

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

QUESTION 441-19(2): WATER QUALITY MONITORING

October 30, 2020

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. My question is for the Minister of Environment and Natural Resources. In my statement earlier today, I noted that the Alberta provincial government and Alberta energy regulator unilaterally decided to reduce water quality monitoring as a result of the pandemic and to provide so-called industry relief. Can the Minister confirm whether he received any notice of these reductions in water monitoring by Alberta, and what we are doing to prevent this from happening again? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Member for Frame Lake. Minister of Environment and Natural Resources.

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First of all, I'd like to thank the Member for Frame Lake for doing the Member's statement and asking these important questions and saying how good the work that the ENR staff are doing. The suspension of the long-term water quality monitoring in Alberta caused significant concerns this summer. The GNWT was not notified about the suspensions of water quality monitoring. However, I must inform the House here, it should be noted, that there are provisions within the Alberta and NWT water management agreement that allows either government to take urgent action where needed to protect the health or safety of the public. COVID-19 was an example.

Mr. Speaker, as soon as we learned of the water quality monitoring suspension, I reached out to my Alberta counterparts, Minister Nixon, and the federal Minister of ECCC to express my concerns about reduced water monitoring in Alberta and ask that the GNWT become members of the oil sands monitoring committee. I'm happy to report that all provincial water quality monitoring has been reinstated in June and July, and the monitoring at key federal sites has been in place since August. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that. I'm not sure that industry relief qualifies for the sort of exemptions that the Minister said, but I understand that it takes some time to have water quality samples analyzed and that, of course, once that analysis is done, we can better understand adverse impacts from upstream. I think some of those impacts may have compounded by high water levels that have been carrying additional sediments into the NWT. Can the Minister tell us whether the analysis of this summer's water samples has been finished and whether there are preliminary findings?

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: In our conducted water quality monitoring in the North and South Slave regions on the Slave, Hay, Liard, Peel, and Coppermine rivers this spring, the department did additional monitoring on the Slave River at Fort Smith due to the concerns about flooding in Fort McMurray. Results for the July monitoring of the Slave

in Hay River have been released, and analysis of the August sampling is under way. The department has committed to make these findings available to the public through our website, and we will also provide it to standing committee as soon as they become available. So far, the results have pointed to the effect of high water levels, including higher than normal metal concentration.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that. With the surprise reduction in water quality monitoring by Alberta and the federal government, this would seem to have some impact on our ability to detect water quality changes. We need to have repeated, continuous, long-term water quality monitoring, and that's one of the cornerstones of the Transboundary Water Agreement. Can the Minister tell us what impact the reductions in water quality monitoring have had on our ability to detect and predict adverse impacts on NWT waters and people?

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: Healthy water is of critical importance to the Northwest Territories and its residents, and continuous long-term water quality monitoring is a critical part of the Transboundary Water Agreement. While water quality monitoring in Alberta was suspended, the GNWT conducted our own monitoring at borders throughout most of the pandemic, with only slight delays at the start of the season. Our results at the border are consistent with those in other parts of the basin and point to the impact of high water levels. All Alberta monitoring and most key federal sites, including all key sites downstream of the oil sands, are now up and running.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Minister. Final short supplementary. Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the response from the Minister. I'm not sure he actually understood what I was saying. We need long-term, continuous data sets, but I want to move on. I support the efforts of our staff to stay on top of the situation, but I am not convinced that the Transboundary Water Agreements are working as they should. Could the Minister tell us what lessons GNWT has learned from this experience and whether any changes will be made to the Transboundary Water Agreements? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: To just elaborate on the third question: yes, we continue to monitor, and we are continuing to do it with our transboundary agreements. This agreement is one of the most comprehensive of its kind, as it takes into account traditional knowledge, biological indicators, and indicators on early warning systems to detect changes in water quality before they reach the border. While there were some challenges this summer with its implementation, we have seen improved communications and notifications since then. Our bilateral management committee, which impacts the agreement, is led by ADMs from both governments. As well, deputy ministers are now meeting quarterly to ensure effective communication between our two jurisdictions. The GNWT continues to pursue a seat on the oil sands monitoring committee that would give us a stronger voice on related monitoring program decisions. The GNWT will continue to protect NWT interests with the context of the NWT-Alberta Bilateral Water Management Agreement. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.