



Media lines on COVID-19

Preparedness and inventory of the National Emergency Strategic Stockpile
(Response to concerns raised during appearance before the House of Commons
committee in May 2020)

Issue Statement: During Minister Hajdu and Dr. Tam's appearance at the House of Commons on May 22, 2020, concerns were raised as to whether the Public Health Agency of Canada had warned Cabinet in the last decade that the National Emergency Strategic Stockpile (NESS) was not properly funded. There were additional criticisms related to preparedness, supplies and closure of NESS warehouses, which resulted in the disposal of expired personal protective equipment. These media lines have been developed using previously approved messaging to respond to potential questions from media.

Key messages

- Since 2012/2013, the National Emergency Strategic Stockpile (NESS) budget, including salaries and operating costs, has been approximately three million dollars a year.
- Investments were also made in specific initiatives and medical countermeasures, including a four-year investment, made in 2015/2016, in medical countermeasures against smallpox and anthrax. Over the past ten years, these investments have varied from year to year and have amounted to over \$79M.
- The federal government created the NESS on the assumption that the provincial, territorial and local governments were prepared to deal with the most common emergency situations. The NESS was intended to supply goods and services when provincial, territorial and local resources were exhausted, and to be the sole source of the specific goods required for rare public health emergencies (for example, vaccines or costly or rarely used antidotes).
- The authorities usually procure personal protective equipment (PPE) directly from known suppliers, and NESS inventory has always been relatively low.
- The NESS inventory has been the subject of periodic audits and new supplies are purchased regularly.
- The Canadian Pandemic Influenza Plan is a federal, provincial, and territorial guidance document intended for the health sector that is aimed at helping authorities with their emergency planning.
- According to the latest version, which goes back to 2011, the availability of PPE should be reviewed during pandemic planning, and building up stockpiles should be considered. However, no inventory quantities are specified.



- In January 2020, the Public Health Agency of Canada began to monitor the coronavirus disease outbreak in China, assess the NESS inventory, and purchase the supplies required to be able to respond in the event of an outbreak in Canada.
- Given the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, the Government of Canada is spending considerable sums, as the NESS is being called on to play a broader and more active supply role.

If asked whether advice related to the NESS has been given to Cabinet

- All officials, regardless of the department, are required to respect Cabinet confidentiality.

Questions and answers

Q1. Has the Public Health Agency of Canada asked the government for additional funding or suggested that the National Emergency Strategic Stockpile was underfunded?

The PHAC has asked for additional funding when it was needed. Over the past ten years, additional investments in the National Emergency Strategic Stockpile has varied from year to year and has amounted to more than \$79M. That includes, for example, additional investment in antivirals, medical countermeasures against smallpox, anthrax, and the Ebola virus, and additional resources such as pharmaceutical products to guarantee sufficient quantities for mass gatherings like the 2015 Pan American Games and the G7 Summit in 2018.

Q2. Can you explain why the number of warehouses where the National Emergency Strategic Stockpile (NESS) supplies are kept have been reduced and whether that has brought about a reduction in the amount of personal protective equipment (PPE) that the government keeps in them?

Canada's NESS contains supplies that the provinces and territories may ask for in emergency situations, such as infectious disease outbreaks, natural disasters, or other events affecting public health, when their own resources are not sufficient. It is intended to supplement the supplies stockpiled or purchased by the provinces and territories, not to replace them. The provinces and territories must prepare and maintain their own supply capacities.

Over the past ten years, the NESS has been modernized, and emphasis has been placed on strategic medical supplies that the provinces and territories do not usually keep, such as drugs and vaccines that must be kept in climate-controlled conditions.

After an independent assessment of the network of federal warehouses in 2013, the number of NESS warehouses, which are located in different regions of the country, went from nine to six, to make the distribution system as efficient as possible, without reducing response capacity. For example, since the creation of the NESS, Canada's transportation infrastructure Canada has



improved, making it easier to meet the same target delivery deadline of 24 hours with fewer warehouses.

The NESS inventory is periodically audited and new supplies are purchased regularly. In January 2020, the Public Health Agency of Canada began to monitor the coronavirus disease outbreak in China, assess the NESS inventory, and purchase the supplies required to be able to respond in the event of an outbreak in Canada.

Q3. How much PPE has been disposed of from the three NESS warehouses?

Officials in charge of the NESS review the inventory regularly. When a warehouse is closed, the material that can be used is sent to other warehouses, and perishable items are disposed of in accordance with the Treasury Board *Directive on Disposal of Surplus Material*. As an example, perishable items such as gloves, face screens, bandages, and survival biscuits, were disposed of in 2018. The following year, about 2 million expired masks and 440,000 expired gloves were disposed of when the Regina warehouse was closed. These supplies had been purchased in 2009 and dated back more than five years, the use-by period recommended by the manufacturer.

Although the World Health Organization allows for donations of PPE, the equipment must be guaranteed by the manufacturer for at least two years. Therefore, it must be donated two years before its expiry date.

The PHAC follows strict guidelines when it disposes of material. If it is unable to guarantee the quality of the material it does not send it. Even though Health Canada guidelines allow shipment of some expired PPE while the current COVID-19 pandemic rages, the PHAC carefully reviews all expired equipment, according to the manufacturer's instructions.

Q4. Does the NESS comply with the PPE guidelines contained in the Canadian Pandemic Influenza Plan?

The Canadian Pandemic Influenza Plan is a federal, provincial, and territorial guidance document intended for the health sector that aims to help authorities with their emergency planning.

According to the 2006 Plan, the plans must guarantee an ongoing flow of supplies for influenza and other infections for a period of 16 weeks (or two pandemic waves) to remedy sporadic interruptions in supply chains (such as interruptions in postal and courier services, border closures, and supply limitations).

According to the latest version, which dates back to 2011, the availability of PPE should be reviewed during pandemic planning, and building up stockpiles should be considered.

The provincial and territorial governments are responsible for supplying the required drugs, supplies and equipment for the delivery of pandemic healthcare services.



The NESS is intended to supply goods during health emergencies when provincial, territorial, and local resources are exhausted. Its PPE inventory has always been relatively low.