

KEVIN O'REILLY—MLA FRAME LAKE
Forest Fire Suppression Budgets
Committee of the Whole—2018-2019 Operating Budget Review
Dept. of Executive and Indigenous Affairs—February 27, 2018

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. I have a couple of questions or lines of questioning here. The first one is: in the business plan, there are some reductions shown for a program, management and pre-suppression, reduce number of helicopters for pre-suppression. There's a reduction of \$155,000 and then eliminate one helicopter contract for \$469,000. Can someone explain what these reductions are all about and how that's going to affect our capacity to do pre-suppression work? Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Blake): Thank you, Mr. O'Reilly. Minister McLeod.

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair, we feel that it doesn't affect our capacity to deliver on our programs. On the \$469,000, the re-election to eliminate one helicopter contract was based on historical fire behaviour, and the department proposed to reduce the rotary wing contract in one of the regions.

The \$155,000 was decreasing the number of helicopters in pre-suppression to rotary wing contracts, which was to reduce the hours from 250 to 150. In addition, for the two contracts, it would reduce hours from 250 to 200. Should any additional rotary wing aircraft be required, they will be contracted on an as-and-when-needed basis. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Blake): Thank you, Minister McLeod. Mr. O'Reilly.

MR. O'REILLY: Thank you, Mr. Chair. If we have to go and contract additional time on an as-required basis, presumably that would be a higher per-hour rate. Is that true? Thanks, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Blake): Thank you, Mr. O'Reilly. Minister McLeod.

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: No, it's not true, Mr. Chair. My understanding is it's the same rate.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Blake): Thank you, Minister McLeod. Mr. O'Reilly.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. Maybe can the Minister elaborate a little bit more on the rationale for these cuts? I just want to understand. These are long-standing contracts. The time was never used before, so that's why the cuts are being made or what is the rationale? Thanks, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Blake): Thank you, Mr. O'Reilly. Dr. Dragon.

DR. DRAGON: Thank you, Mr. Chair. With the reduction of the one helicopter for \$469,000, again, based on historical fire behaviour, we felt like that we didn't need that helicopter support in that region.

With the one that's for the \$155,000, what we noticed was that we had the hours and they're actually being used more in the suppression area. That's why we've looked at

moving that reduction so that if it happens, typically it's happening in the suppression area and not in the pre-suppression area. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Blake): Thank you, Dr. Dragon. Mr. O'Reilly.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. I guess we'd just have to see how this rolls out. On the same page in the business plan, there's this ominous line that reads, "ENR to return to Financial Management Board with alternate reductions of \$500,000 in each of 2018-2019 and 2019-2020." That seems to have been deferred back by a year. Can someone tell me what that is all about? Thanks, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Blake): Thank you, Mr. O'Reilly. Ms. Craig.

MS. CRAIG: Thank you, Mr. Chair. When we were developing our reduction options, we had anticipated that the operating costs for the 802s would be significantly less than the operating costs that we had for the 215s. Unfortunately, that did not materialize, so we went to the Financial Management Board to let them know that we would not be able to implement the savings that we had originally suggested in that area.

The decision was that in 2018-2019, we would not recognize any savings, but we would return to the 2019-2020 business planning process with other reduction options. We have yet to identify those options, but we will be looking within the department, not just within forest management to make those reductions. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Blake): Thank you, Ms. Craig. Mr. O'Reilly.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. Yes, that's what I was most worried about. These reductions are not necessarily going to be confined to forest management. They might be made elsewhere within the department. Is that what I heard? Thanks, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Blake): Thank you, Mr. O'Reilly. Minister McLeod.

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: We will look at forest management, but the Member is correct. They will look throughout the department. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Blake): Thank you, Minister McLeod. Mr. O'Reilly.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. Yes, I'm quite concerned about further reductions in other parts of the department. I don't want to have to go back and re-live what happened with our discussion in corporate management and how I don't believe the department has the capacity to carry out what it's trying to do.

Look, does the Minister of Finance, as well? Is this something that he can take to the Financial Management Board and get them to just leave this extra \$1 million reduction for ENR so that they can get the work done that's required? Thanks, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Blake): Thank you, Mr. O'Reilly. Minister McLeod.

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair, I appreciate the Member not wanting to rehash the discussion we had under corporate management. As we start developing the next business plans, we'll come forward with some options we'll have prepared before committee. Committee will obviously make their concerns known, but

we'll work on trying to come up with a solution that should work for all. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Blake): Thank you, Minister McLeod. Mr. O'Reilly.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the Minister's commitment, but so far, the solutions haven't worked with the fiscal strategy of Cabinet to reduce this department because it hasn't been able to accomplish everything that it wanted.

I want to ask, though: when was the last time that there was a good review done of a fire suppression in particular? Thanks, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Blake): Thank you, Mr. O'Reilly. Minister McLeod.

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: Thank you, Mr. Chair. The Member and I will continue to disagree on the capacity issues. We feel that our folks feel that they're able to do the work they do with the appropriation they have, and if there's a need for further appropriation, then they would approach FMB. I have a lot of confidence in our people.

To the Member's question, 2016-2017, my understanding was the last time the fire suppression appropriation was reviewed. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. McNeely): Thank you, Minister McLeod. Mr. O'Reilly.

MR. O'REILLY: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I am talking about, I guess, a review of the effectiveness; not just the expenditures, but a value-for-money audit or something along those lines of our fire suppression program, whether there might be other ways to do it more effectively. Thanks, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. McNeely): Thank you, Mr. O'Reilly. Minister McLeod.

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: Yes, thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair, again, my understanding is that 2011 is the last time that there was a review done of the value for money and effectiveness, and my understanding, again, is, this upcoming year, they are looking at possibly doing another review of the overall fire suppression. Thank you, Mr. Chair.