

Opening Remarks

of the

**Vice-President,
Health Security Infrastructure Branch,
Public Health Agency of Canada**

**Standing Committee on Government Operations
and Estimates**

**National Emergency Strategic Stockpile and
PPE Procurement - Part A - NESS**

**Ottawa, Canada
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Introduction

- Good morning. I would like to thank the Chair and the Committee members for inviting the Public Health Agency of Canada to speak today.
- My name is Sally Thornton. I am the Vice-President of the Health Security Infrastructure Branch at the Agency. Joining me today are Éric Dagenais, also Vice-President of the Agency, and Steven Guercio, Executive Director of the National Microbiology Laboratory.
- As you know, our highest priority is to ensure the health and safety of Canadians.
- Since we learned of a respiratory illness in Wuhan, China, on December 31, 2019, the Public Health Agency of Canada has continued to actively monitor and respond to COVID-19. This includes planning a series of scenarios, and continually adapting our response strategy based on new information.
- We have quickly activated our Health Portfolio Operations Centre and we continue to plan and coordinate the federal response in close collaboration with our provincial, territorial and international partners.
- I understand that you have invited us here to speak specifically about Canada's National Emergency Strategic Stockpile (or, as we call it, the NESS) and the work we have been doing to procure personal protective equipment (or PPE) and make it available to the provinces and territories.

- I will begin with a brief background on the NESS, and Mr. Dagenais will address the issues of bulk procurement and distribution of PPE in the context of the response to COVID-19.

NESS

- As you know, public health in Canada is a shared responsibility among multiple levels of government. The role of the federal government is clear, but a fundamental principle in emergency management is that provincial, territorial and local governments must be reasonably prepared for the most common emergencies.
- The NESS is the federal government's emergency stockpile of health supplies. It plays two important roles:
 - It provides a surge capacity to provinces and territories when their own resources have been depleted;
 - It is the sole source of certain supplies needed for rare public health emergencies, such as expensive and rarely used vaccines or antidotes.
- The NESS was created in 1952, largely in response to the threat of a nuclear attack, to stockpile medical supplies for civil defence purposes.
- During the 1950s and 1960s, the NESS acquired 200 hospital beds and blood collection units.
- The scope of the NESS expanded in the 1980s and 1990s to include supplies for mass evacuations and for responding to

natural disasters, such as kits for setting up reception centres for displaced individuals.

- The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the 2003 SARS outbreak and the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic required a shift in the role of the NESS from mass victim response and the provision of beds and blankets, to a role focused on chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear threats.
- It began to move away from “beds and blankets” and increased its holdings of antiviral medications, a key treatment in response to viral outbreaks such as influenza pandemics.
- The role of the NESS in procurement has also evolved, as a potential sourcing organization and clearing house, paving the way for possible bulk procurement.
- In summary, the NESS:
 - complements provincial, territorial and local capacity;
 - prepares for low-probability, high-impact events (for example, a terrorist attack or a major natural disaster);
 - ensures the continued availability of pharmaceuticals, equipment and medical supplies that are rare or difficult to obtain in a short time frame.
- The NESS also plays a unique role in stockpiling certain rare and high-value assets in the national emergency management system, such as the smallpox vaccine.

- The NESS aims to be a leading resource when local and provincial and territorial resources have been depleted.
- Nevertheless, it maintains its ability to facilitate bulk procurement with provinces and territories.

NESS and COVID-19

- In order to respond to the unprecedented challenges Canada is facing with the COVID-19 pandemic, the NESS was mobilized to support response efforts.
- The Public Health Agency of Canada is leveraging its bulk procurement capacity by working with the provinces, territories, Public Services and Procurement Canada and Health Canada to procure supplies for front-line health care workers.

Bulk Procurement Capacity

- We have:
 - worked closely with the provinces and territories, Public Services and Procurement Canada, Health Canada and other partners to make bulk purchases and to allocate donations;
 - ramped up our internal capacity, with specialized PPE procurement units, identifying appropriate PPE, preparing requisitions, reviewing product specifications and testing products;
 - deployed NESS equipment and supplies in response to requests for assistance from provinces and territories

since the beginning of this outbreak; and we will continue to do so.

Conclusion

- The NESS has evolved considerably since its beginnings during the Cold War, through its evolution in the 2000s, to its current role. Its role is changing in terms of responding to bulk procurement, and it will no doubt change again, in light of this event.
- I would now like to hand it over to my colleague, Mr. Éric Dagenais, who will provide you with an overview of our PPE bulk procurement and distribution work in the context of the response to COVID-19.