly, in another two years, that we would initiate an official grass from a field of five.

As I see here, we have an election of the rough fescue grass as our native grass. Also under consideration was the western wheat grass, the blue grama grass – and it's interesting to note that that's already designated in two states of America: Colorado and New Mexico – the green needlegrass, and it was not designated anywhere else. The June grass was overlooked by the electorate in this case, and perhaps the hon. Member for Highwood, who introduced this legislation, could in committee update us on the balloting that occurred at the Prairie Conservation Forum on the second floor of the Provincial Building in Lethbridge. The June grass, interestingly enough, grows all over the province. The rough fescue grows in an area, oddly enough, if you were to look at the map of Alberta, running east and west to as far north, maybe a little further north, as the town of Grassland, maybe Wandering River, maybe a little bit further. That's the range north of the rough fescue, but it is interesting that the June grass would grow all over the province. In the balloting that occurred, I for one would have an interest in just how many ballots were received, and was it the overwhelming choice of those who took the time out to participate to make the rough fescue our latest provincial symbol?

Now, Mr. Speaker, when we think of setting aside a grass like this and if it's going to be a special plant or a special grass, then are we also going to set aside a specific area where future generations can see this? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie has suggested that it grows in a lot of different areas. It grows in a lot of places that are already protected, but the hon. member also spoke about special places designations and the fact that we are statistically underrepresented in special places allocations for grasslands. Perhaps at some point in the very near future I will be surprised by this government, particularly in light of the rather loud debate that went on last fall regarding the Kyoto protocol, that this Assembly will entertain the legislative proposal that we will set aside additional grasslands for future generations not only to enjoy but also to study. I think this is very important.

One only has to look at the fact that the Athabasca Glacier in the 100-year time frame that this province has existed has shrunk by two-thirds in volume. So not only would the notion that we would be willing to set aside areas for future generations to enjoy and study be notable, but I think it would be a step in the right direction as far as public policy is concerned. We have to realize that this province

is not an isolated island. We are members not only of the North American community but also the world community, and what we do here at a local level as far as conservation impacts everyone. Everyone. Mr. Speaker, we certainly are a member of the global village.

When you look at this bill, I think it's a good idea. We have certainly the rough fescue as it was described earlier in the opening remarks by the hon. Member for Highwood. Yes, there are three different types. There are northern, the foothills, and the plains rough fescue. It needs to be recognized, and it needs to be protected, and I think this is a good first step.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

3:50

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky.

Mr. Knight: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed an honour to rise today and speak on behalf of the Emblems of Alberta (Grass Emblem) Amendment Act, 2003. Again I want to start by thanking the hon. Member for Highwood for his efforts to adopt a new emblem that all Albertans can be proud of.

From the members who have spoken before me we have heard of the importance and the qualities of rough fescue in Alberta. I'd like to shift gears a little bit, Mr. Speaker, and talk about the selection process through which rough fescue was selected as the candidate for our provincial grass. Before I tell you about the selection process, a few words about the network that put the selection process together.

The Prairie Conservation Forum, Mr. Speaker, made up of 27 nongovernmental organizations and 20 provincial and federal bodies, played the lead role in setting up the selection process. The forum is a broad voluntary coalition representing agricultural groups, conservation groups, land and resource management organizations, federal and provincial agencies, industry, and academia.

The Prairie Conservation Forum has three broad objectives:

1. develop and implement broad strategies and focused initiatives for conserving native prairie ecosystems;
2. encourage information exchange among member organizations; and
3. raise public awareness about management issues pertaining to prairie landscapes, habitats and species.

The Prairie Conservation Forum typically meets three times a year – January, May/June, and September – in various locations within the prairie and parkland areas of Alberta. A steering committee meets between meetings to review and ensure implementation of actions agreed upon at the previous meetings and to plan the meetings. All forum meetings are open to the public.

Mr. Speaker, the Prairie Conservation Forum plays an integral role in creating awareness and preservation of Alberta's ecology. Its goals and the way it conducts its business are commendable. Some notable accomplishments of the forum include the development, publication, and implementation of two Alberta prairie conservation action plans, 1996-2000 and 2001-2005, which focused on conservation of biological diversity in prairie and parkland Alberta.

The forum also promotes education and awareness in the area of prairie conservation targeted at landholders, decision-makers, industry, and the public using various media, including a web site, brochures, displays, pamphlets, posters, writer kits, conferences, and speaking engagements. The forum has developed a university course, topics on prairie conservation, which has been offered as a senior seminar course by the department of biological sciences at the University of Lethbridge since 1998. The Prairie Conservation Forum has also established a proposed national wildlife area at Canadian Forces Base Suffield that resulted from discussions initiated by the Prairie Conservation Forum.

Mr. Speaker, it is obvious by this list of achievements that the Prairie Conservation Forum is dedicated to the preservation of Alberta's natural landscape while acknowledging the economic realities of the 21st century. It is for these reasons that the Prairie Conservation Forum was the perfect organization to conduct the selection process of the provincial grass.

In the fall of 1999 the forum initiated a project to select a provincial grass emblem for Alberta. The purpose of the project was to choose an official symbol of our prairie heritage and of the prairie as home for many Albertans. The process of selecting and officially designating a provincial grass, according to the Prairie Conservation Forum, would help Albertans to better understand and appreciate the ecology of native grasses and grasslands and their cultural and economic importance. The concept was approved in February 2000 by the provincial Minister of Community Development. In April 2000 a provincial grass working group was formed, comprised of several experts in native plants, range management, soil conservation, communications, and education whose organizations were represented on the conservation forum. The work of the provincial grass group was facilitated by the Alberta Native Plant Council's representative on the forum. The Society for Range Management served as the financial administrator, and as of December 2001 over 500 volunteer hours had been devoted to the project. A grant of \$5,000 from the Sport, Recreation, Parks & Wildlife Foundation helped to cover the costs, and there were generous contributions of photographs and artwork.

Of more than 135 different native grasses in Alberta the prairie members selected five to be shortlisted for consideration as a provincial grass: blue grama grass, green needlegrass, June grass, rough fescue, and western wheat grass. Among the characteristics shared by the shortlisted grasses, we find that they're widespread in Alberta and easy to recognize. Mr. Speaker, all of them are highly ecologically significant, specifically with regard to dominance, wildlife use, or at-risk status. Moreover, the five grasses are culturally significant and have great traditional and horticultural uses. They are also economically important, providing forage and use in reclamation.

An attractive colour brochure was developed profiling the five species and providing information on grasslands in Alberta. Media releases inviting all Albertans to participate in selecting a grass were distributed through the province from January to April 2001. Articles appeared in numerous magazines and newspapers, and several interviews with working group members aired on radio and television. Information on candidate species was posted on the conservation's web site, and over 8,000 brochures were distributed to some 40 Prairie Conservation Forum member organizations, schools, 4-H groups, interpretation centres, relevant academic institutions, MLAs, and the general public upon request and through government offices. Brochures were also made available at several conferences on agriculture, environment, and education.

After this thorough and democratic selection process, Mr. Speaker, an overwhelming choice for our provincial grass was rough fescue. Over 2,000 Albertans from many parts of the province voted by mail-in ballot and e-mail between January and April 2001. Rough fescue received 36 percent of the vote cast, with June grass coming second at 28 percent. Reasons given by Albertans for choosing rough fescue as a provincial grass were that it is an attractive and sturdy grass providing nutritious food for grazing wildlife and livestock in winter and summer and that it is an indicator of well-managed rangeland. Other reasons were that Alberta is the largest area of rough fescue grassland anywhere in North America; rough fescue grasslands are at risk; and, lastly, rough fescue is not designated elsewhere as a provincial or state grass. At the moment

Alberta has six natural emblems: the wild rose, the bighorn sheep, the great horned owl, the lodgepole pine, the bull trout, and petrified wood. And I surely can relate to that in this room. Given that Alberta is a prairie province, I believe it is appropriate that Alberta have an official grass emblem, just as most other Great Plains provinces and states do.

4:00

It is clear, Mr. Speaker, that the selection process that brought rough fescue forward as the nominee for a provincial grass emblem was complete, fair, and democratic. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Prairie Conservation Forum for all the hard work and dedication in this matter. Alberta is culturally, ecologically, and economically rooted to the prairies. A provincial grass will reaffirm our prairie heritage to Albertans. For this reason I urge all my colleagues here today to support this bill and help create an emblem that bonds present and future generations of Albertans to our prairie character.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Mr. Renner: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm very happy to have an opportunity to rise today and speak to this bill. Interestingly enough, I had originally indicated that while I was supportive of the bill, I told the member that's bringing forward this bill, the Member for Highwood, that I probably would not be available to speak. However, given that there is time and we've had a lot of discussion on this bill, I thought I would take the opportunity given to me to just make a few comments on the bill.

First of all, I think it's appropriate, although I'm a city boy through and through, that I have an opportunity to discuss this bill, given that the area I live in is often referred to as the grasslands area. The city of Medicine Hat is located within shortgrass everything: we have Short Grass Ranches; we have Shortgrass Library System. We have all kinds of reference to our prairie heritage. Mr. Speaker, I live in the city of Medicine Hat with manicured lawns and don't have access to a whole lot of wild grass. On the other hand, I live in an area where many are very much cognizant of the importance of wild grass in our heritage and the tremendous way that the natural grass has contributed to the development of not only southeastern Alberta but, really, all of Alberta. So I'm very pleased that the member has brought forward this bill and proposes to signify one of the grasses of Alberta as a provincial emblem.

Mr. Speaker, let's talk just a little bit about the process. As members of my caucus certainly are aware, I have been critical at times of the private member's bill process. Frankly, I believe that there are times when we have passed bad legislation in this House through private members' bills because there has not been ample opportunity for the member to do sufficient research, there hasn't been ample opportunity for the public to be sufficiently knowledgeable about what is being proposed in a private bill, and I think, probably most importantly, there have not been sufficient resources available to individual members to consider the long-term ramifications that passing a law, that has exactly the same law as every other bill that's introduced in this House, may or may not have on the future of Albertans. In this particular case, I'm very pleased and happy to say that none of the aforementioned concerns apply.

The member has taken a tremendous amount of time and diligence in consulting with various stakeholder groups. The process by which we have selected the grass, the rough fescue grass, has been well documented by others in their debate this afternoon, so I won't get into that, but there has been ample opportunity for the public to have

input into this. From a point of view of long-term ramifications, the nature of this bill is such that I don't think that 10 years from now we're going to come to regret dealing with this issue in this House. After all, Mr. Speaker, designating a grass as a provincial emblem is a significant event in this House, but it's probably not a life-changing event for most Albertans. So I have absolutely no difficulty. In fact, I am very pleased to support the bill this afternoon.

Now, some have said that rough fescue, perhaps from the perspective that it is not native and does not grow in all parts of the province, should not have been chosen. However, I'd like to point out to all members that we have an emblem in Canada that all of us hold very near and dear to our hearts, and that's the maple leaf. I'm not sure that I've seen too many maple trees growing in this part of the world either. That doesn't mean that that emblem is not important and is not a significant emblem for our nation, Canada. In much the same way, fescue, for all of the various reasons that others have spoken to this afternoon, makes a very, very logical grass to use as a provincial emblem. We've heard about the longevity of the grass, the fact that the grass has deep, deep roots and can survive droughts and makes the best use of snow in the winter. All of these various factors, I think, speak well of the way that this grass mirrors in many ways the long roots that Albertans have in this province.

Mr. Speaker, I want to also spend just a little bit of time talking about some of the groups that have been involved and acknowledge the fact that, in addition to the Member for Highwood, a number of other groups have been instrumental, I think, in bringing this bill forward and, in fact, staying in touch with the MLAs. I have had contact with a number of groups, and I congratulate them and thank them for being involved in the process, in particular the Prairie Conservation Forum, which was instrumental in the process in dealing with the discussion related to the initiation of a grass emblem and then following through, with the assistance of a number of people and organizations, to eventually choose the winner, which is rough fescue. I think it's a tribute to that organization and to all of the naturalists throughout the province of Alberta that everyone has come together and is working so hard to see this bill come to fruition.

Mr. Speaker, I indicated that I didn't plan on speaking for a long time on this bill, but I am pleased that I have an opportunity to talk about some of the, I think, very valid and good reasons why I, like so many others that I've heard speak this afternoon, will be supporting this bill, and I encourage all others to support it in the same way.

Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Government Services.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is really, indeed, a pleasure to stand this afternoon and speak to Bill 201, the Emblems of Alberta (Grass Emblem) Amendment Act, 2003. I'm just really delighted to be able to speak to and support this particular bill. I think it's fitting that the hon. Member for Highwood is the individual to bring this particular bill forward, not only in recognition of all the work that he's done for it, but if you happen to know the constituency of Highwood, it has within it one of the first rangelands designated as public land, where cattle were free to roam, and large ranches were settled there. From an historic point of view, it's appropriate that that individual from Highwood brings this particular bill forward.

It's not only that, but Albertans, you know, look towards their environment, and things like fescue grass represent some of the values that have been traditional in our province. As well, you look at the absolute respect that ranchers have for that particular grass, the

resiliency of the grass, not only for what it did for the buffalo, but those original ranchers found they could use it for raising the best cattle the world has ever seen. It is a testament to their fortitude.

4:10

Also, through our provincially protected areas we ensure that our natural heritage remains vibrant, that it remains strong and protected for today and for future generations. The intent of the designation of a provincial grass emblem is to select an official symbol of our grassland and our prairie heritage. This grass emblem will join the ranks of our other natural heritage provincial emblems. We've heard about them all, but I want to provide just a bit of a different perspective to that today. I will be proud to say that I stood up and supported this particular designation.

Every year when I go to my grade 6 classes, I give them a little quiz: what are the provincial emblems? Hopefully, next year we'll be able to say: yes, the provincial grass. Particularly in our area, with the northern fescue that is there, we'll be able to include that with the wild rose. It's synonymous around the world as our provincial flower. In the Crownsnest Pass area, where the lodgepole pine is predominant, we also will be able to add the grass to that. Of course, we've got the petrified wood down in our area right close to the Burmis tree, and although we don't see many great horned owls in our area, our kids always enjoy the significance of the little pin that we give them. So along with the Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, that we see in our area, and the bull trout, that graces our wonderful, clean streams throughout the Rocky Mountains, we're adding this grass. I think it's something that my constituents will certainly identify with.

These emblems reflect the province's history, its natural diverse landscape, and its flora and fauna species richness. They represent elements of Alberta that are important to us all because they are symbolic of the wild, natural, and bountiful Alberta, that is home to aboriginal people and that first attracted European settlers to western Canada. Evidence of how important the grass was to the native people in bringing up the buffalo can be seen by visiting Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump. You can see evidence of that grass today at Head-Smashed-In.

Ecologically, it would be hard to argue for a better grass than rough fescue to represent the province of Alberta. Fescue grasslands are symbolic of natural and human-based systems and host a rich range of contrasting elements that do indeed reflect the diversity of the province. From a natural history point of view Alberta is the only place in North America that contains all three species of rough fescue. This grass is fairly widespread in the province and is found in four of the six natural regions in our province, those being the grassland, the parkland, the foothills, and the Rocky Mountains. Rough fescue ecosystems are the mature grasslands in the grassland natural region, and they are as synonymous as the old-growth forest in the boreal forest natural region. Because of the unique way that this grass retains nutrients in the system, it's a critical winter food source for wildlife, including important big game species of the prairies and the foothills.

From a human history perspective it is difficult to see how the parkland, grassland, and foothills regions of the province could have sustained agricultural development without rough fescue. It provided critical winter feed for livestock and sustained pioneering efforts on the prairie. Today it is recognized that an extensive cover of rough fescue is an indicator of a well-managed rangeland. No better evidence of the resiliency of this grass could have occurred than in the famous Granum fire of 1997, where 110 sections of prairie native grassland were burnt. Those ranchers and those farmers, yes, had to take their cattle to other areas because there was

no feed for the winter, but the next spring – it was an amazing thing, Mr. Speaker – with the extra rainfall that we had, that grass came back after a really intensive fire going over it. That's a testament to the root system and the depth that the roots go to preserve the vitality of the roots so that it will regenerate itself again next year. Within two years cattle were back on those barren lands, and because of its resiliency those ranchers did survive through a very, very difficult time.

Identifying rough fescue as Alberta's official grass emblem will contribute significantly to the conservation of natural grasslands. Our action to recognize this grass will go a long way to inform Albertans about native grasses and their ecological, cultural, and economic importance to the province and will aid in the efforts to educate the public about the critical importance of wild grass species to both the natural and human history of our province of Alberta. Albertans are proud of their province and will continue to help to protect the natural diversity that is found across this province, and I know that ranchers, who are probably the best stewards of the land, know this probably better than anyone.

This is evident in the success of the special places program, which took place in Alberta and involved the process of nominating, identifying, and establishing new parks and protected areas around the province. Alberta's parks and protected areas network conserves many of the most spectacular natural areas in the world from majestic mountains and wide-open prairies to the mystical badlands and the vast northern forests.

Alberta parks and protected areas are living libraries and laboratories of provincial natural heritage, and I know that the Minister of Community Development, the Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek, is responsible for protected areas. I know him as a former educator, and I believe I can speak on his behalf when I strongly say that in the benefits of life-long learning not only through the formalization of the education system but also as a part of exploration and the discovery of processes in life, education is necessary to ensure the sustainability of the province's natural features and biological treasures. As outdoor classrooms our protected areas offer hands-on exploration and a connection to a variety of natural ecosystems found in Alberta and contribute to our evolving knowledge of Alberta's natural and cultural history.

The Acting Speaker: I regret, hon. member, that your time has run out.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you very much.

4:20

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View.

Ms Haley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure today to rise and be able to address this bill and actually offer support. Many of my colleagues will know how difficult it is for me to actually support a private member's bill, so congratulations to the hon. member. I'd like to thank my colleague the hon. MLA for Highwood for introducing this great idea. As has been mentioned repeatedly in here, Alberta has a number of emblems that represent Alberta's heritage and deep connection with our great outdoors, the Rocky Mountains, and the prairie life. The addition of rough fescue will help represent the importance of ranching and agriculture to the province of Alberta and, therefore, nicely complement the rest of the emblems.

I want to briefly revisit some of our other emblems to show how the proposed addition of rough fescue fits well with the existing provincial symbols. The first and perhaps most easily recognizable

Alberta emblem is, of course, our wild rose, and many of us know it as a blossoming pink flower that beautifies the Alberta countryside and adorns the top of our licence plates. It's also something that, for a child growing up in Alberta, was one of the first flowers that was out in the spring, and you just couldn't help but recognize its beautiful scent and just the joy. I think there were many of us as children that would collect them and press them into our textbooks, which was probably not a great idea but hard to resist.

One of our other emblems is the great horned owl, which was selected as the provincial bird by schoolchildren in 1977. This bird is a year-round resident of our province and as a resilient and resourceful bird shares some of the same characteristics that Albertans are famous for.

The next Alberta emblem that I'd like to mention is the official stone, which is petrified wood. Petrified wood and stone seems like a strange combination, but it was selected as our provincial stone largely due to its natural beauty but also because it was created during the same era as Alberta's oil reserves. The semiprecious stone symbolizes the importance of oil and the energy industry to this province.

Another beautiful Alberta emblem is the lodgepole pine, a tree found throughout the Rocky Mountains. The long, straight lodgepole pine was the preferred tree of the First Nations people for teepee poles, from which it gets its name, and it was also widely used in railroad construction and remains important to the lumber industry today. Clearly, as an important part of aboriginal culture and as a part of our railroad history and of the continuing significance of our forestry, lodgepole pine is a very appropriate official tree.

Yet another emblem that we're all familiar with is the Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, and as the official mammal of Alberta it is a majestic representative of Alberta's inherent closeness to the Rocky Mountains.

In addition to the abovementioned, there is also our wonderful Alberta tartan from my colleague from Calgary here that came up with our dress tartan a couple of years ago. It's absolutely phenomenal.

My colleague from Stony Plain, Minister of Seniors, did the bull trout bill a few years back. You know, there were great pins with that, and, Don, I'm disappointed that there are no pins with the grass. But we had fish pins.

As I mentioned earlier, I wanted to give everyone a brief look back at a number of our Alberta emblems and the reasons that they make such great symbols for our province. Having said that, I believe that a provincial grass would go nicely with the sentiments expressed by the emblems here in Alberta. Bill 201 aims to add rough fescue as a provincial grass to that list, and as many of you know by now, rough fescue has played a very important role in Alberta as the main source of food for grazing animals, that are so important to our agriculture and prairie heritage. Without rough fescue's high nutrient levels it would have been much more difficult if not impossible to sustain agriculture development in our province.

As the provincial grass rough fescue would serve as a wonderful symbol of Alberta's close ties to prairie life, and further it would be a strong symbol of the important role agriculture has played in Alberta during the times of our pioneers to the equally important role that agriculture continues to play today.

I'd like to once again thank my colleague from the Highwood constituency for bringing this idea forward as well as to encourage everyone to support Bill 201 and make rough fescue the official grass for our province.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Mr. Graydon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Members of the Legislature will be pleased to note that the Grande Prairie caucus is unanimous in their support of Bill 201.

It is my pleasure to rise today and to continue the debate on Bill 201, the Emblems of Alberta (Grass Emblem) Amendment Act, 2003, sponsored by the Member for Highwood. There's been much discussion about the validity of designating an official grass as an emblem for Alberta. The grass in question, of course, is rough fescue. We have many emblems in this province, ranging from official colours to official flowers to official birds. I think the member is quite just in his attempt to anoint rough fescue as the official grass of Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, where in Alberta we have approximately 135 active grass species and probably two dozen or more introduced species, rough fescue is a very complicated plant which has been studied for years by scientists so that its benefits could be fully realized. Three species of rough fescue are found in Canada and the United States: the plains rough fescue, foothills rough fescue, and northern rough fescue. These three species give rough fescue its character, and they dominate many of Alberta's natural regions and subregions.

Rough fescue is characterized by deep roots, roots which tap into the underlying soils, drawing nutrients and water while binding soil particles, improving water penetration and acting as a stabilizing force in watershed quality. The root system can grow many centimetres into the soil and can alter the carbon content of the soil around it. In fact, rough fescue is a key element in the development of our rich black, our thin black, and our dark brown soils, some of the most prevalent types of soil in Alberta and some of the best anywhere for growing. Mr. Speaker, the way that rough fescue alters carbon content in the soil is an extremely important feature of this grass.

The environmental benefits of rough fescue are immense, and I'd like to speak a few minutes on the positive impact this grass has on our environment. There have been many debates in this House on the validity of the greenhouse effect and discussions on whether the Earth is warming up. After the lengthy debate, we all seem to be in agreement on the fact that there is a change taking place in our climate. Since this is accepted, we must then also accept another fact, that the earth's carbon cycle is also changing, as the two, climate and carbon cycle, are linked together.

The carbon cycle is not that complicated. Carbon moves continuously among air, plants, and soil. Carbon dioxide, or CO₂, in the air is converted to organic forms by photosynthesis in green plants. CO₂, of course, is the dreaded greenhouse gas that everyone is worried about. When plants die, the carbon enters the soil, becoming part of the soil's organic matter. At the same time, organic matter in the soil is being decomposed, which returns the carbon back to the air as CO₂, and the cycle is complete.

Rough fescue is an important part of the global carbon cycle along with all the grasses in the temperate grasslands found in the northern Great Plains. They are important because of their vast area and high soil carbon density. The soils in the area where rough fescue dominates contain more carbon per unit area than most of those in other ecosystems worldwide. For example, Mr. Speaker, the soil of Alberta may contain a one-metre deep layer of up to 200 tonnes of carbon per hectare in the black soil zone under the fescue prairie. This means that carbon under foot may exceed the amount of carbon in all aboveground portions of a temperate forest and a tropical forest even though nearly half the dry weight of plant material is carbon. In fact, according to many studies our prairies, which are littered with rough fescue, take a considerably larger amount of CO₂ out of the atmosphere than do the rainforests.

Mr. Speaker, even though this isn't a science class, I think that a

most extraordinary facet of rough fescue must not be overlooked. It takes a significant amount of greenhouse gases out of the atmosphere, gases which are said to be causing climate change, increasing the overall temperature of the Earth. One of the issues we struggle with year in and year out is how to keep our air clean. Well, I think it's quite clear that one of the best ways to do this is to promote the growing of our native grasses, especially rough fescue. Not only does rough fescue sustain life for animals, not only is it extremely important to the global carbon cycle, but it could also be used as a strategy to clean our air. Promoting rough fescue as our official grass could possibly raise its profile and show the world that we have a natural way of battling climate change. It seems funny, but it's true. Our grass can be part of the answer to global climate change. Rough fescue is quite dominant throughout central and southern Alberta. It helps that Alberta has some of the best growing soils in the world.

Bill 201 recognizes that this plant is important to Alberta, and therefore it should be made an emblem of Alberta. Mr. Speaker, rough fescue is extremely important to Alberta's environment. As well, due to its role in the carbon cycle, it's extremely important for agriculture in this province. Because rough fescue holds so much carbon in the soil, this makes the soil around it extremely rich for growing. As mentioned earlier, rough fescue is the main reason for our extremely dark, nutrient-rich soil. The soil is extremely good for growing our wheat and other grains that are so prevalent throughout Alberta. When the pioneers came to Alberta over 100 years ago, they began clearing land to grow crops. What was cleared away was a lot of grassland, including fescue. The pioneers found the land to be rich and excellent for their crops, and this helped establish the unique culture that we know in Alberta today.

4:30

Of course, as the fields grew wheat, barley, and oats, the carbon content in the soil began to diminish as the new plants did not store as much carbon as did the native grasslands before them, but as fields were left to fallow and rough fescue began to grow back, the carbon content returned, albeit not to the levels of the past. Nonetheless, the carbon and the good soil returned when rough fescue returned. This is just an example of how the grasslands of Alberta are extremely important to not only the environment but to agriculture and also, one could argue, to the economy of early Alberta. Rough fescue, being a dominant grass in Alberta, is a big part of our history.

Mr. Speaker, rough fescue is an absolutely fascinating grass. Its life cycle, so to speak, is particularly interesting. The plant outlives the working career of those who study it, and this is true even though the species only sets seed periodically. Every few years field workers studying the plant report a good seed set, which still may only include half the population. The seed sets are frequently four or more years apart, yet the plant continues to flourish throughout central and southern Alberta. Rough fescue has a life span of many decades and potentially hundreds of years. This is absolutely remarkable especially considering the benefit the plant has for our environment, our agriculture, our landscape, and our geography.

As I mentioned at the beginning of my time, we have many different emblems in Alberta. Each of them represents something special. Every single emblem has something uniquely Albertan about it. Rough fescue has something uniquely Albertan about it. It represents what Albertans are. Like the fescue, Albertans take root in Alberta, and the roots give life to the province. The rough fescue, in the same way, took root in our province many hundreds and hundreds of years ago and began bringing about a land that is beautiful and important to the sustainability of life in the province

and on earth. Our environment benefits from the rough fescue, as do our farmlands which are benefiting from hundreds of years of carbon being stored in our soil, making it extremely advantageous for agriculture. Making the rough fescue an emblem of Alberta is something that Albertans would appreciate especially since no one can argue that without the rough fescue we might not have the province that we have today.

I support Bill 201 and urge all members to vote in favour of this bill as well. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc.

Mr. Klapstein: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour and a pleasure to join debate on Bill 201, the Emblems of Alberta (Grass Emblem) Amendment Act, 2003, sponsored by the hon. Member for Highwood. I would like to talk about the importance of establishing a provincial grass for Alberta and the benefits of selecting a symbol of Alberta's prairie heritage.

Before I begin, I think that the hon. Member for Highwood should be commended for his hard work in bringing this bill forward. However, I would like to remind this Assembly that Bill 201 would enshrine rough fescue as Alberta's official grass on behalf of dozens of organizations and thousands of Albertans.

The hon. Member for Highwood has already pointed out that the selection process for an official grass was wide open to all Albertans and relied almost entirely on public participation. The Prairie Conservation Forum, a voluntary coalition made up of over 30 private and public organizations, wanted to draw attention to Alberta's rich prairie heritage. In the fall of 1999 the Prairie Conservation Forum began a project to select a provincial grass emblem for Alberta. The members of the forum believed that by selecting and officially designating a provincial grass, Albertans would develop a great appreciation for the ecology of native grasses and grasslands and their cultural and economic importance.

Mr. Speaker, there are more than 135 different native grasses in Alberta. The members decided to select five to be shortlisted for consideration as a provincial grass. The grasses on this short list are recognizable throughout Alberta, and three common characteristics are shared by the five species. First of all, each grass has a high ecological significance in that each is a dominant grass, essential food for wildlife, and is vital to the ecology of the region in which it grows. The members also decided that each grass should have cultural importance through traditional use in various agricultural industries. Finally, each grass had to have an economic impact on the region, such as the use for livestock forage. The Prairie Conservation Forum encouraged Albertans to get involved in the selection process by using various forms of communication including newspaper articles, brochures, and electronic media.

The overwhelming choice for a provincial grass was rough fescue. Over 2,000 Albertans from many parts of the province voted by mail-in ballot and e-mail between January and April of 2001. The selection of rough fescue as the official candidate for a provincial grass was announced on May 25, 2001. Mr. Speaker, I found the selection process to be an inspiring example of democracy at work. The decision to make rough fescue the final candidate as Alberta's official grass was not made inside a boardroom. This process was an example of how democracy is still the best way to make important decisions.

If Bill 201 were to pass, Alberta would not be the first province in Canada to designate an official grass. The idea of campaigning for an official grass began in Saskatchewan with the Native Plant Society. Just like Alberta's Prairie Conservation Forum, the members wanted to highlight the value of a native prairie species and

thought that enshrining a specific species would be a good way of drawing attention to the short-grass prairie.

It is interesting to note, Mr. Speaker, that Saskatchewan's Native Plant Society wanted to nominate rough fescue as a candidate for the official grass. It is a widespread native species associated with Saskatchewan's grasslands, but many people in Saskatchewan also associate rough fescue with Alberta, where the species is more widespread. So the Native Plant Society turned away from rough fescue just in case Alberta attempted to enshrine the species in the future.

The designation of a provincial grass is welcome in that it draws attention to Alberta's remaining native grasslands. Since our birth as a province Alberta has lost a great deal of our native grassland. Mr. Speaker, the remainder must be protected from development, not only from the perspective that dozens of animals depend on it but also because thousands of people depend on it. The use of native grasslands by our ranchers is probably the strongest example we have of sustainable development in this country. Rough fescue is a critical food source for wildlife and big game species of the prairies and foothills. Over the past decade elk and bison ranching have joined the ranks of pork, lamb, and beef as high-quality meat producers.

I have no doubt that there will be people, especially those living in urban areas, who will have no idea what rough fescue is or why we need to enshrine it as an official grass. I also believe that there will be those who will wonder why we need an official grass in the first place. Mr. Speaker, identifying rough fescue as an official Alberta emblem would be a key element in its conservation.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to address another possible concern as it relates to the relevance of a provincial grass. When this Assembly proposes an emblem to be added to Alberta's very distinguished list, it should represent the entire province. Alberta, as we all know, is a very diverse province. Wood Buffalo in the north is one of the world's largest boreal forests. The Canadian Rockies are also world renowned for their scenery and diversity of plant and animal species. It is not possible to find a uniformity of grasses or fauna of any kind across Alberta because our landscape is far too diverse. However, a decision had to be made in order to preserve Alberta's prairie heritage.

Mr. Speaker, the case for naming rough fescue as Alberta's official grass is overwhelming. Alberta is the only jurisdiction in North America that contains all three species of rough fescue. Plains rough fescue, foothills rough fescue, and northern rough fescue can be found throughout most parts of central and southern Alberta. From the perspective of human history and the settlement of Alberta the parkland and foothills regions of the province would most likely not have been able to sustain agriculture development without the existence of rough fescue. It provided critical winter feed for livestock and sustained pioneering efforts on the prairies.

The list of emblems in the Emblems of Alberta Act reflects the diversity and history of this province and its people. Each emblem has been carefully chosen from Alberta's natural habitat and symbolizes a unique characteristic of this province. Alberta's emblems serve a similar purpose to mementos in our homes. Over the years we have all collected trinkets and souvenirs that serve as conversation pieces and remind us of special events or experiences in our lives.

4:40

Some people may ask why this Assembly would debate a bill proposing an official grass. I think that an official grass, specifically rough fescue, would help preserve and promote Alberta's fascinating agricultural heritage, including ranching. For decades this grass has

been vital for grazing and the ranching industry. Put differently, I believe that an official grass, like any other provincial emblem, symbolizes a unique aspect of living in Alberta, one that deserves official recognition.

The most important lesson learned from our unique history is that Alberta's rugged terrain has played a significant role in making Alberta the most successful province in Canada. Irrigation, grain farming, prospecting, surveying, and, of course, oil and mineral extraction have all played important roles in creating the economic climate we enjoy today. Each of these industries combined working off the land with keen business acumen, which resulted in a more stabilized economy and a better standard of living.

The hardships these men and women faced forging new paths for future generations of Albertans is to be recognized, and while some may scoff at the mention of an official grass, a quick look at the history of Alberta tells us that our success is based on rural development. One of the goals of the Emblems of Alberta Act is to remind Albertans that this province is a wonderful and exciting region. Bill 201 goes a step further by helping Albertans recognize the need to maintain and manage this critical grass species.

Mr. Speaker, designating rough fescue as Alberta's official grass helps achieve this goal. I think it's important that we keep this in mind as we debate Bill 201 through this Assembly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to enter the debate on Bill 201 today. This bill would make rough fescue Alberta's provincial grass to stand amongst all the other great emblems which represent Alberta. Rough fescue, as we've come to know from the debate today, is a grass which manifests itself in three forms: the plains, foothills, and northern rough fescue. It's a grass that grows throughout the majority of our province. It's a wiry and sturdy grass and, some would say, stubborn, and that makes it as good a reason as any to call it Alberta's official grass. Today I'd like to state my support for Bill 201 and encourage all members of this Assembly to join me in doing so as well.

In discussing why I am going to support this bill, I want to talk for a short while about the economic significance of rough fescue and how rough fescue played an integral role in helping those who first began farming in our province, and in fact I'll argue that this help still occurs today.

The Acting Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for

Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, but under Standing Order 8(5)(a)(i), which provides for up to five minutes for the sponsor of a private member's public bill to close debate, I would invite the hon. Member for Highwood to close debate on Bill 201.

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I believe the merits of rough fescue have been adequately, nobly addressed by the members on both sides of the House, and I want to thank all hon. members for their comments and support this afternoon.

In my concluding remarks to the second reading this afternoon I would like to first of all acknowledge my debt to Cheryl Bradley of the Alberta Native Plant Council, who patiently answered my many questions and always with knowledgeable answers and suggestions that made this bill on this day possible. I also must acknowledge the work of Mr. Frank Ostlinger of the government members' research. I think he's done a tremendous job of researching and really appreciate his work.

I would also wish to thank a number of other individuals for their help and guidance: Ed Nelson of the Society for Range Management, Francis Gardner of the Southern Alberta Land Trust Society, Mac Blades of the Western Stock Growers' Association, Albert Middleton of the federal Range Research Station, Reg Ernst of the Society for Range Management, and Foothills ranchers Jim and Steven Hughes, Gordon Cartwright, and Ken Stiles.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 201 seeks to bring recognition and awareness of the importance of native grassland and the special role played by the rough fescue complex *Festuca scabrella*. As the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St Paul noted, our symbols define who we are, and I believe that rough fescue is an ideal symbol for our Alberta prairie heritage.

Mr. Speaker, I move that the question be now put.

[Motion carried unanimously; Bill 201 read a second time]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The next matter for consideration this afternoon is Bill 202, which is the Workers' Compensation (Firefighters) Amendment Act, 2003, which is sponsored by the hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill. A number of firefighters from throughout the province have been invited to attend next Monday as they wish to hear the entire debate with respect to this particular bill, and as such, at this time I would move that we call it 5:30 and adjourn until 8 o'clock this evening.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 4:47 p.m.]

