

Environment and Protected Areas
PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE MEETING
May 5, 2026

- Follow-up Responses -

(Questions derived from Hansard)

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Public Accounts Committee – Written Response

1. Theme: Coal Liabilities		
1.a. According to the Coal Policy Committee's report provincial officials had only conducted detailed reclamation liability audits on two of the 19 existing coal mines. Provide an update (current status) on what additional audit work on coal mine environmental liability has been done since the committee tabled its report.	**Mr. Schmidt**	**Hansard PP: 550**

Response:

- Information about audit work on coal mines falls under the mandate of Alberta Energy Regulator (AER).
- In 2021, when the Coal Committee was established, there were 18 coal mines with approvals under the *Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act* (EPEA) and paying security under the Mine Financial Security Program (MFSP).

1.b. Provide a site-by-site estimate of environmental liabilities for each coal mine in Alberta?	**Mr. Schmidt**	**Hansard PP: 550**

Response:

- A site-by-site estimate of environmental liabilities for each coal mine can be found on the following website, on page 2: https://static.aer.ca/prd/documents/liability/AnnualMFSPSubmissions.pdf.
- Coal mine operators provide the full cost of reclamation security to the AER using financial instruments rather than collateral, meaning the amount of security held by the AER for each coal mine corresponds to the costs of reclaiming these sites. Any additional requests on this topic should be directed to AER.

1.c. What is the estimated value of legacy coal mine liabilities specifically?	**Mr. Schmidt**	**Hansard PP: 550**

Response:

- There are over 2,300 known coal mine sites in Alberta, most of which operated in the early to mid-1900s and were small operations with minimal disturbance. Their liability is unknown, and most of these operators are no longer in existence. An inventory of known coal mines is available on the AER's website at https://www.aer.ca/data-and-performance-reports/statistical-reports/st45.
- The 18 modern coal mines have elected to pay full cost security under the MFSP. This means that the amount of security collected is equal to their remediation and reclamation liability. The amount is publicly posted annually at https://static.aer.ca/prd/documents/liability/AnnualMFSPSubmissions.pdf.

2. Theme: Property Rights Tribunal - Surface Rights Payments		
2.a. For 2024-25, accounting for the $34.2 million paid to surface rights compensation, provide a list of the payments owed by company (496 operators) and how much was owed by each company.	**Mr. Schmidt**	**Hansard PP: 546**

Response:

- From information provided by the Land and Property Rights Tribunal, EPA understands most surface leases are held under joint venture arrangements involving license holders and interested working participants, who all hold responsibility. Amounts owed are not separated by company.
- Under the *Surface Rights Act,* the Tribunal can direct the Minister of Environment and Protected Areas to make payments to the landowners for compensation when a company defaults.

2.b. What is the total amount of money that the department has paid out in surface payments since 2010?	**Mr. Schmidt**	**Hansard PP: 547**

Response:

- EPA has paid approximately $148 million in surface rights compensation since 2010.

3. Theme: Calgary Domtar		
3.0 What is the extent of monitoring and the results of that monitoring for the fiscal year in question pertaining to the Calgary creosote site that now belongs to Domtar, both on the south side of the river as well as the north side in West Hillhurst?	**Member Eremenko**	**Hansard PP: 551**

Response:

- The City of Calgary has managed the containment wall along the south side of the Bow River and groundwater collection system on the former Canada Creosote site since 1997.
- Since 2004, the City has also monitored environmental conditions at the site.
- Ongoing monitoring confirms that contaminated material remains on site but that the containment wall is effective in preventing off-site migration. Under current land use conditions, there are no identified risks to human health.
- On the north side of the Bow River, the most recent "North Bow Monitoring Program" was completed in 2021 as a part of a five-year assessment focused on groundwater and soil vapour. The program was implemented to verify results of previous monitoring programs and to assess human health risks related to site contaminants. The 2021 results confirmed that contaminant levels are decreasing, and concentrations of Volatile Organic Compounds and Petroleum Hydrocarbons remain below levels protective of indoor air quality.

4. Theme: Land and Property Rights Tribunal		
4.0 How many of the cases that the Land and Property Rights Tribunal heard that resulted in direction to pay were as a result of insolvent operators versus delinquent operators?	**Member Eremenko**	**Hansard PP: 551**

Response:

- EPA does not manage this information, and the Land and Property Rights Tribunal does not confirm whether an operator is insolvent as part of its processes.

5. Theme: Financial Risk in Flood Prone Areas		
5.a. Environment concluded that designated flood hazard areas under section 96 of the *Water Act* would only prevent provincial projects or funding in these areas, but the department did not evaluate the extent of the provincially funded projects in flood hazard areas or the additional costs. One example given by the AG was a project called Willow Square health facility in Fort McMurray. Explain how this large gap in financial risk analysis is in the best interests of Albertans and the people of a flood-prone area like Fort McMurray.	**Ms. Renaud**	**Hansard PP: 551**

Response:

- In Alberta, municipalities are responsible for land use and development decisions, including in flood-prone areas.
- The province supports these decisions by providing flood mapping and guidance and working with communities to inform local planning and improve resilience.
- Designation under Section 96 of the *Water Act* would not prevent municipal development.
- The province made significant investments in Fort McMurray to reduce flood risk, including providing $6.59 million in grant funding in 2019 for construction of earthen flood berms. The provincial flood map, finalized in 2025, indicates the Willow Square Continuing Care Centre is outside the floodway – an area typically representing the highest hazard. Flood protection berms built along the Clearwater River (Lower Townsite Dyke) now protect the area, including the Willow Square Continuing Care Centre from 1:50 year ice jam flooding.
- The province continues to invest in flood mapping and mitigation and to work in partnership with municipalities to reduce long-term risk to communities. For example, in 2024-25:
  - 22 flood studies were finalized, covering 1,100 kilometres of mapping.

- A new Drought and Flood Protection Program was established and launched ($125 million over 5 years) to protect critical infrastructure from flood and drought.
- The feasibility study for a new flood and drought mitigation reservoir on the Bow River was complete, and the scoping and feasibility study for the Ardley Reservoir, east of the City of Red Deer, was launched.

- Municipalities across the province advanced and completed mitigation projects, with provincial financial support, such as Fort McMurray's system of flood protection berms and the Town of Canmore's Cougar Creek debris flood retention dam.

5.b. The ministry states that development decisions on flood protection and mitigation are within the jurisdiction of communities within Alberta; however, the government assumes most of the financial risk in case of damage to property and flooding. Clarify the extent of the government's responsibility in the event of flooding and what steps does the ministry take to minimize these financial risks.	**Ms. Renaud**	**Hansard PP: 551**

Response:

- *Note: Response is focused on the department's responsibilities, not those of the entire Government of Alberta.*
- To minimize financial risk, the department invests in flood hazard mapping, supports community-level mitigation projects, supports provincial reservoir infrastructure, and provides monitoring and river forecasting services.
- The department supports municipal governments and Albertans to make informed decisions by providing flood mapping and guidance and works with communities to inform local planning and improve resilience.
  - Flood maps are used by most municipalities to inform bylaws and development decisions, helping reduce exposure to future flooding.
- The department supports community and provincial infrastructure investments to reduce flooding risk and impacts. The department maintains an inventory of potential water reservoirs, and along with Agriculture and Irrigation, leads the first two phases of assessment for potential reservoirs – scoping and feasibility stages.
  - For example, the Drought and Flood Protection Program is administered by the department to support communities to improve long-term flood resilience by helping fund projects that protect critical infrastructure and improve public safety.
  - Provincial flood mitigation structures provide protection against floods. For example, the Springbank Off-Stream Reservoir protects Calgary and other downstream communities on the Elbow River.
- The department provides river forecasting services, based on monitoring networks established and managed by the department and others, to ensure emergency managers and Albertans have up-to-date and accessible information.
  - The department applies continuous (24/7) monitoring and communication systems to identify likely flooding and communicate to authorities, stakeholders, and the public.
- In the event of a flood disaster, the department activates the emergency flood plan to coordinate and mitigate flood impacts to communities.

6. Theme: Legacy Environmental Liabilities		
6.a. How many legacy sites has the ministry currently accepted responsibility for, and what is the estimated liability associated with those sites?	**Mr. Schmidt**	**Hansard PP: 551**

Response:

- EPA has accepted responsibility at four sites related to substance releases (per the Public Service Accounting Standard 3260).
- The total estimated liability for all four sites is $2,502,422 as of March 31, 2025.

6.b. Clarify how the ministry plans to fund the closure work for the sites that it has accepted responsibility for.	Mr. Schmidt	Hansard PP: 551

Response:

- The associated liability has been recorded, and funding requests will be considered as part of the annual budget process.
- The funding source is to be confirmed and will require approval from TBF.

6.c. Provide a breakdown of the 2,600 sites (managed by EPA and AER) and clarify how much cleanup work is necessary on those sites.	Mr. Schmidt	Hansard PP: 551

Response:

- The stated 2,600 sites appear to be a figure generated by the OAG and it is unclear to EPA how it was generated. As noted in response 6(a), EPA currently manages four sites with an estimated liability of $2,502,422 as of March 31, 2025.

7. Theme: Industrial Heartland - $50.5 million was invested over five years from 2024 to 2029 to the Industrial Heartland Designated Industrial Zone.

7.a. How is this investment supporting job creation, attracting new investment, and streamlining regulatory approvals?	Mr. Cyr	Hansard PP: 551

- The funds support the construction of up to three new water intakes in the Industrial Heartland Designated Industrial Zone (IH DIZ) to provide access to process water in a sustainable and environmentally responsible way. This enables industrial growth as well as achieves environmental objectives.
- 2024-25 was year one of this five-year capital grant and resulted in funding agreements between municipalities (including Lamont, Strathcona, and Sturgeon Counties) and Alberta's Industrial Heartland Association (AIHA), the grant recipient, as well as contracts for engineering designs. It is anticipated that the provision of funding and completion of water intakes in the IH DIZ will enhance water distribution and provide lower-cost access to water. In combination with access to other feedstocks and carbon capture infrastructure, this development will enhance investment competitiveness of the IH DIZ.
- According to the AIHA, since the implementation of the IH DIZ, 10 projects have been announced with over $20 billion in investments, including those related to value-added industries in natural gas, carbon capture and storage, hydrogen, and solar energy sectors.
- With additional investments comes high-paying jobs in construction, fabrication, operations, and management of these facilities.
- The March 2025 IH DIZ Two-Year Evaluation Report confirmed the zone is meeting its goals of attracting investment, creating jobs, and achieving environmental outcomes.

7.b. How has this initiative improved the streamlined regulatory approvals?	Mr. Cyr	Hansard PP: 551

Response:

- The IH DIZ concept is a planning approach used in several international jurisdictions to support the potential for development and growth in the future. The approach focuses on enhancing efficiency using cluster infrastructure (shared infrastructure for process and services), regulatory certainty, and management of cumulative environmental effects.
- Key regulatory enhancements that are supporting the IH DIZ include:
  - Implementing Master Drainage Planning with partner municipalities to streamline *Water Act* applications while reducing any potential impacts to drainage.
  - An Applicant Advisory Service to guide potential applicants through regulatory processes, providing clarity of requirements, improving the quality of applications, and reducing authorization timelines.

- Establishing standard approval conditions for the region to provide transparent regulatory expectations, enabled by the IH DIZ directive.
- The IH DIZ Guide for EPEA Renewal Applications streamlines application requirements to only require new information that has not been submitted in a previous application.
- Developing an innovative topsoil conservation guideline to ensure flexibility in meeting the intended outcome for both soil conservation and end land use in the zone.
- A zone-wide environmental and socio-economic assessment is in year two of three to reduce effort in preparing project-specific requirements for new applicants undertaking provincial Environmental Impact Assessments and other regulatory applications.

7.c. Is the department is considering expanding this model to other regions, and what criteria would guide this decision?	**Mr. Cyr**	**Hansard PP: 551**

- Insights from development and implementation of the IH DIZ continue to be shared with other municipalities seeking future potential DIZ opportunities in the province.
- EPA has published criteria for provincial designation of a DIZ, which include formal inter-municipal agreements, coordinated heavy industrial zoning, infrastructure capacity, harmonized permitting systems, and environmental management commitments.
- The following municipalities have expressed interest in designation: the City of Medicine Hat Chamber of Commerce; the Municipal District of Greenview, Greenview Industrial Gateway; and the City of Calgary and Rocky View County, Prairie Economic Gateway.

8. Theme: Digital Regulatory Assurance System - $5.7 million in spending on the digital regulatory assurance system.		
8.a. How will this investment improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the department's regulatory assurance system?	**Mr. Cyr**	**Hansard PP: 551-552**

Response:

- The Digital Regulatory Assurance System (DRAS) has been built iteratively to shift from outdated information technology systems and processes to a modern platform that reflects an outcomes-focused, risk-based approach to environmental regulation.
- Actual expenditures for the 2024-25 fiscal year totaled $5.7 million. The difference from the allocated budget is primarily attributable to lower-than-budgeted expenditure under the DRAS contract, based on project progress.
- In 2024-25, EPA added functions in four separate releases that:
  - Improved access and reduced administrative steps to sharing enforcement action information with the public.
  - Shifted information on environmental incidents and water licences, including reporting to a modern data management platform.
  - Created a portal for partner regulators to transition investigations to EPA.
  - Digitized paper-based application processes for water well drilling approvals.
  - Digitized paper-based pesticide registrations for applicators and vendors.
  - Created an Environmental Records Viewer that allows enhanced access to public records through an interactive mapping tool for environmental authorizations.
  - Created reports that enhance accessibility to environmental data.
- DRAS enhances transparency by automating notifications and introducing self-service features for external users so they can see the status of their applications at any time.
- It also improves efficiency by integrating automated workflows, service targets, and risk management to get to decisions that are timely and include necessary environmental safeguards.
- Faster approvals are the result of better processes, not lower standards. EPA uses risk-based decision-making, ensuring high-risk activities receive the highest scrutiny.

8.b. Can the department provide concrete examples of outcomes or use cases?	Mr. Cyr	Hansard PP: 552

Response:

- *Water Act*
  - Since *Water Act* applications were integrated into DRAS in 2021, backlogs have been avoided, and average processing times for applications have declined despite an increase in application volumes annually.
  - EPA has achieved over 98 per cent adherence to target application completion times.
  - An 82 per cent reduction in water licences process times from a pre-DRAS average of 446 days to 80 days.
  - A 70 per cent reduction in water approval processing times from a pre-DRAS average of 224 days to 67 days.
- *Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act* (EPEA)
  - Service targets have recently been implemented under EPEA.
  - Timelines for EPEA approvals are 270 days or less.
  - Timelines for EPEA registrations are 120 days or less.
  - Pesticides registrations with a service target of 42 days have only recently begun to be tracked and are demonstrating timely decisions with an average of 10 days for issuance.
- Compliance
  - In October 2023, DRAS was expanded to include incidents and compliance functions, improving tracking of cases.
  - Since implementation, over 22,000 incident cases have been received and closed.
  - As of December 2025, 2,961 incident cases had escalated to compliance investigation for follow-up.

8.c. How is the success of this investment being measured and reported?	Mr. Cyr	Hansard PP: 552

Response:

- DRAS has features that allow real-time tracking of performance. Dashboards allow for real-time numbers, statistics, and trends of performance for staff and managers.

9. Theme: Fish Management and Angling		
9.a. What investments were made in fish management and angling programs from 2024 to 2025?	**Mr. Cyr**	**Hansard PP: 552**

Response:

- The department spent $15.7 million in 2024-25 for fisheries management, including the provincial fish stocking program, to improve angling opportunities.
- In 2024-25, EPA stocked 2.228 million trout in 244 lakes throughout Alberta, a 26 per cent increase from the year prior. The increase was supported by the completion of upgrades to the Cold Lake Fish Hatchery to improve energy efficiency by using less fresh water.
- In 2024-25, the design phase enhancement to the Raven Brood Trout Station was completed.
  - The 2025-26 modernization process for the station began with the facility able to rear fish again by April 2028.
- The department continued the walleye program and stocked 13.9 million fry into 10 lakes throughout Alberta in 2024-25. This marked an increase of 140 per cent more fry stocked as compared to the previous year.
- EPA engaged in numerous research collaborations with universities and other partners to advance scientific understanding of key issues for Albertans. Examples of research collaborations in 2024-25 that support provincial fish management included:
  - Combined effects of water temperature and urban runoff-associated contaminants on rainbow trout and brown trout.

9.b. How have programs such as fish in schools and kids can catch trout pond contributed to youth education and stewardship?	Mr. Cyr	Hansard PP: 552

Response:

- EPA provides youth environmental stewardship programming, including the Fish in Schools Program (FinS program) and the Kids Can Catch Trout Pond through Bow Habitat Station.
- The Bow Habitat Station reaches over 250,000 Albertans annually to promote conservation, water awareness, and stewardship through hands-on learning opportunities for all ages and abilities.
- The FinS program engages students and teachers in experiential learning opportunities that support delivery of environmental education topics, including native trout, fisheries management, water quality, ecosystem health, and aquatic invasive species.
- The Kids Can Catch Trout Pond provides young anglers and their mentors with a place to learn to fish in the heart of Calgary. The Trout Pond is stocked with up to 200 rainbow trout from the Sam Livingston Fish Hatchery each fishing season.

9.c. What outcome and participation metrics demonstrate the success of these initiatives?	Mr. Cyr	Hansard PP: 552

Response:

- In 2024-25, the FinS program provided 95 schools across the province with hands-on learning opportunities to raise trout in their classrooms.
  - This program supports Alberta Education learning objectives by offering hands-on, classroom-based learning about science and nature, such as fish life cycles, water quality, aquatic invasive species, and healthy aquatic habitats.
  - Since the program was created in 1998, it has reached more than 84,000 students through 1,055 projects across Alberta.
- In the summer of 2024, the Kids Can Catch Trout Pond reopened at Bow Habitat Station with over 50 thousand people using this space.

9.d. Are there plans to expand the programs to other communities across Alberta?	Mr. Cyr	Hansard PP: 552

Response:

- Since 1998, the FinS program has been delivered to 69 communities across Alberta.
- Alberta schools from anywhere in the province can apply for the FinS program.

10. Theme: Caribou Recovery - $38.1 million was allocated for caribou recovery in 2024-25, up from $15.7 million in 2022-23, and $15 million was allocated for land-use planning, up from $9.8 million.		
10.a. Can the department expand on how this increased funding is used to advance caribou recovery and habitat restoration outcomes?	**Mr. Cyr**	**Hansard PP: 552**

Response:

- This funding goes toward supporting planning and caribou recovery actions such as the Caribou Habitat Recovery Program (CHRP), which oversees the restoration of legacy seismic lines in caribou ranges to promote intact habitat.
- CHRP funding supports planning restoration projects and the delivery of treatments, hiring contractors to complete treatment, completing establishment surveys and monitoring, and building capacity for Indigenous communities participating in the CHRP.
- In 2024-25, restoration planning of legacy seismic lines took place in five project areas across three caribou ranges (Little Smoky, A La Peche, and Cold Lake), with 1,738 km assessed and treated and 838,000 seedlings planted. This is a significant increase from what was restored in 2023 (882 km) and 2022 (1,000).
- EPA builds capacity with this important work through our project partners, which enables more effective restoration of legacy seismic lines.

10.b. What performance metrics are used to measure the success of these initiatives?	Mr. Cyr	Hansard PP: 552

Response:

- EPA measures performance of the program with two metrics.
  - A performance measure that reports the amount of restoration treatment for all seismic lines. Alberta has seen significant progress in the last year on actual kilometres restored.
  - A performance indicator that accounts for the overall legacy seismic line footprint in caribou ranges.
- EPA expects to see a decrease in the amount of legacy seismic lines over time. Since the baseline of 209,000 km was determined in 2022, a decrease of 6,000 km to 203,000 km in 2024 has occurred.
- Caribou populations are measured annually to provide an understanding if a particular population is in decline, stable, or increasing.

10.c. How does the department track progress over time against these metrics?	Mr. Cyr	Hansard PP: 552

Response:

- EPA monitors progress toward restoring legacy seismic lines in partnership with the Alberta Biodiversity Monitoring Institute, which evaluates quality assurance and quality control of treatments.
- Survival assessments and establishment surveys are undertaken two to five years and eight to 10 years, respectively, after treatments have occurred to evaluate the effectiveness of the treatments.

10.d. How are results reported to demonstrate accountability and value for money?	Mr. Cyr	Hansard PP: 552

Response:

- Since creating a performance measure and an indicator, the department uses the annual report to publicly report on progress made. The performance measure is reported annually, and the indicator is every two years.
- Initial indications from the monitoring program show positive results for tree survival.

10.e. Are there established targets or benchmarks for success, and are they being met?	Mr. Cyr	Hansard PP: 552

Response:

- Alberta reports on the amount of legacy seismic lines that have been assessed and have received restoration treatment through the Caribou Habitat Recovery Program.
  - Results are reported every two years.
- In 2024-25, Alberta restored 1,738 km of legacy seismic lines. This was short of the planned target of 2,000 km.
- The Caribou Habitat Recovery Program is challenged by seasonal constraints for restoration treatment activities.
- The program has shifted its service delivery model to adapt to this challenge and has secured multiple partners to streamline program delivery.