

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

**QUESTION 532-19(2):
ENVIRONMENTAL REMEDIATION AND ECONOMIC RECOVERY**

February 10, 2021

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. My questions are for the Premier who is responsible for federal relations. In my statement in May, October, and earlier today, I noted the potential for literally billions of dollars of federal investment across the northern territories as part of an accelerated program on contaminated sites remediation and economic recovery. It's not clear that my call for action was taken seriously in May and October. Can the Premier provide an update on the status of the work to secure accelerated federal investment to build a remediation economy? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Member for Frame Lake. Honourable Premier.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to defer that to the Minister of ITI. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Premier. Minister of Industry, Tourism and Investment.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have had the opportunity to speak to this before in the House, and I am happy to give a bit more of an update as to the work that is under way. Mr. Speaker, the Department of ITI had previously written, when this initiative first came out, directed at three of the prairie provinces specifically and intended quite specifically to be in response to the downturn in their oil and gas economy. We saw this as an opportunity to accelerate our remediation economy. We have written to them, as I detailed here before. There was no reply to my October 4th letter, so I wrote again in December. There was no reply to that letter.

With the concern that this is about the mineral resources sector alone, I want to assure the House and assure the Member that that is not the case. It is an opportunity for the Northwest Territories, Indigenous, and other businesses for immediate economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as laying a foundation for long-term economic growth, and I go on in the letter to speak about remediation and the remediation economy. When I didn't get an answer to that, Mr. Speaker, I made arrangements to have a call with Minister O'Regan. Since that time, I have also had an opportunity to speak with my colleague in the Yukon, and the deputy ministers and the officials are also having conversations.

I share some frustration with the Member that this hasn't moved faster, but I do believe that we are at a point now where we are getting some positive traction, and I am hopeful that we will continue to be able to report positive updates to the house. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that very detailed update. That's great. I

would love to see those letters. Clearly, the approach that we have taken to date has been a dismal failure. From what I've seen, we continue to pitch this investment as a way to bail out the petroleum and mineral industry. Federal support is not a way to back track on polluter-pays and liabilities for the private sector. What assurance can the Minister give me that we are going to change our bailout approach and start to make a pitch for an accelerated northern contaminated sites remediation program?

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: I have provided my two previous letters to the Member. I will certainly be happy to provide my December letter to the Member, as well. Let me continue to, just for the sake of the House, reassure everyone that, indeed, this is not about bailouts and this is about a future remediation economy.

Not only are there projects ready to move forward in the short term, remediation work is poised to be a significant source of economic growth in the medium- and long-term across the Northwest Territories. There is significant interest in becoming involved in this work early in order to build capacity for future participation in this potential growth sector.

Mr. Speaker, I should also note that I had reached out to Indigenous communities, Indigenous governments, in advance of sending this December letter seeking their support so that they, too, would have an opportunity to voice to the federal government what they had voiced to me, which was their own interest in this area. I did receive one letter of support that went in at the same time, in addition to, as I've said, receiving many verbal indications of an interest in this area, as an economic opportunity and not as any form of bailout or otherwise. It's an area of potential growth, and we have characterized it as such.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that. Now she's starting to talk my talk. This is great. Look, I'm not afraid to roll up my sleeves and get dirty, too. I think part of the problem here is that we don't have a concrete proposal that has been put together to show what the contaminated sites are, the risk they pose, the cost to assess and remediate them, the benefits that will accrue. As I said, I am more than happy to roll up my sleeves and help with the work. Can the Minister tell us whether there is a concrete proposal for an accelerated northern contaminated sites remediation program?

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: I'd like to defer that to the Minister of ENR.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Premier. Minister of Environment and Natural Resources.

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Preventing environmental liability and effective management of contaminant sites and the stimulus of local economy opportunities through remediation are high priorities for this government. Meeting a remediation economy will require a balanced approach between ensuring we continue to prioritize projects based on the degree of risk to people, property, and the environment, and also consider economic opportunities that a project may offer. The GNWT is currently working to explore new ways in which the GNWT can support a remediation economy in the Northwest Territories. Remediation projects create economic opportunities through employment, training, and procurement. The GNWT developed a document called "The GNWT Approach to Contaminant Management" in

2019. This document provides guidance to the GNWT departments on how to manage sites that the GNWT is working on. Lands and ENR are also working to finalize a negotiated mandate for expected waste sites under the devolution agreement. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Minister. Oral questions. Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I want to thank the Premier and the Minister. It's great to see that there's a whole-of-government approach here that is starting to emerge, but I'm not sure that I really got a good answer there. Look, I'm ready to roll up my sleeves and get dirty and help with this work. We have these inventories that are there. We just have to put together a solid ask. The document that the Minister talked about that was prepared in the last Assembly was not very good, and I'll leave it at that. This work could be a key part of what the polytechnic university is going to be doing, to help build capacity and capture the opportunities for a remediation economy. Will the Premier commit to regularly updating MLAs on her efforts moving forward to accelerate remediation work? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Yes, we will commit to regularly updating Regular Members through the appropriate standing committees on the work regarding remediation. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.