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Chair

Mr. Harold Albrecht

Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC)): I'd like to call our meeting to order.

This is meeting number 37 of the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development.

We have with us today, appearing as a witness, the Honourable Leona Aglukkaq, the Minister of the Environment.

We welcome as witnesses as well the staff from Parks Canada: Rob Prosper, vice-president, protected areas establishment and conservation; Kevin McNamee, director of parks establishment; and Darlene Pearson, director of policy, legislative and cabinet affairs branch, strategy and plan directorate.

Welcome, Minister. We welcome your opening comments, followed by questions from our committee members.

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of the Environment, Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and Minister for the Arctic Council): Thank you, Mr. Chair and honourable members. Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before this committee to speak to Bill S-5, the Nááts'ihch'oh national park reserve act.

This is important legislation to protect the lands and water of the nationally significant landscape in the Northwest Territories. Protecting the Nááts'ihch'oh national park reserve is a commitment that we had made in the 2013 Speech from the Throne, to protect the wilderness land of the Nááts'ihch'oh by 2015.

Creating this new national park reserve delivers on Canada's national conservation plan announced by the Prime Minister in May 2014. This park will help conserve our country's natural environment, restore ecosystems, and connect Canadians to nature.

We are creating this national park reserve in collaboration with aboriginal people in the Tulita district of the Sahtu settlement area. The park is subject to the provisions of the Sahtu Dene and Metis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement. This agreement requires Parks Canada to enter into an impact and benefit agreement with the Sahtu Dene and Métis prior to establishing a national park reserve in their settlement area.

Signed in March 2012, the Nááts'ihch'oh impact and benefit plan covers cooperative management, the continuation of traditional harvesting rights, and economic opportunities.

Under the plan the community of Tulita will be the administrative centre for the Nááts'ihch'oh. This will involve the development of office space, a visitor centre, staff housing. Construction and maintenance of these facilities will employ local trades people in the community of Tulita.

Traditional use of land within the national park reserve by the Sahtu Dene, and Métis will continue as a right under the land claim agreement. They will continue to harvest wildlife and plants on parklands, including gathering plant materials for food, medicine, cultural and other personal purposes.

Mr. Chair, I will now turn to the specifics of this bill itself.

The main purpose is to establish the park under the protection of the Canada National Parks Act.

Clause 6 of Bill S-5 amends the act by adding the boundary description of the national park reserve. The boundary achieves key conservation gains, including protection of the upper reaches of the South Nahanni River, as well as the habitat for woodland caribou and grizzly bears.

The boundary in Bill S-5 is slightly different from the one announced by the Prime Minister in 2012. An area of about 20 square kilometres extending to the south shore of O'Grady Lake was added at the request of the Sahtu Dene and Métis. This addition will serve as a gateway to the park to make it easier for visitors to access.

An ecological site on one square kilometre was removed at the request of the Northwest Territories government.

We are taking steps to ensure the new national park reserve will not only protect the environment, but make meaningful contributions to the social and economic well-being of the community.

The park provides for conservation values and visitor experience without blocking access to significant areas with high mineral potential. The bill before us will continue to allow the mining industry to use several specific mineral access roads in order to access their existing mineral claims.

Finally, Mr. Chair, I would like to summarize the steps our government is taking to establish, develop, and operate this national park reserve.

Our government has provided Parks Canada with an annual operating budget of \$1.4 million for the Nááts'ihch'oh. This is in addition to the \$3 million in capital investment in the community of Tulita. We have established a management committee that will provide advice on the development of the park management plan, employment, training, and economic opportunities for Sahtu members.

Parks Canada has opened a temporary office in Tulita until a new one is constructed. Parks Canada has started discussions with first nations on the supply office, a visitor centre, a warehouse, and housing units.

Parks Canada has also initiated the staffing of positions in Tulita, including a site superintendent. Parks Canada is advertising positions locally in the community and is consulting with the Sahtu on how best to attract Sahtu beneficiaries.

• (1535)

We are committed to fulfilling the terms of our agreement with the Sahtu Dene and Metis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement and have moved to immediately implement it.

The Nááts'ihch'oh national park reserve has received overwhelming support from stakeholder groups, leadership and community members, and local regional governments in the area. All first nations and Métis as well as stakeholder groups were invited to consultations. Meetings with the leadership and community members from several communities in the Northwest Territories and Yukon were also conducted. Of the over 1,600 individuals who participated in the consultation process, more than 96% support the creation of this park.

The Government of the Northwest Territories applauds this bill. Mr. Peter Vician, the GNWT deputy minister of the Department of Industry, Tourism and Investment, told a Senate committee on June 4, 2014, "The Government of the Northwest Territories supports the establishment of the proposed park as set out in this legislation."

This legislation is being passed less than a year after Canada and the Northwest Territories reached a historic devolution agreement on the transfer of the administration and control of land and resources to the territorial government. Once it is established, I am confident that both governments will continue to collaborate to ensure that any development on the land outside the park will not have an impact on the national park values that we are seeking to protect through Bill S-5.

The bill delivers on our government's northern strategy. It promotes responsible approaches to northern development that balance environmental protection with socio-economic development while empowering northerners and exercising Canada's sovereignty in the north. Northerners have shaped the federal boundary and negotiated terms of the establishment of the park.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, I urge this committee to not just think of Bill S-5 as establishing Canada's 44th national park but rather to consider the larger achievement here. Globally this is among the most significant national park expansions ever. With Bill S-5, our government has expanded by sevenfold the nearly 5,000 square kilometres of the Nahanni National Park Reserve to the point where the Nahanni/Nááts'ihch'oh national parks complex is the third largest

in Canada at 35,000 square kilometres. Together Nahanni and Nááts'ihch'oh parks protect 86% of the entire South Nahanni River watershed. The two parks jointly provide habitat for up to 600 grizzly bears, nine times the number of grizzly bears within Banff National Park, Canada's first national park.

Mr. Chair, Bill S-5 is part of this Parliament's legacy to future generations.

I wish you well in your deliberations.

I would be happy to take questions.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I appreciate your comments, and I appreciate your keeping well within your 10-minute time limit for your opening statement.

We're going to proceed now to questions from members.

We'll start with Mr. Carrie.

Mr. Colin Carrie (Oshawa, CPC): I want to thank the minister for coming to committee again. It seems as though you were here only yesterday, and I know everybody here appreciates your presence.

To begin, could you please explain to the committee why this area is being designated as a national park reserve?

• (1540)

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: The size of the Parks Canada protected network was just over 277 square kilometres. Our government will protect an additional 149,000 square kilometres, an area almost eight times the size of Lake Ontario. Within this total, our government has established six new protected areas since 2006, protecting just over 49,000 square kilometres.

This park is being established as part of our commitment to a number of parks which we announced in the throne speech and so on. We are proceeding on those commitments and building on the legacy of the initiatives that we have undertaken since 2006. This is one of the commitments we made through the Speech from the Throne regarding working in partnership with a number of stakeholders in the Northwest Territories.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Minister, we all know that you come from the north and you know first-hand the pristine, natural beauty that surrounds us in Canada's north. I was wondering if you could please describe to the committee what this new national park will serve to protect.

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: Nááts'ihch'oh national park reserve protects 70% of South Nahanni watershed that lies within the Sahtu settlement area. I believe you also have received a map of the area that we're proceeding in protecting. It protects more than wildlife management, from mountain woodland caribou, to grizzly bears, Dall sheep, mountain goats, and trumpeter swans. The Nááts'ihch'oh protects habitats of 82 grizzly bears and 63% of the summer range of the Nahanni caribou herd within the Sahtu settlement area.

The park also protects the land that has been travelled and valued for its traditional harvesting purposes and its spiritual importance to the Mountain Dene in the Tulita district area. The mountain after which the national park reserve takes its name has been a pilgrimage site for the Sahtu Dene and Métis people from time immemorial. The park also protects places such as Moose Ponds, the south shore of O'Grady Lake, and much of the course of the South Nahanni River used by canoeists and whitewater enthusiasts.

Mr. Colin Carrie: That's great.

Minister, you know that the committee just studied the Rouge, and we've heard the term "ecological integrity" quite a bit lately. I was wondering if you could let the committee know how the ecological integrity of Nááts'ihch'oh national park reserve will be protected now and for generations to come.

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: The establishment of the Nááts'ihch'oh completes the ongoing work to significantly expand the Nahanni National Park Reserve. It also helps to conserve a significant portion of the world-class South Nahanni River watershed. Our government has expanded the original Nahanni boundaries sevenfold making it the third largest national park complex in Canada. Globally, this is among the most significant national park expansions.

The connection to the expanding Nahanni National Park Reserve is important to the ecological integrity of this park. Together, Nahanni and Nááts'ihch'oh protect about 86% of the entire South Nahanni River watershed. The two parks jointly provide habitats for up to 600 grizzly bears. This is nine times greater than the number of grizzly bears protected within Banff National Park. The establishment agreements are government signed with the Sahtu Dene as well as the Métis, and commits both parties to sustain the ecological integrity of the South Nahanni watershed.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Minister, we got a map with our handout. I was wondering if you could comment on how the lands adjacent to this world-class national park reserve will be managed to ensure the protection of the natural surroundings.

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: The land outside the park will be subject to all the laws of general application, particularly the Mackenzie Valley Resource Management Act. The Sahtu Land Use Plan recognizes the entire watershed as regards proposed conservation initiatives and will provide guidance on its development. When and where appropriate, Parks Canada will work with land managers and responsible authorities on land adjacent to the national park just as it does with other national parks across Canada to ensure a collaborative approach to resource management.

• (1545)

Mr. Colin Carrie: Minister, it's critical to consult with local stakeholders prior to making decisions that will affect them. Can you please tell the committee who was consulted on the proposed boundary for Nááts'ihch'oh and where these consultations took place?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: The creation of this park has been years in the making. It involved consultation with communities, aboriginal groups, industry, and the Government of the Northwest Territories. Parks Canada also conducted public consultations on the three boundary options in Yellowknife, Whitehorse, Calgary, and Ottawa. All first nations and Métis with settled or asserted claims in the areas

were also invited. Consultations were also conducted with the leadership and community members of Norman Wells, Tulita, Fort Good Hope, Fort Simpson, Nahanni Butte, and Fort Liard.

When Parks Canada released its three boundary options for comments in 2010, it was very clear that it was not a vote; it was a discussion. The agency affirmed it was unlikely that the final boundary would look exactly like any of the three options, so consideration was given to the views of the Government of the Northwest Territories as a result of the mineral and energy resource assessment and the strategic value of the minerals in the area. Northerners also played a key role in setting the park boundaries and negotiating the terms of those establishments.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Carrie.

Thank you, Minister.

We'll now move to Mr. Bevington for seven minutes.

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Northwest Territories, NDP): Thanks, Madam Minister, for your presence here today on this very important subject for my constituents, the Nááts'ihch'oh national park reserve.

It has been a process that I think has had a conclusion which in some respects doesn't match up with what many of the people who were involved in the consultation had asked for, so that's something we have concerns about. We generally support the bill because it is a step forward. It may not be what all people want in the region. It may not be a complete protection for the ecosystem, and that's very evident because the upper reaches of the Nahanni watershed are not protected and can be subject to mineral development.

Having lived next to a national park, Wood Buffalo, for many years, I understand the impacts that resource development around a park can have on the watershed, on the very integrity of that particular park. Of course, when you have a river that flows directly through the park and is essential to the park, when it is the essential feature of the park.... In the words of my constituents, water is the most significant feature on the land. They like to say "water is life", in that water must be protected at all costs. That's the attitude of people in the Sahtu region.

In the process of not choosing the larger boundaries, which would have excluded some mineral and resource development from taking place because it would have been within the park boundary, you've made some deliberate choices that didn't really stand up to the opinions of the public. Can you explain why you chose to go with the smaller boundary for the park and exclude these potential developments that if allowed to go ahead would likely have impacts on the pristine nature of the park and of the river system?

• (1550)

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: I'll speak to the consultations on the boundary issue again, as a follow-up to the comments in my opening remarks. As the member knows well, the creation of the park has been years in the making, involving a number of consultations with communities, aboriginal groups, and industry, as well as the Government of the Northwest Territories. Of the 1,603 individual submissions and comments, 65 did not support our proposal, so that's not the majority of people related to the boundaries question.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: How many of those spoke to the boundary question?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: Sixty of the 1,603.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: How many of the 1,600 spoke to the boundary issue?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: The 60 did not support our proposal. They didn't comment on—

Mr. Dennis Bevington: How many of the 1,600 actually spoke to the boundary issue and said that the boundary was adequate?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: Sixty spoke against.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: How many spoke for that particular boundary?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: The silent majority was in support of it.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Okay.

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: That's the process we go through in a consultation. We put submissions forward. We seek the feedback of organizations. Some people spoke against and some people spoke... in this particular case, of the 1,603, 60 didn't...

The other point I want to raise here is that in soliciting the public's comments on the three boundary options, Parks Canada was very clear and told the public that it's not a vote; it's a discussion. It's also clear that it is unlikely that the final park boundaries will look exactly like the options that have been presented. It is not just public consultation that determines the final boundary for the national park. For the Nááts'ihch'oh, consideration was also given to the views of the Government of the Northwest Territories, the results of the mineral and energy resource assessments, and the strategic values of that.

All of these were considered and the boundary was changed to add a 20 square kilometre extension to the O'Grady Lake area at the request of the Sahtu Dene and Métis. The Sahtu Dene and Métis also supported the extension to the O'Grady Lake area, so these were all factored into making the determination of the boundaries.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: You had a process known as MERA.

Were the recommendations that came from that process made public?

Mr. Rob Prosper (Vice-President, Protected Areas Establishment and Conservation, Parks Canada): No.

The Senior MERA Committee is an organization that has been in place since the late seventies, I believe. It's the process by which the recommendations for a boundary for a national park, when it's being established, go through.

It has representation from—

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Okay, but were those recommendations made public? That was my question.

Mr. Rob Prosper: No, they were not.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Why were they not made public?

We don't know what recommendations were made through this process.

Mr. Rob Prosper: I'll maybe fast-forward to the end of the process.

The participants include senior officials from the three territories, as well as ADM levels from a number of federal government departments. The recommendation that is developed through many years of consultation is brought forward as a recommendation by the chair of the Senior MERA Committee, who works with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, AANDC. That constitutes advice to the minister of AANDC for the decision on what lands to transfer from AANDC's control to a national park.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: When it comes to resources for this park, this is very interesting to all of us, of course, because the first nations who have agreed to the park want to see economic opportunities come out of this.

We've seen in the case of the Nahanni expansion that there has been a very slow process to establish the opportunities that were outlined by Mr. Prentice when he was the environment minister. We're seven years into that process and still without a visitor centre in the Nahanni. That is a real failure on the part of everyone. I'm not saying that the government is solely to blame, but certainly the government had made assurances that this would go ahead.

Are you in a better position to get this capital program going in the Tulita region than you have been in the Fort Simpson area for the Nahanni park? Is this process going to move ahead? Do you have the agreements in place with the Sahtu Dene to accomplish what you've laid out?

• (1555)

The Chair: Your time is up. I want to give a chance to respond, so we have to come to the end of the question.

Does anyone want to respond to that?

Mr. Kevin McNamee (Director, Parks Establishment, Parks Canada): First of all, Mr. Bevington, we are currently in negotiations with the Dehcho First Nations to work out an agreement. The difference between the Dehcho and the Sahtu is that the Sahtu has a settled land claim agreement that directs us to negotiate an agreement prior to establishment. We do not have a similar arrangement in the Dehcho because the land claim has not been settled. We are, nevertheless, working on an agreement with Dehcho.

We do have a capital plan allocation budget of \$12.9 million for Nahanni. That is in place, and as part of those negotiations we are in discussions with the Dehcho about facilities in Fort Simpson and Nahanni Butte. In fact, we have re-established a temporary office in Nahanni Butte.

We have also staffed 31 positions in the current Nahanni National Park Reserve, of which 25 positions are staffed, and of those, 60% are to Dehcho beneficiaries. We're looking for further additional staff, and we're hoping to be in a position to hire Dehcho.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We went well beyond our time on that one, but we needed to get to the answer.

We'll move now to Mr. Toet, for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Lawrence Toet (Elmwood—Transcona, CPC): It's always great to have the minister with us at committee, so welcome again.

Minister, there were some questions regarding the area and the boundaries, etc. You mentioned in your opening remarks that the boundaries of this park have changed since it was originally announced in 2012.

I am wondering if you could explain to us how and why the boundary has changed since the 2012 announcement was made by the Prime Minister.

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: Absolutely.

Our government added a 20 square kilometre extension to the national park reserve on the south shore of O'Grady Lake. This is in response to the request from the Tulita, as well as the Sahtu Dene and Métis groups.

O'Grady Lake is one of only two places in the northern part of the watershed where float planes can land and take off with parties of hikers and their gear. Including O'Grady Lake in the park will encourage more visitors to come to the park. They can use it as a base camp for wilderness hiking, increasing economic and employment prospects for aboriginal people related to outfitting and guiding visitors.

The Sahtu Dene and Métis, signators to the impact and benefit plan, requested and were consulted about the changes, and there was unanimous support for the addition of the O'Grady Lake extension.

In addition, a small one-kilometre archaeological site in the Mackenzie Mountains was excluded from the park, also at the request of the Northwest Territories government.

Those were the two changes that we have made to the boundaries since 2012.

Mr. Lawrence Toet: You touched on it a little bit in your last answer, Minister, but we all know and we see on the map that this park is located in a fairly remote location in the Northwest Territories. One of the questions which I think a lot of people would have is, how visitors are going to be able to access this park.

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: Visitors can access the park from several communities: Tulita, Norman Wells, and Fort Simpson in the Northwest Territories, as well as Ross River and Watson Lake on the Yukon side.

The park is primarily a fly-in park, although road access from the Yukon is being explored.

Visitors will continue to travel from Moose Ponds down the South Nahanni River into the Nahanni National Park Reserve.

Close coordination between Nááts'ihch'oh and Nahanni will be required to ensure that permitting and travel planning are dealt with consistently and efficiently between the two parks.

Park operation got under way this year. Visitors were able to book river trips through Nahanni National Park Reserve, which has an established reservation system. Licences for air charter services are also being set up in the interim. Several charter aircraft services can provide sightseeing tours for visitors as the work continues.

• (1600)

Mr. Lawrence Toet: Thank you.

I have one final question. We have the establishment of the Nááts'ihch'oh national park reserve through this act, which is great. Can you tell us what the government has accomplished in expanding the Parks Canada network to ensure some of Canada's most pristine and sensitive areas, which as we know are protected in this park, are also protected for future generations?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: I touched on this a little bit. Since 2006, our government has established six new protected areas, protecting just over 49,000 square kilometres, including the Lake Superior National Marine Conservation Area, which is the world's largest freshwater marine protected area dedicated to national conservation, as well as the Sable Island National Park Reserve.

This past summer our government also brought legal protection to 20,000 square kilometres of northern lands within Auyuittuq National Park in Nunavut.

Our government has also taken action that will eventually result in the addition of over 100,000 square kilometres, such as a proposed national park reserve in the Mealy Mountains of Labrador.

Those are examples of initiatives our government has taken in terms of protecting areas of land in Canada since 2006.

The Chair: You have a minute and three-quarters left.

Mr. Lawrence Toet: Great.

In your opening remarks, Minister, you touched on the benefits of the creation of this national park reserve for first nations. Can you please explain some of the benefits of this national park reserve for the first nations in the region?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: Absolutely.

The benefits in the creation of this or expansion of the park will flow from the impact and benefit agreement signed in March 2012 by Canada, as well as the Sahtu Dene and first nations of the Tulita district. The benefits include employment: eight full-time positions, which include six permanent jobs and two training positions for the first five years in order to develop the necessary skills. Parks Canada offices and the visitor reception centre will be located in Tulita.

There will be additional economic opportunities for the Sahtu Dene, including contracting provisions and a \$50,000 scholarship fund to benefit members of the Tulita, Fort Norman Métis and Norman Wells land corporations pursuing post-secondary education, providing more opportunities for beneficiaries to pursue careers for direct jobs in the park.

A cooperation management committee has also been established for the park. Nááts'ihch'oh national park reserve also protects land that has been travelled and used by traditional harvesters for many, many years. That will now be protected for the benefit of the Dene in the Tulita district. As well, the aboriginal people will continue to exercise their traditional harvest of the wildlife as well as the plants in the park.

In summary, those are some of the initiatives that have been agreed to under the impact and benefit agreement for the benefit of the Sahtu Dene individuals.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Toet.

Thank you, Minister.

We'll move to Mr. McKay, for seven minutes, please.

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister.

What's the difference between a park and a park reserve?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: The National Parks Act provides for the establishment of two categories of national parks: national parks as well as reserves. The national park reserve designation is used when there are outstanding claims by aboriginal groups regarding aboriginal rights and title and these claims have been accepted by Canada for negotiation. Once the claim is settled, the agreement negotiated within the relevant aboriginal organization is established, and the land can be converted from a park reserve status to a national park. As well, a national park reserve is operated and run in the same manner as a national park, but while the park is located in the Sahtu settlement area, the Kaska Dena Council asserts claim of rights and title over a substantial portion. It's a holding place until the settlement of a land claims agreement.

• (1605)

Hon. John McKay: Is there a material difference in how this land would be administered until the aboriginal claims are settled?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: No.

Hon. John McKay: For all intents and purposes a reserve is a park, subject only to those.... Are those the only reservations with respect to—

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: When I say “reserve”, I'm talking about dedicating an area that would eventually be converted into a park as a national park reserve.

Hon. John McKay: I'm trying to see whether there's any real material difference between your presenting a park bill as opposed to a park reserve bill. Am I to assume that the aboriginal claim—

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: Yes.

Hon. John McKay: —issue is the only thing that's keeping...? Is that true in all parks? You mentioned that Labrador was also a reserve, or Nunavut was a reserve.

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: In cases where we're negotiating land claims, that's the process we follow.

Hon. John McKay: Okay, so it's only with respect to land claims.

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: Yes.

Hon. John McKay: How far along are we with respect to the settlement of those land claims?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: I believe the Sahtu Dene is concluded.

Do you want to speak to the time?

Mr. Kevin McNamee: In the case of the Kaska Dena Council, Canada has accepted their land claim for negotiation. Where they are exactly in the process, we would have to check with aboriginal affairs, but usually it takes a fair amount of time to conclude them.

Hon. John McKay: Are we talking years?

Mr. Kevin McNamee: The important point here is that they were consulted on this proposed park, and they were supportive.

Hon. John McKay: Are we talking years before this is concluded?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: Negotiations of land claims vary by groups that you deal with. It's difficult to determine the exact timeline and how those negotiations are going. I'm not familiar with those files, but some can take longer than others. The point here is that the National Parks Act allows us the flexibility to name an area that has been identified as a national park reserve until those are concluded.

Hon. John McKay: I don't argue the point that you're putting it aside. I just want to know when it's going to become.... I guess the issue is when it becomes a park.

Did any of the other parks that you mentioned...? You said there were six areas, 49,000 square kilometres. Are any of those areas reserve areas?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: No. There are settled claims now.

Hon. John McKay: Okay, so they're all settled claims. I thought you did—

The Chair: Just for clarification, my recollection is that Sable Island National Park is also a national park reserve.

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: Is it completed?

The Chair: I think Sable Island is still under the reserve category.

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: It's still a reserve. That one is a reserve.

The Chair: Yes. Only because we recently discussed that one, it was top of mind.

Hon. John McKay: I thought you used the word “reserve” with respect to Labrador as well. I'm not quibbling; I'm simply finding out whether there's a material difference between the two.

This consultation stuff that was raised by Mr. Bevington is curious. Sorry, Dennis. Apparently only two people supported what you proposed as option 3. Who are the 1,600 people who were consulted? Do they include people from the various aboriginal nations you're negotiating with at the present time?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: Absolutely. It's essential to negotiate with the land claims groups you're developing the park with.

Hon. John McKay: If that's true, and the overwhelming majority wanted to preserve the south watershed, wouldn't it be a reasonable conclusion to say that the aboriginal wishes for this particular area are to preserve the entire South Nahanni watershed? Wasn't that the overwhelming choice of the people who were consulted, many of whom would have been aboriginal by definition?

●(1610)

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: A whole range of groups and organizations are involved in discussions of the boundaries. I think I've outlined these before quite clearly.

Consultation on the boundaries issue was extensive. Sixteen hundred groups were consulted. Those ranged from aboriginal groups to governments to people in the surrounding areas and various communities. We consulted with groups to determine the boundaries.

Hon. John McKay: I'm just quibbling with your interpretation of the consultation. I'm looking at the Library of Parliament briefing note here, and it states:

While the great majority of people consulted supported the protection of the entire watershed, of the 65 people who expressed a preference for any of the options, only two supported option 3.

That doesn't seem like a lot of people. Does the Library of Parliament have it wrong? It doesn't strike me, as you said, as overwhelming support from stakeholder groups.

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: Again my understanding is that from the 1,600 individuals who had submissions and comments, only 60 expressed a preference for one of the three boundaries. The remaining respondents did not express any preference. So 60 of the 1,600 had other views on the proposed options.

The Chair: Mr. McKay, your time is up; you're well over.

I'm going to move to Mr. Choquette, for five minutes, please.

[Translation]

Mr. François Choquette (Drummond, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also thank you, Madam Minister, for being here with us.

While the minister is here, I will take this opportunity to table a notice of motion we can discuss at the end of the meeting, if my colleagues agree.

The motion is the following:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 81(5), the committee invite the Minister of the Environment to testify for a two-hour televised meeting related to the referral of Supplementary Estimates (B), and that this meeting take place at the latest on November 28, 2014.

Colleagues, I would like us to vote on this motion at the end of the meeting.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Choquette, I think it's unfortunate that you bring that up in the time that the minister is here, but it's your choice of use of time.

Mr. Woodworth.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth (Kitchener Centre, CPC): To discuss this, we would need to go in camera and I'm not sure if Mr. Choquette has just indicated that he's prepared to defer the discussion as well as the vote to the end of the meeting, but as a point of order, I think we need to clarify that.

The Chair: Mr. Choquette, are you willing to—

[Translation]

Mr. François Choquette: That is exactly what I am proposing, that is to say that we postpone the discussion to the end of the meeting.

[English]

The Chair: We will discuss it at the end of the meeting, after our other witnesses have appeared, in the next hour.

Proceed.

Hon. John McKay: We should vote on whether we're going to go in camera.

[Translation]

Mr. François Choquette: I agree with Mr. Bevington that this is an interesting bill and that it is a step forward. It has already been studied in the Senate, where certain concerns were expressed. I will paraphrase what Ms. Alison Woodley said. She feels that the bill is a good start, but does not protect the important habitats of the woodland caribou, the grizzly and the Dall thinhorn sheep.

Have you something in mind to protect those habitats?

[English]

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: On the issue of the grizzly bears, the boundaries achieve the key conservation gains, including the protection of the upper reaches of the South Nahanni River, as well as the habitats for the woodland caribou and grizzly bears.

With Bill S-5, our government has also expanded by sevenfold the nearly 5,000 square kilometre boundary of the Nahanni National Park Reserve, to the point where the Nahanni and Nááts'ihch'oh national park complex is the third largest in Canada at 35,000 square kilometres.

Together Nahanni and Nááts'ihch'oh protect 86% of this entire South Nahanni watershed. The two parks jointly provide habitat for up to 600 grizzly bears in that region.

●(1615)

[Translation]

Mr. François Choquette: Thank you very much, Madam Minister.

I am trying to understand exactly what happened when replies were submitted. According to what I understand, out of 1,603 replies, only 60 supported the third option. All of the others were in support of the first option. Is that correct?

[English]

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: Again, going back to determining the boundaries, of the 1,603 submissions that were made, my understanding is that 60 supported the current boundary. At the same time, we've also solicited comments from the GNWT, the Northwest Territories government, which also has responsibilities for managing lands in the north. We've also consulted with the mineral and energy resource assessment, which was also mentioned.

There's a whole bunch of factors that are considered in this process, but of the 1,603 submissions that were made, my understanding is that the majority of these groups submitted comments that supported and expressed support for our initiative. Of the 60 that didn't, we factored in every one of them, but the majority were in support.

Also, the Sahtu Dene groups had supported this initiative to make changes. We've supported their request to make changes since 2012, and those are all reflected in this plan.

The Chair: I will move to Mrs. Ambler, for five minutes.

Mrs. Stella Ambler (Mississauga South, CPC): Thank you, Minister and officials, for being with us today to talk about Nááts'ihch'oh park.

In fact, I'm particularly delighted that we're talking about more than one national park at this committee. Being a member of Parliament from the greater Toronto area, I can say that the Rouge national urban park is going to be another wonderful commitment and promise kept. I know that expanding parklands in Canada is a priority for this government and we really appreciate that you are making it a priority as well.

In your opening remarks, Minister, you talked about protection of woodland caribou and grizzly bears. You also mentioned the protection of and respect for the traditional use of lands, and for harvesting wildlife and plants in the parklands. Can you also please explain to the committee how first nations sacred sites will be protected within the Nááts'ihch'oh national park reserve?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: The government takes the protection and preservation of cultural and spiritual sites seriously. We work in partnership with the aboriginal groups with whom we're negotiating regarding the parks.

The parks will offer these sites that are under the full protection of the Canada National Parks Act. Additional protection for the sacred sites of the Sahtu Dene and Métis that are within the park is detailed in the impact and benefit agreement that we've signed with the aboriginal groups, which states that the management committee may recommend to the minister as to what protections are needed.

Parks Canada also urges the best practices when planning and operating the parks to help protect these sacred sites. The superintendent's orders can be given and there is a park zoning regime under the management plan.

The Government of Canada is confident that these measures will help protect and preserve those sites within the park that are being considered as sacred by the Sahtu Dene and Métis people. There is work in progress identifying how we will proceed in protecting those areas.

• (1620)

Mrs. Stella Ambler: I'm glad to hear that. In fact, I'm sort of comparing it in my own mind to similarities with the Rouge national urban park with respect to cultural and historical sites located on those lands as well, taking into consideration those who have made their livelihoods from farming on those sites as well.

It's interesting for me personally to see the juxtaposition of a park in the city of Toronto and the greater Toronto area with one in the Northwest Territories. It's kind of fascinating.

I know that for both parks, economic opportunity is a priority. Could you share with the committee the short-term actions and initiatives that are creating employment for first nations in relation to the park?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: We are moving on with plans for the Nááts'ihch'oh national park reserve parks office. We are also establishing a visitor's centre, a warehouse, and proper garage facilities for the park's operations equipment, as well as housing for the park staff in Tulita.

Through that process the local people will be employed in the construction and maintenance of that infrastructure in those communities. At the same time, we have moved forward with capital funds of about \$2.8 million to be committed for the construction of the projects I just identified.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: You also mentioned that the park is subject to the provisions of the Sahtu Dene and Metis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement. I'm not an expert in that area. Could you fill me and the rest of the committee in on the requirements of the land claims agreement?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: You have the map. The park is located in the Sahtu settlement area. It is subject to the provisions of the Sahtu Dene and Metis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement. The land claim agreement requires that an impact and benefit agreement be negotiated and signed before the establishment of a park.

In March 2012, the three land corporations and two renewable resource councils agreed to the establishment of the park, its boundaries, and a cooperative management regime. The impact and benefit plan for the Nááts'ihch'oh covers cooperation, management agreements, the exercise of traditional harvesting rights within that agreement, as well as employment and economic development opportunities identified in that impact and benefit agreement.

In order to move on the park piece, the impact and benefit agreement must first be agreed to in order to trigger the development of the use of that park as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ambler.

We'll move now, for the last question, to Mr. Bevington, for five minutes.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Minister, I want to go back to a question I asked, because Mr. McNamee didn't really answer the question. I wasn't asking about Nahanni. I was asking about the provisions that have been put in place to ensure that Tulita would see this action going ahead. I'm really just looking for the action plan going forward on the capital facilities and the development of the staffing there. That was the question.

• (1625)

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: Mr. Chair, I think I just outlined the process moving forward in Tulita. I've identified the infrastructure that we need to construct in order to have the office space and the warehouse facilities for that. I believe \$2.8 million has been identified to start the construction. These impact and benefit agreements are identified and agreed to through the agreements with the aboriginal groups. In the development of a park, we have to have the impact and benefit agreement signed. It outlines the number of staff, training, and so forth. I believe I just covered that in responding to that question.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Through Wood Buffalo I'm familiar with the management planning process in national parks that deal with the first nations. Could you outline how that cooperative management planning is going to take place? Do you have a specific board that will meet on a regular basis? Will the management plan have a five-year review, a ten-year review? What's the process that would guarantee when we're moving forward with the management of this region, there will be enough opportunity for interaction to ensure that what we're doing is going to work out for the people there?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: This is part of the normal process of developing a management plan for creating any park. In this particular case, what's unique is that we're dealing with a land claims group as well. Through the land claims agreements that are signed, there's an impact and benefit agreement requirement that triggers the creation of the park. Without an IBA we can't proceed with the actual creation. Those two work in parallel, the creation of the park boundaries issues and so forth. The management committee will provide advice to the minister as well as the Sahtu Renewable Resources Board on various park matters, for example, permitting aircraft going into O'Grady Lake to access the park. Different communities are also involved, so it allows a committee to coordinate efforts in allowing Canadians to access the national parks in their areas.

The management committee includes the chairperson, four representatives from the Tulita and Norman Wells renewable resource councils, and four ministerial appointments. The management committee's initial priorities will focus on supporting Parks Canada as well as the Sahtu in getting the new park operational. That has to be completed as part of the claim within five years, I believe.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: You have one minute, if you want it.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Okay.

One of the big problems in the whole Sahtu region is climate change. I believe that in Canada, this region, the Mackenzie Valley, is impacted the most by climate change. Scientists report losses of up to 40% of the permafrost in that area.

Does Parks Canada have a clear understanding of the significant changes that are taking place in the ecosystem there? Will that be part of the management plan going forward, to deal with those types of issues or put forward those issues as significant in the development of the plan?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq: I'll refer that to the member here.

Mr. Rob Prosper: Yes. In fact we have a comprehensive monitoring program that's undertaken in all national parks. It looks at all of the key ecosystems and establishes measures for measuring change for each of those key ecosystems in every national park. Nahanni has a monitoring program and Nááts'ihch'oh and Nahanni combined, being in the same watershed, will likely share a monitoring program for that.

The Chair: Thank you. That brings us to the end of our first hour of witnesses for the establishment of Nááts'ihch'oh national park reserve.

I want to thank our Minister of the Environment for being here.

Thank you to the officials for joining us today.

We'll suspend for three minutes, and then we'll have our witnesses who are appearing by video conference

• (1630)

(Pause)

• (1630)

The Chair: I would ask our committee to come back to order, please.

We have appearing with us by teleconference, from the Tulita Renewable Resources Council, Rocky Norwegian, president. We have his name tag at the end of the table, so when you have a question, members, please direct it to one of the members, so we don't waste time trying to decide who has been asked the question.

Also with us by teleconference from the Northwest Territories, we have Sahtu Secretariat Incorporated, Ethel Blondin-Andrew, chairperson.

Welcome. We're going to proceed in the order I just listed.

Mr. Norwegian, I'm assuming you will proceed with your opening statement, and then Ms. Blondin-Andrew later.

Mr. Norwegian, go ahead please.

Mr. Rocky Norwegian (President, Tulita Renewable Resources Council): Greetings.

My name is Rocky Norwegian, Senior. I'm a member of the board of directors of the Fort Norman Metis Land Corporation, and I am also the president for the renewable resources council in Tulita. I have a responsibility for Nááts'ihch'oh.

When I signed the impact and benefit plan that enabled the bill on behalf of the Fort Norman Métis and the renewable resource council, I did so with a great deal of happiness and pride.

The impact and benefit plan was entered into as a result of chapter 16 of the Sahtu Dene and Metis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement. The comprehensive agreement was entered into on September 6, 1993 and was ratified by legislation that received royal assent on June 23, 1994. I mention this because without the comprehensive agreement there would be no national park for you to consider today. The comprehensive agreement is the first and so far only treaty that specifically includes the Métis people.

I want to acknowledge the contributions that each member of the Tulita district Nááts'ihch'oh working groups past and present has made to the achievement that is embodied in the bill you are considering. I also want to acknowledge all past and present members of the board of directors of the organizations that approved the impact and benefit plan, not once but twice. The first approval was with the greater land area that we had agreed to with Parks Canada. The second approval was with the area that was reduced by John Duncan, the then-minister of AANDC, that we reluctantly agreed to.

I also want to acknowledge the elders who were with us through the negotiations, as well as those who have passed on since the finalizing of the Sahtu Dene and Metis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement. I would particularly like to remember my good friend and mentor, the late Rod Hardy, one of our elders who passed on just before we started the negotiations, who brought us to where we are today. Rod was a great supporter of the Yellowstone to Yukon concept that is sometimes simply called the Y-to-Y. Nááts'ihch'oh fills in another spot in the Y-to-Y concept.

I would also like to acknowledge the work of Chief Frank Andrew of the Tulita Dene band, who played a significant role in bringing the impact and benefit plan to finalization, which has in turn enabled the legislation you are now considering.

The impact and benefit plan is very significant for us as it is the first complete agreement that we have made with the Parks Canada agency. We have made complete agreements with many oil and gas companies and mining companies, but never one such as this one. It is not without significance that we negotiated and completed a cooperative agreement with Selwyn Resources about four years ago. The Selwyn mine borders Nááts'ihch'oh, and a road to the mine will run through Nááts'ihch'oh. This is fine with us as it illustrates how the proponents of conservation and resource extraction can be good neighbours.

The process used to complete the agreement is a good illustration of how the Sahtu Dene and Metis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement can be used to bring significant economic benefits to the beneficiaries of the comprehensive agreement, and at the same time protect a significant part of our homeland. The impact and benefit plan and the subsequent legislation would not have been possible without the Sahtu Dene and Metis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement and the leadership of the Government of Canada.

I will not go into the details of the impact and benefit plan, but I can tell you that it was approved by the board of directors and the members of all three corporations and both renewable resource councils, knowing that it would lead to the legislation being considered by you today. I can tell you that we are now actively engaged in the implementation of the plan by way of our participation in the management committee.

I am also sure that the members of all three land corporations look forward to taking advantage of the employment, training, education, and scholarship opportunities that are provided for in the impact and benefit plan. Additionally, the members who have businesses also have opportunities that are provided for in the plan.

Notwithstanding our support for the bill, there remains one outstanding issue, and that is the boundaries of Nááts'ihch'oh. Although we are not completely happy with these boundaries—we supported more land being included—we are prepared to accept what is in front of you today. We accept what is in front of you today in the hope that in the not too distant future the boundaries will be expanded to include more land.

In the meantime we have another avenue open to us to push for more protection of the land in the area.

• (1635)

The other avenue is the Sahtu Land Use Plan and the requirement that it deal with the lands that were part of the lands that were withdrawn for negotiation purposes but not included in Nááts'ihch'oh.

It would be helpful if the committee could recommend passage of the bill with a caveat that Parks Canada open negotiations to expand the boundaries to protect more of the ecosystem of Nááts'ihch'oh, and that the current land withdrawal order, which is scheduled to end on March 31, 2015, be extended indefinitely until an expansion agreement is reached.

Mahsi Cho, merci beaucoup, and thank you.

• (1640)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Norwegian.

We'll move now to Ms. Blondin-Andrew.

Hon. Ethel Blondin-Andrew (Chairperson, Sahtu Secretariat Incorporated): Good afternoon. I was very happy to listen to Minister Aglukkaq speak to the bill. My colleague, Rocky Norwegian, Senior, and I have had the opportunity to be a part of this process since the onset of the work to begin the establishment of this park when the Government of Canada itself had requested the expansion of the Nahanni headwaters.

Minister, committee Chair, and members, both MPs and senators, I would like you to know that as the former member of Parliament for this area for 18 years, I'm extremely proud to have been part of this process. It shows you there is life after politics for one, and that good things can be done in partnership.

My name is Ethel Blondin-Andrew. I am the chairperson for Sahtu Secretariat Incorporated. I'm serving my second term representing the 3,500 Sahtu Dene and Métis land claim beneficiaries.

On behalf of the SSI, I was involved in the initial planning and establishment of the Nááts'ihch'oh national park reserve of Canada. I am pleased to make these comments to you on behalf of the SSI. I no longer sit on the board or have any direct contact with the daily work to ensure that the benefits agreement is actually implemented. However, I'm sure like everybody else who was involved we keep a leery eye out and watch what's happening on a grander scale.

I'm pleased to make these comments to you because there is a high level of interest in what's happening here.

The area of the park has great cultural significance to the Sahtu Dene and Métis, and in particular the Mountain Dene. This area has a special spiritual significance to the Mountain Dene who have lived and used these lands and resources since time immemorial. Our people have always recognized that these lands within the national park hold special powers, meaning we've carried those messages in our oral tradition as our languages are spoken not written.

The Mountain Dene traditionally travelled throughout the area of the park visiting among the various tribal groups. Our grandparents and parents took their children to this area in order to teach them about culture and the stories of the land. This experience formed an important part of our identity, culture, and beliefs. This is where we learned to be self-sufficient, and to be good hunters, workers, and providers.

Our people would usually go up the Keele River which goes into the national park. They would walk into the mountains to the headwaters such as the Nááts'ihch'oh area and O'Grady Lake, which is known as Túoch'ee Tuwé, to live throughout the winter and hunt moose. The following spring and summer they would return by the Keele River to the Mackenzie River in big moose-skin boats filled with freshly harvested moose meat and other goods.

Today the Mountain Dene still use this area for traditional purposes. We continue to use it for spiritual purposes and to hunt moose, sheep, and caribou. Occasionally and more than occasionally I've seen my colleague, Mr. Norwegian, and myself up in the Caribou Flats area doing what has been carried on for thousands of years by our ancestors, harvesting food in the fall.

The Sahtu Dene and Métis support the establishment of the park. We maintain that any park in the settlement area must be created and managed in partnership with the Sahtu Dene and Métis and based on our cultural traditions, spiritual values, and economic aspirations.

I can say we were involved in the identification of the boundaries of the park and the establishment of its co-management board. The co-management board will oversee the operation of the park. This is significant because we do not see the park operating as those parks located in southern Canada. Our role on the co-management board will ensure we are involved in decisions relating to the management of the park and ensure that operation of this park will be consistent with our values and traditions.

• (1645)

I must say that this is consistent with the basic tenets of the land claims agreement, which is a document that really promotes co-management. We took a practical and balanced approach with respect to the planning and establishment of the park and its management. We wanted a park to protect the land. We wanted to ensure that our people are able to continue to hunt and trap within this area and use the lands and resources of this area for traditional purposes if they choose to do so. But we also see potential economic development opportunities in this area, including mine development.

The western part of the park is rich in minerals, including the Selwyn lead-zinc deposit which is considered to be one of the biggest deposits in the world. I point out that the Sahtu Dene and Métis have a partnership agreement with the proponent of Selwyn with respect to this deposit. We have a cooperative agreement that's

actually being reinvigorated and revisited. I was at a meeting with Selwyn just two or three days ago in which they cited that when they build the road near the park, much of which is in the Sahtu area, they would like to do it to industrial level and that the Government of Canada looked favourably upon their aspirations to do that in concert with the Sahtu Dene and Métis and that they wanted us to support that.

My read of this is that I hear from my colleague Mr. Norwegian that we support that because it will provide economic benefits to our people. The Sahtu Dene have an interest in developing an ecotourism lodge that is connected to the park as well. We wanted to ensure that the park did not adversely impact economic development opportunities. For instance, we agreed that the Lened and Selwyn mining claims and leases should be excluded from the park.

There were compromises made, and there were practical approaches taken. A key component of the establishment of the park was the negotiation of an impact and benefit agreement. Mr. Norwegian spoke to this, so I won't bother going into details. The IBA among Sahtu land corporations, two renewable resource councils in the Tulita district, and the Government of Canada establishes infrastructure in Tulita that is intended to be the gateway to the park. There must be a federal commitment to hire new positions relating to the operation and management of the park as committed to in the IBA. There must be a commitment to provide funds for local capacity building and that hiring practices and approaches maximize local benefits in particular to ensure that the Sahtu Dene and Métis benefit from employment and other economic opportunities relating to the park.

Parks Canada has made significant commitments to the Sahtu Dene and Métis in the IBA. We must work together in collaboration if these commitments are to be realized. The Government of Canada is very familiar with this park. It started out with Minister John Baird, and then went on to Minister Kent, and now we have Minister Aglukkaq.

The Prime Minister himself has actually been to Nááts'ihch'oh along with Mrs. Harper on a trip with our legal adviser and our political adviser, Rick Hardy, who took a pre-eminent role in helping to establish this park. I think some of that credit should go to the work Rick has done as well as all of the board members and the elders. It was a work in progress and it was an awesome experience to share this with the Prime Minister of our country, and to show that when people want to there can be cooperation and that things can happen positively.

We look forward to working with the Government of Canada to manage the area of the park in a balanced approach and capitalize on the benefits arising from the Nááts'ihch'oh park.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mrs. Blondin-Andrew.

We will now move to the questions from committee members.

We'll begin with a question from Mr. Woodworth.

•(1650)

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Thank you, witnesses, not only for being here today, but also for your long and determined involvement in this process. It's so good to hear the pride and accomplishment in your comments today and your satisfaction with having reached this point in the journey.

I have some questions. I'll begin with Mr. Norwegian, particularly around the impact and benefit agreement.

Forgive me, my voice is a little hoarse due to some health issues.

Do I understand, Mr. Norwegian, that the most recent or final impact and benefit agreement contained the boundaries which are in effect before us today in relation to this legislation for the park?

Mr. Rocky Norwegian: Yes.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Okay.

You mentioned a board of directors which had approved that impact and benefit agreement. What board of directors was that?

Mr. Rocky Norwegian: It was the parks committee, the board of directors from the three land corporations...well, the board of directors that were made up by the RRCs.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: I'm afraid you need to be a little more specific for me, because I'm not familiar with the groups up there. What land committees are you referring to?

Mr. Rocky Norwegian: I mean the parks committee that was established by the renewable resources councils to negotiate with Parks Canada.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Very good.

You mentioned all three organizations, and again I didn't quite catch what organizations we're talking about. You're here for the Tulita Renewable Resources Council. Is that one of the three that you mentioned?

Mr. Rocky Norwegian: No, it has all three of the land corporations within the Tulita district.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Okay, I understand.

Then the resource councils, that's the—

Mr. Rocky Norwegian: These are the two, one in Norman Wells and one in Tulita, that are also part of the Tulita district.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Okay.

Was this impact and benefit agreement in its current final form reviewed by all of these groups: the board of directors, the three land companies, and the two resource councils? Is that correct?

Mr. Rocky Norwegian: Yes.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: They all approved it. Is that correct?

Mr. Rocky Norwegian: Yes.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: You mentioned that you would of course have liked to see more land in the park but signed on to this agreement anyway. Can you tell me what benefits you see coming out of this park as it is currently being legislated that caused you to sign on, even though you'd rather have more land in it? What do you see the benefits as being?

You didn't just say "No, forget it." You said that this is good to have. I'd like to hear from you what benefits you're expecting.

Mr. Rocky Norwegian: Well, we've always wanted to have a bigger land base for the park, because it gives us more protections. I see the benefit of having it there so that there are more benefits for the aboriginals in respect to having land set aside for future trapping, hunting, and fishing. Because of development happening around us, we were hoping to have more lands in the area, but unfortunately it didn't turn out that way. We accepted what we have now, because we still get all of the benefits that come out of it. That hope was more for protecting the land for future hunters and trappers.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Okay. That's really what I wanted to get at, that as you said, you still get the benefits that come out of it. One benefit is the protection of these lands for future hunters and trappers. Isn't that right?

Mr. Rocky Norwegian: Yes.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: As I understand it, there are some other benefits as well that come out of this agreement. Can you expand on those?

Mr. Rocky Norwegian: Well, there are any employment or business opportunities. We also have the right to have licences put aside for the landowners to do river rafting, for example, or naturalist lodges. We have those set aside and we have the first opportunity within our agreements. Everything we did there was for the first opportunity for our members.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Very good.

Do you think this park and this legislation may provide a boost to tourism into the area?

•(1655)

Mr. Rocky Norwegian: I believe it will, because there's a road coming in already from the other side, from Nahanni. Nahanni is quite well known and quite well used, I believe, right now. This is just an extension of that.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: This brings me to another question, if I have time. I was quite taken with an expression you used when you were talking about some of the roads into this area. The phrase I noted that you said was that it shows that conservation and resource extraction can be good neighbours.

Can you expand a little on what you meant by that?

Mr. Rocky Norwegian: I didn't say "intend" to be good neighbours, I said that this shows that we're able to work with industry and conservation. We have a road going right through our park. We're able to have a say in what goes on with it. We're also able to take advantage of having the road there to get in more easily to take advantage of the area, because we're so far away from it.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Would I be correct to say that this creates a good balance between conservation and resource extraction?

Mr. Rocky Norwegian: Yes, definitely. I've been involved with this for 25 years now, and I've been always trying to get a balance for our people. We know that development wants to happen in here. We know that some of our people want development to happen. We also know, listening with the other ear, that we have members out there who would like to continue to practise their traditional ways.

We try to make that balance, and thanks to Parks Canada and the leadership that.... You know, they were able to come up with something that allows them to do all those things in the park.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Thank you, sir.

Mr. Rocky Norwegian: You're welcome.

The Chair: We'll move now to Mr. Bevington for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Good afternoon, Mr. Norwegian and Ms. Blondin-Andrew. It's great to have you here speaking to this bill. The work you've done to bring it to this point is remarkable. I think, in a way, it's a gift of the Sahtu people to the people of Canada. I think any national park that takes up and is engaged in the comprehensive land claims of a region is.... It comes from the people of that region, so I thank you for that, for doing that work, and we look forward to that.

I'm always concerned to ensure that there's a return, that the Government of Canada lives up to its promises on implementation. We have an implementation coalition here in Ottawa among settled land claims dealing with trying to get done some of those things that the government has promised. We need to ensure that Parks Canada is ready and willing to do the things they've said they're going to do in terms of the facilities, the staffing, and the opportunities you have.

How do both of you feel about the progress with Parks Canada in those areas, on the types of things that will add to your community?

Mr. Rocky Norwegian: I'm actually pretty impressed with the way it's going right now. They're already starting to put their infrastructure in the community. They have staff hired here already. They're starting to implement the training programs available for members. They have someone locally hired running the office at this time.

I'm pretty impressed with the way things are going.

Hon. Ethel Blondin-Andrew: I'm very encouraged by Parks Canada. If you take Nahanni National Park and also Wood Buffalo National Park, we should be heartened by the fact that they have been, I believe, very well served. I believe those parks are world-renowned. Their facilities have been very good. I've been in and out of the offices, and actually in both the parks themselves, and if we use them as a measure, I'm sure Nááts'ihch'oh will do very well.

I believe one of the other MPs asked about tourism. As you probably well know, Mr. Bevington, canoeing trips start right at the mouth of Nááts'ihch'oh and they go down. Those trips down the Nahanni or the trips on the rivers, the Keele and Natla, are very well connected to these areas as well. O'Grady Lake is another place that's just unbelievable. It has a treasure trove of animals, moose and other species.

I'm very encouraged that the government will do the right thing. I'm not worried about it. My job with SSI is implementation. I know all the trials and tribulations of a lack of resources and the troubles in trying to get something like land claims implemented, but this is a chewable bite-size, I think, that Parks Canada can handle.

●(1700)

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Well, we in the opposition have put up the fact that we'll support this bill and move it forward in a very timely fashion, because we know this is what we've been offered.

With regard to the Sahtu Secretariat, I know that Mr. Norwegian spoke to the boundary. Did the Sahtu Secretariat expect that the boundary would be larger as well, and were you disappointed that it had been reduced somewhat?

Hon. Ethel Blondin-Andrew: Well you know, these things are the art of the possible. Both Rocky and I are old hands at what we do. Rocky knows from his work and I know from my previous incarnation as an MP that when you're negotiating, there is an opening and there is a closing, and there is the art of the possible.

We knew at that point that no amount of pushing would get us more, so I think the suggestion by Mr. Norwegian to continue the extension onward indefinitely and to open up negotiations to expand the park are good ones.

We wanted more, but we know when we're going to have to find other means to achieve our goals. I would say that you don't get everything, but you can get a lot of things if you work together. We feel we did the best job we could with our elders and with our leaders to make this happen. I don't think there was any more room, because at one point the negotiations and the pushing are over, and if you've been around for a while, you know when that happens.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: The question I have is for Mr. Norwegian.

You talked about the fact that you're very much supportive of the mining development. When you looked at the previous larger boundary, did you think it was going to be an impediment on resource development in that area, or did you find that it was probably a balance that could be put in place?

Mr. Rocky Norwegian: When we first started, it was more that the government accepted the grandfathered clause, and once we were dealing with that, we knew other development was going to try to stop what we were doing. But we kept pushing on and we accepted Selwyn, because they were there. They had a grandfathered clause in there already.

I kind of expected that, and I was more or less working towards getting that balance for both parties.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to move to Mrs. Ambler for the next seven minutes.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: Thank you to Mr. Norwegian and Ms. Blondin-Andrew for being with us by teleconference today. I'm delighted to be able to ask you a few questions about the Nááts'ihch'oh park reserve.

In particular, Ms. Blondin-Andrew, I want to thank you for speaking with such great affection about growing up in the park, and about its culture and heritage, and about it being a way to teach our youth how to respect the land and care for it and to make conservation a priority with youth.

One of my colleagues on the committee has just written a book called *A Life Outdoors*. I'm shamelessly plugging his book for him, because he may be too shy to do so. Okay, he's not shy. It's subtitled, *Essays on Hunting, Gathering and Country Living in the 21st Century*. I suspect that you could probably write your own book of essays on hunting, gathering, and living in the north in the 21st century.

Here is your book, Bob. I'm going to buy a few copies, I just want to make that clear. It just went on sale today.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mrs. Stella Ambler: I can hear you laughing.

Here on this committee we're all very excited about this park—I think I can speak for everyone—as well as about the Rouge national park in my neighbourhood in the greater Toronto area.

I also want to thank you for your service of, I believe, 18 years as a member of Parliament and for letting us all know that there is life after Parliament.

My question is a very general one. What are the benefits of the Naáts'ihch'oh national park reserve for first nations?

• (1705)

Hon. Ethel Blondin-Andrew: I think it's an opportunity to show that two worlds don't have to collide, that they can co-exist and you can co-manage aspirations in the 21st century. For the jobs that are going to be related to the park, the hiring and all the demonstrations I've seen through the advertisements, they will go through the north and advertise in the north. I've seen jobs for parks in Inuvik and also on Great Bear Lake, as well as in our area. Then when they build the facilities, I think they're going to be looking at working with local people, local contractors. They will go that route.

I've been to Auyuittuq in Nunavut where they have a really nice visitors centre. It really gives focus to what's around the environment. We have what's called the place of creation in Bear Rock, right beside Tulita. All those significant sites have a wonderful oral history, and this is shared with the children. I've seen children work on some of this stuff at the schools. I think it's a foundation for learning and for gifting other people with that knowledge.

I also think it's an opportunity for our people to not only co-manage, but to manage in real terms those facilities and those opportunities, by going out into those areas. I see an ever-prominent move for the outdoors.

I don't know who the author is of that book you mentioned.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: I didn't mention his name. His name is Robert Sopuck. He's the member of Parliament for Dauphin—Swan River—Marquette.

Hon. Ethel Blondin-Andrew: Awesome. I'm going to have a look for that.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Hon. Ethel Blondin-Andrew: It works. Social media works.

I think it's a great opportunity, just the knowledge and the beauty and the aesthetics, and the issue of conservation. Then on the other

side, there's development. I think this is what the north is about. It's not just one thing; it's many things. Sometimes when you have a challenge, it turns into an opportunity. I think people will share in that and be very happy to work along. I know the process when we started. We had the elders involved. It was a whole community thing. The rooms were full of elders at these meetings, to start working on the park. Rocky was there. I was there. Rick Hardy was there. There were all kinds of elders, all the people from the community of Tulita and the local environment who were all working on this project together. How could they reject it? They're the ones who helped build it.

• (1710)

Mrs. Stella Ambler: That does sound like a very positive process.

If I could encapsulate a bit what you're saying, I believe you would say that the national park does achieve that balance between conservation, environmental protection, and responsible resource development.

Hon. Ethel Blondin-Andrew: I would say that's a work in progress. There's the opportunity to do that, but Mr. Norwegian was very profound when he said there are people who want the opportunities, but there are also people who appreciate that they want to be able to carry on their traditional pursuits as well. It's a respectful and very guarded process.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: Thank you so much for your time today. We really appreciate it.

The Chair: I think that's the first time we've considered the environment committee as a social media construct.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Mr. McKay has seven minutes.

Hon. John McKay: Twitterverse is lighting up as we speak.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Hon. John McKay: Ethel, it's John McKay here. Nice to hear you're having a wonderful, productive life post-politics. I'm glad to see that you're working very hard on this park.

I'll direct this question to both you and Mr. Norwegian. It's clear to me after your conversation that this was not quite what you'd hoped for, and that it was something less than a full southern part of the Nahanni watershed. But you made a decision that this was as good as it was going to get for a while. So the question really is, what did you leave on the table? What is it you didn't get that you would have liked to get? What are the implications for the Sahtu Dene and Metis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement? What are the implications of not getting all of what you wanted?

Hon. Ethel Blondin-Andrew: Rocky, do you want to go first?

Mr. Rocky Norwegian: No. You go ahead, Ethel.

Hon. Ethel Blondin-Andrew: I'll go back to what we both said. We want more land. We want more land within the park. I think that's basically it.

I did hear Mr. Norwegian, who is now involved in the renewable resources council in Tulita, say that there was a process outside of this one. After we complete the agreement, if we could extend the extension for the expansion of the park, the boundaries of the park, then we could work on this. If we could get an extension to do that, to work on getting more land, that would be a great process. That would be very good.

In terms of the implications for the land claims agreement, I'm not sure there are any, except that with respect to land claims, we always welcome as much as we can gain in our impact and benefit agreement, and as much as we can gain in terms of lands, which is what the claim is all about. It's about trying to maximize benefits for our 3,500 beneficiaries.

It's good to talk to you, John.

Hon. John McKay: I remember that hamburger joint you took me to in Yellowknife. I've forgotten the name of it, but it is a legend.

Hon. Ethel Blondin-Andrew: Gold Range.

Hon. John McKay: Yes, that's probably it.

The government is obviously keen to exclude some lands. What is unique about the lands that were excluded from the negotiations?

Hon. Ethel Blondin-Andrew: On O'Grady Lake, which is Tùoch'ee Tuwé, we have two of them. I think the Lened project is on that. It's a very scenic and wonderful spot. It was a heart-wrenching experience for all of us to have to make those compromises, but that's what life in politics is all about, making those decisions.

We didn't make them lightly. We really thought about it. We decided it was better to be there for another fight, for another battle, if we have to. It was better to make a decision rather than to throw our hands up and walk away. You can't do that. You gain nothing.

• (1715)

Hon. John McKay: Ethel, I understand the concept of this is as good as it's going to get for the time being, but what I don't understand is why the government decided that this particular scenic piece, or any other piece, was not to be included in the park reserve.

What is unique? What's special about these many square kilometres that aren't part of the reserve?

Hon. Ethel Blondin-Andrew: I think there are some very special rare earth metals or precious gems in that area. We also have a mining agreement with Selwyn. That's another one.

I have to say that in the end, we all made that decision together. It's not a decision that was made just by government. It was a decision that we accepted and that we worked with. We're hoping to get another kick at the can down the road. It's a park reserve; it's not a park.

Hon. John McKay: Yes, I understand it. There are some negotiations left to be done, apparently, before you can establish it as a park.

Is there anything unique that's left to negotiate? What's still on the table that prevents it from going from a reserve to a park?

Hon. Ethel Blondin-Andrew: Go ahead, Rocky.

Mr. Rocky Norwegian: I don't think there's anything that's holding it back now.

Hon. John McKay: Really?

Mr. Rocky Norwegian: We believe we've completed the agreement. With regard to asking about why certain lands were put aside, all through the negotiations we had to stickhandle quite a bit, stickhandle between the outfitters, etc. Once they went through the MERA...the potential for minerals in all the different areas, some of those areas were taken off.

Hon. John McKay: As lead negotiators for the Sahtu Dene and Métis folks, you don't think there is anything left to be negotiated, and yet the minister just told us that the reason it's still a reserve as opposed to a park is that the negotiations are continuing and there are still things to be negotiated. I'm not quite sure, if one side doesn't think there is anything left to negotiate how the other side still thinks there is something to be negotiated.

Hon. Ethel Blondin-Andrew: That's very encouraging because the minister is the one who has the hands on the lever and I'm encouraged by that.

Hon. John McKay: Thank you, Ethel.

Hon. Ethel Blondin-Andrew: All right, John. Thank you.

The Chair: Does anyone else have a question on this side?

Mr. Sopuck.

Mr. Robert Sopuck (Dauphin—Swan River—Marquette, CPC): I have more of a comment. My own experience in the Mackenzie Valley, Mr. Norwegian, was way back in the seventies. In the Mackenzie Valley pipeline days I was doing environmental impact work and I had the opportunity to moose hunt with an Albert Norwegian. Would he be related to you?

Mr. Rocky Norwegian: He's my uncle.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: We'll talk about the hunt some other time.

I have a policy question for you.

I was very taken by your comment, Mr. Norwegian, about how mining and conservation can co-exist. The inclination many people have is that as soon as a development, like a mine, goes into place, the whole environment is somehow compromised.

Outside of the park we can still have mining development that is regulated through sound environmental licensing and have significant conservation benefits outside of the park. Would you agree with that, and if you do, could you expand on that?

• (1720)

Mr. Rocky Norwegian: Under a land claim agreement they'd have to come to us anyway and talk to us and consult with us, so we're directly involved with what goes on out there. I feel confident knowing that we're directly involved with whatever goes on out there, and that we have a say on what happens out there.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Great, thanks.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I want to thank Mrs. Blondin-Andrew and Mr. Rocky Norwegian for being with us by teleconference.

We're going to suspend and move in camera in about two minutes.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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