

TRANSCRIPT

SELECT COMMITTEE ON VICTORIA'S RECREATIONAL NATIVE BIRD HUNTING ARRANGEMENTS

Inquiry into Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements

Melbourne – Monday 3 July 2023

MEMBERS

Ryan Batchelor – Chair

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Jeff Bourman

Katherine Copsey

Bev McArthur

Evan Mulholland

Georgie Purcell

Sheena Watt

WITNESSES

Ms Carolyn Jackson, Deputy Secretary, Environment, Climate Action and First Peoples,

Mr James Todd, Chief Biodiversity Officer,

Ms Sarah-Jane McCormack, Acting Deputy Secretary, Agriculture Victoria, and

Mr Trevor Pisciotta, Executive Director, Agriculture Victoria, Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action.

The CHAIR: Thank you, officials from the department of environment, energy and climate action, as it now is. Is that right, or is it the other way around?

Carolyn JACKSON: No. Energy.

The CHAIR: Energy, environment and climate action. I will get in trouble with the energy minister for getting that wrong – that is okay.

Sheena WATT: It is the tags.

The CHAIR: It is the tags' fault. It is correct in my notes.

All evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing, and transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

For the Hansard record, could you each please state your name and any organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Carolyn JACKSON: I will go first. I am Carolyn Jackson. I am the Deputy Secretary of Environment, Climate Action and First Peoples with the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action.

James TODD: James Todd. Chief Biodiversity Officer in DEECA.

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: Sarah-Jane McCormack. I am normally executive director responsible for agriculture policy and programs, but today I am Acting Deputy Secretary for Agriculture Victoria.

Trevor PISCIOTTA: And I am Trevor Pisciotta. I am the Executive Director of Animal Welfare Victoria and Agriculture Regulatory Policy in Agriculture Victoria at DEECA.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. I might invite you to make your opening statement, and then when all the members of the committee are here we will introduce ourselves.

Carolyn JACKSON: Excellent. All right. I am going to start. I would like to start by acknowledging that it is NAIDOC Week this week and pay my respects to elders past and present. We are on Wurundjeri country, and I would like to acknowledge those elders and also any traditional owners in the room this afternoon.

Visual presentation.

Carolyn JACKSON: I will start our presentation off. I will go straight to the next slide if that is okay, please. I will talk very briefly about the legislative and regulatory framework as well as ministerial and DEECA responsibilities. Apologies if you have heard this already – I know you have been meeting for some time – but I will be pretty quick. As per the slide, game bird hunting is permitted in Victoria under section 22A of the *Wildlife Act*, and a game licence is required from the Game Management Authority to hunt game birds. The

regulation of native bird hunting and the default hunting season arrangements are prescribed in the *Wildlife (Game) Regulations 2012*, and state game reserves are managed under the *Wildlife (State Game Reserves) Regulations 2014*.

In terms of ministerial responsibilities, since last year's state election the Minister for Outdoor Recreation, the Minister for Environment and the Minister for Agriculture have joint responsibility for the management of game under the *Wildlife Act* and the corresponding regulations.

In terms of the department, DEECA, we have a support role in the management of native bird hunting, and we are responsible for a range of things. I will give some examples, and they will not be necessarily exhaustive: providing policy advice to the Minister for Environment and the Minister for Agriculture regarding duck season, including briefings and the preparation of legal notices. We coordinate and undertake, along with the GMA, the priority waterbird count, which provides data on the presence of threatened species and breeding waterbirds to inform the closure of any wetlands during the season or the further regulation of hunting. We provide advice in relation to Crown land policy and legislation, maintain online spatial maps which identify where hunting is permitted and provide policy advice as needed in relation to the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986* and the two codes of practice for the welfare of animals in hunting. We provide authorised officers to assist the GMA in compliance during duck season and investigating allegations of unlawful control or killing ducks outside of duck season. It should be noted that the GMA does lead compliance activities during duck season. We also, through the Arthur Rylah Institute, who you heard from a week or so ago, undertake research in relation to native bird hunting management, and that research is usually commissioned by the GMA.

Next slide, thank you. In terms of season arrangements for duck hunting, the default season arrangements are prescribed in the *Wildlife (Game) Regulations 2012*. A standard season runs from the third Saturday in March until the second Monday of June each year. There is a prescribed daily bag limit of 10 game ducks per hunter, including no more than two blue-winged shoveler, and hunting can start 30 minutes before sunrise and closes 30 minutes after sunset. That is the standard season. But the season arrangements can be amended by the three ministers by way of legal notice issued under the *Wildlife Act*, and changes to the standard season arrangements are generally recommended by the GMA board to the Minister for Outdoor Recreation.

In December every year the GMA asks that DEECA and DJSIR – I should say that is the jobs, skills, industry and regions department – review the results of the interim duck harvest management model, which provides a recommendation on an appropriate bag limit for game ducks based on the available data. We also consider data from the eastern Australia waterfowl survey; climate, pasture conditions, run-off and water storage levels; the New South Wales annual waterfowl quotas; South Australia's duck season considerations data; the previous season's Victorian harvest surveys; and the Victorian game duck abundance survey data, if it is available. The GMA board will then write to the Minister for Outdoor Recreation with its advice for the upcoming season and make recommendations for any changes required and will provide a copy to DEECA so that we can brief the Minister for Environment and the Minister for Agriculture. Changes to the season arrangements are enacted through gazettal of a legal notice issued under the *Wildlife Act* that must be approved by all three ministers, and that notice will be accompanied by a brief providing advice on why the proposed season arrangements are appropriate.

Next slide, thank you. Duck hunting can take place on both public and private land. On public land the land classification determines whether duck hunting is a permitted activity. On private land, duck hunting can occur with the approval of the landholder. However, under the *Wildlife Act* we have the ability to close any wetlands to duck hunting temporarily for up to 12 months via gazettal of a legal notice under section 86 or 86A of the *Wildlife Act*. The annual priority waterbird count and threatened species observations made during the season inform these decisions.

The annual priority waterbird count is conducted by ARI and regional DEECA and GMA staff in the lead-up to the duck-hunting season. Its purpose is to identify wetlands holding significant numbers of threatened species or breeding waterbird colonies. GMA, DEECA and DJSIR consider the priority waterbird count report and make recommendations to the three ministers about wetlands that should be closed to duck hunting or additional conditions to be applied – for example, banning the use of boats to provide refuge for threatened species. The agencies use the *Assessing Waterbird Susceptibility to Disturbance by Duck Hunters in Victoria* report, which was prepared by ARI to assist in deciding whether a wetland should be closed to duck hunting.

This waterbird susceptibility to disturbance report outlines threshold levels for each species – in other words, what constitutes a significant number of each threatened species at any given wetland. If the number of a species present at a wetland has met or exceeded the threshold, the agencies will then consider whether a closure or other management action is needed at that wetland to prevent disturbance to that species.

The GMA will then usually write to the Minister for Outdoor Recreation recommending any closures or the further regulation of hunting to protect threatened species. We are provided a copy of that so that we can brief the environment and agriculture ministers. The ministers are required to approve and sign the legal notice under the *Wildlife Act* to enact the wetland closures or further regulation of hunting to protect threatened species or breeding waterbirds. Closures typically extend to the length of the season, although sometimes wetlands are reopened during the season if the reason for closure no longer exists – for example, if the threatened species has moved on. Reopening a closed wetland requires another legal notice to be signed by the ministers.

Third-party reports about the presence of significant numbers of threatened species or large colonies of breeding waterbirds are often also received just prior to and during duck season, which require the on-ground verification of a government agency, which is typically the GMA or DEECA, and advice from the GMA to the ministers.

Next slide, please. Quickly, stubble quail is the only native quail species that can be hunted in Victoria, and the default hunting season arrangements are prescribed in the *Wildlife (Game) Regulations*. The season runs from 1 April to 30 June each year, with a daily bag limit of 20 stubble quail, and lead shot can be used, unlike for duck hunting. Stubble quail hunting occurs predominantly on private land with the permission of the landholder but can also occur at 16 state game reserves. We have had little involvement in the regulation of the stubble quail hunting season, because a need has not been identified to modify the prescribed season arrangements since the regulations were made in 2012. However, ARI has been engaged by the GMA in the last two years to analyse field data and prepare a report on stubble quail abundance and distribution. For the 2022 and 23 seasons the GMA recommended a prohibition on the use of electronic quail callers due to the risk that their use could lead to overharvesting, and the minister has approved the ban, which was effected via gazettal of a legal notice under the *Wildlife Act*. This year ministers also decided to modify the season arrangements by shortening the season. It commenced on 26 April and ended on 30 May.

I will hand over to my colleague Sarah-Jane to talk from an animal welfare perspective.

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: I think Trevor actually can answer better.

Trevor PISCIOTTA: Thanks. Animal welfare in relation to native bird hunting is primarily regulated under the *Wildlife (Game) Regulations*. The regulations include provisions to protect animals from wounding or prolonged pain and suffering. In particular the regulations provide that a person must not use toxic shot to hunt, take or destroy ducks, that a person who takes game which is alive when recovered must immediately kill that game and that a person who hunts, takes or destroys a game bird must make all reasonable efforts to recover the downed bird. The *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act*, or POCTA, does not apply to activities carried out in accordance with the *Wildlife Act* and its regulations. However, where an activity is not undertaken in compliance with that regulatory scheme and where that results in cruelty to an animal, action may be taken under POCTA. Section 9 of POCTA outlines the relevant cruelty offences, including that pending an investigation, a person who wounds an animal or causes unreasonable pain and suffering may be found guilty of an animal cruelty offence, and that penalties for that offence are up to approximately \$48,000 or 12 months imprisonment.

GMA is the primary regulator for animal welfare-related compliance and enforcement for native game birds, and GMA-authorized officers are authorized under POCTA to investigate animal welfare matters and enforce animal cruelty provisions related to duck hunting, including wounding, as well as being authorized to enforce the relevant provisions of the *Wildlife Act* and its regulations. Thanks, Carolyn.

Carolyn JACKSON: Thanks, Trevor. That is the end of our presentation. We do have some contact details up there, if there are questions that you have following this hearing for James Todd, who is to my right, from a biodiversity perspective, and Trevor, to my left, in relation to animal welfare. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. I might ask members of the committee to introduce themselves.

Bev McARTHUR: Bev McArthur, Western Victoria Region.

Jeff BOURMAN: Jeff Bourman, Eastern Victoria Region.

Michael GALEA: Michael Galea, South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

Sheena WATT: Sheena Watt, Northern Metropolitan.

Georgie PURCELL: Georgie Purcell, Northern Victoria Region.

Katherine COPSEY: Katherine Copsey, Southern Metro Region.

The CHAIR: I am Ryan Batchelor, Southern Metro, and Chair of this committee. I am going to kick off.

We have had a few of your colleagues advise us 'That is a matter for DEECA,' so these questions might get a little bit disjointed as we kind of Hoover up the questions for you. My sense is that they broadly fit into categories of land and land use designations, some of the environmental science/biodiversity ones, and then animal welfare/agricultural practices, just to give you a sense of the range.

I might start with the 20,000-hectare question. I tried to ask GMA – and we had it raised in the committee but they have been unable to tell us – how much of Victoria's land is available for the hunting of native birds. Do you have a figure?

James TODD: Yes. Thank you for the question. Obviously hunting can occur on private and public land, but in terms of the public land estate there are approximately 3.5 million hectares of public land where duck hunting is possible, based on the land classification.

The CHAIR: That means it has got water and birds?

James TODD: Then the other bit about that is that the primary locations near waterways cover about 285,000 hectares, including about 75,000 hectares of state game reserves.

The CHAIR: Very useful. Thank you. I might go completely to the other end of the table and talk about agriculture. We have heard a lot over the course of the hearings about practices in New South Wales with respect to particularly rice farmers who require their version of authority-to-control permits to manage native birds, effectively as pests to their crops. Following a briefing at the start of our processes, you told us on notice that there were 132 lethal control notices issued in 2021 and 105 in 2022, mainly for duck. What sorts of crops are most susceptible to disturbance by native birds? And can you give us a bit of an assessment of how successful those programs are at mitigating that risk?

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: I can maybe start with the question about the crops. You have already highlighted rice. It is obviously one of the areas of concern that ducks do cause damage to rice. And the other one that we are also aware of is more localised damage to other crops such as canola or other cereals as well, so more localised is our understanding of the agricultural impacts there.

The CHAIR: Sorry, is there much rice grown? How much rice do we have in Victoria?

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: No, certainly not compared to New South Wales. There is a little bit in the north of the state, but it is pretty limited here in Victoria in terms of rice. In terms of the impact – sorry, the second part of your question, which is around –

The CHAIR: We issue these permits. How effective is that process at controlling the risk that the birds are placing on those crops?

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: Yes. I do not have a lot of data specific to the impact of that. So certainly, as you have already pointed out, there are a number of permits issued, and you have got the numbers there. But in terms of, you know, if they were not there, what the impacts would be, I do not necessarily –

Carolyn JACKSON: Sorry to interrupt. It is probably worth noting it is the conservation regulator, who is not here today, who is responsible for considering and then issuing those permits. So the agriculture team will obviously have an interest because of the industry, but in terms of the permits themselves, it is the Office of the

Conservation Regulator. I am not sure whether they would have data on the efficacy of those. We can certainly take that question on notice and find out for you.

The CHAIR: Can you take that on notice? There are a couple of things I am interested in there. One is the efficacy/whether repeat requests are an indicator of that – so is someone reapplying consistently for the same permit year on year? I am also interested in: of the permits that have been issued, can you provide us with a geographic distribution? So what I am trying to understand is: what role does the authority to control currently play, and how effective is it in dealing with the issues? The other sort of related question is the compliance that occurs on that activity. The GMA told us that it was not them who regulate it, so I assume that is the conservation regulator.

Carolyn JACKSON: Correct.

James TODD: Yes.

The CHAIR: And maybe if you have got a briefing, you can provide us on notice with an overview of what it is that the conservation regulator looks for and is concerned about. I suppose the other part of that question – sorry to just land it all on you, but this is how this goes – is how that interacts with the protections that we try and do for the presence of threatened species. Have you got any views on that particular aspect of it?

Carolyn JACKSON: I will hand to James in a second. But in terms of the conservation regulator, during duck season the GMA is the lead compliance agency and outside of that it is the conservation regulator. So with ducks, like lots of other animals, if there are issues of non-compliance or reports of illegal behaviour, the conservation regulator will investigate those kinds of allegations. And there certainly have been many instances of people being taken to court and legal proceedings as a result. So we can certainly get some advice to you about the permits and efficacy and other sorts of compliance activities that are undertaken.

The CHAIR: And do the same restrictions on things like shot that apply for game apply for the authority-to-control permits? Lead shot, for example, is banned for recreational hunting of game. In duck –

Carolyn JACKSON: I will take it on notice for you. I am not sure.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

James TODD: I guess one thing I would say is that all wildlife are protected under the *Wildlife Act*, but there are times when landowners apply to control wildlife because of impacts on their operations or there might be safety concerns. In the first instance non-lethal controls are always the first port of call, the first step, but obviously there are authorities to control wildlife which are lethal, and some of those relate to game birds where they are having an impact on cropping or rice or whatever it might be. I think it is probably worth noting that that method is only there to control those localised impacts. Obviously in lots of cases we are talking about black duck and maned duck, which are probably the two most common species that have authorised permits to control them. There are large populations of these things, and they are highly mobile. So it is about controlling the impact of those species at a particular time of year, which is relevant to the damage they are creating.

The CHAIR: Yes, that is right, and that is why any sort of more granular data would help us understand how that sits in the landscape.

Carolyn JACKSON: Sure.

The CHAIR: Mr Bourman.

Jeff BOURMAN: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for your presentation. I am going to head down the cultural heritage path for a short time. We have heard a lot about cultural heritage sites for traditional owners and what can be done to better protect them. Education is of course critical, but I am aware from some of the traditional owners that we have heard from – and I stress this is not related to hunting – that there is a reticence to signpost or highlight specific sites because there is a fear amongst some traditional owner groups that there is an element of the community, and again I stress it is not hunters, that could intentionally vandalise those assets if they knew about them. As a land manager, how are you working with traditional owners to balance and manage what is obviously a very complex situation?

Carolyn JACKSON: Thank you for the question. In terms of working with traditional owners, I am not aware of any particular instances of what you have talked about in terms of traditional owners being reluctant to identify sites. I am not saying that that has not happened, I am just not aware of any. We certainly have close working relationships with a number of traditional owners on a range of things. With the public land estate we are always working with traditional owners to try and reform the way things are done, and that is certainly with a lens of self-determination on it. As I said, I am not aware of any particular issues around the identification of sites. Where there are sites that have been identified, we certainly work with traditional owners. There are a range of programs that the department runs that are working with traditional owners to undertake a range of works, whether that is revegetation or other types of things. I think we have got a pretty good relationship with traditional owners.

Jeff BOURMAN: I mean, one of the things that has come up – and I will circle back to hunting areas – is that a lot of damage is done I think by ignorance – people having a fire on an old mound, which they would not otherwise know is a traditional site. Is there anything being done to help identify that and educate people so that the damage is minimised if not removed?

Carolyn JACKSON: Thank you. I think it is probably worth noting that there is obviously the *Aboriginal Heritage Act*, which provides for the protection of Aboriginal cultural heritage in Victoria. That Act does include a range of enforcement provisions to provide better protection for Aboriginal cultural heritage in Victoria, and that includes substantial penalties to provide an effective deterrent against harming Aboriginal cultural heritage. The Aboriginal cultural heritage Act is one that is overseen by that Minister for Treaty and First Peoples, and so at the moment she does appoint authorised officers and Aboriginal heritage officers who are responsible for working with cultural heritage and undertaking heritage permits and reports of harm to Aboriginal cultural heritage. That team does sit within the Department of Premier and Cabinet now. In terms of what we do in the environment department, we work with traditional owners, but that enforcement and compliance side sits with another department.

Jeff BOURMAN: I was thinking more about prevention than enforcement. Particularly when it comes to historical artefacts, the best form of cure is definitely prevention. Anyway, I have got limited time, so I will move on. A question was asked of DJSIR about recreation activities that have an element of exclusive use. Obviously for three months of the year in a full season you cannot go in certain areas when there is duck hunting going on. I think as land managers you guys are probably better to answer this. I can think of a few. Ouyen Lake has an exclusion zone for all activities except wakeboarding. An area of the Goulburn River restricts boating in favour of swimming. Areas of Western Port Bay and Port Phillip Bay have exclusive use zones for boating and kiteboarding. Can you provide the committee with a list of outdoor activities other than duck hunting where licenced users are routinely interfered with by protesters acting illegally in those excluded areas?

Carolyn JACKSON: Thank you for the question. I acknowledge and I agree that there are a range of uses and users of public land across the state. I am not sure that we would have that kind of information. We obviously are a public land manager or oversee all of the public land, but I would expect that if there are issues of protesters or whatever it might be, that that would be something that would be raised with Victoria Police.

Jeff BOURMAN: Who we get to talk to next.

Carolyn JACKSON: You do.

Jeff BOURMAN: Thank you. Victoria has 12 Ramsar sites, including the western shoreline of Port Phillip Bay and the Bellarine Peninsula, along with more pristine examples like Lake Connemara. We are talking about industrial areas like North Shore, Avalon airfield and Point Cook. The word 'Ramsar' gets bandied around as if it is some sort of magic word that should stop hunting in its tracks, which we know is not right, because wise use of resources is a key principle of Ramsar and all sorts of uses – some more disruptive than hunting – occur in our Ramsar sites all the time. In 2016 the Auditor-General delivered a report to the Parliament on how Victoria was doing in meeting its obligations to protect Ramsar wetlands. This report was not critical of any one department – sorry for the long question – rather it highlighted how poorly the royal we are doing as a government and as a state in meeting our obligations. The Auditor-General noted that:

Overall, the governance, coordination and oversight of the management of Ramsar sites must improve for Victoria to effectively meet its obligations under the Ramsar Convention.

Are you able to tell us what improvements have been made to the management of Ramsar wetlands since 2016?

Carolyn JACKSON: That is not something that I have got information on for today, so it will be something I will take on notice.

Jeff BOURMAN: Yes. Thanks. Okay, I have got a little bit of time, a minute – I will see if I can get through: 2016 must have been the year for audits. In that year the GMA conducted an audit of 191 state game reserves. The one big improvement that I know of has been with the signage under the first sustainable hunting action plan – there was a great increase in signage. Probably the most concerning part of the audit was that 157 of the state game reserves, so that is 79 per cent of them, are within areas of cultural significance, but the specific site types, locations and conditions were unable to be audited due to unavailable, fragmented and incomplete databases. We heard from witnesses last week that heritage sites are being overlooked and potentially threatened simply because visitors have no way of knowing where they are and what they are. Can you tell the committee what has been done since 2016 to improve the access to our 199 state game reserves, and what has been specifically done to manage those cultural heritage sites? Even though I think the second part of the answer we already covered.

Carolyn JACKSON: I think I will take that on notice as well.

Jeff BOURMAN: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Time is up, Mr Bourman. Ms Purcell.

Georgie PURCELL: Thanks, Chair. And thank you very much for appearing today. I want to talk about the ARI report. We obviously had Arthur Rylah in on an evening a few weeks ago. DEECA funded the 2022 review of that report on disturbance to waterbirds caused by duck shooting, and the trigger level in that report is the most contentious part, as it is a very high barrier sufficient to qualify a wetland for Ramsar status. How was that trigger level set?

James TODD: I can take that one. So I think you heard from the ARI scientists last week about how that was done. They used the 1 per cent of the estimated population across south-east Australia to set those trigger levels.

Georgie PURCELL: And do you believe that in some circumstances that is quite high?

James TODD: I think it is adequate.

Georgie PURCELL: Some of the witnesses for ARI acknowledged that it is a very high threshold to be met, in some circumstances. But you believe it is adequate to protect threatened species?

James TODD: We take the advice from ARI. They led the production of that report, so that is the advice we take from it, yes.

Georgie PURCELL: Yes, okay. They acknowledged that it was quite high. I want to ask Trevor: you mentioned the application of the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act* in your presentation. Have any duck shooters ever been charged under POCTA?

Trevor PISCIOTTA: Thanks for the question. Because the compliance and enforcement of POCTA in relation to duck hunting is led by GMA, I am afraid I do not have that information. GMA would have any information around any kind of infringements or prosecution that they led. So I do not have any information today, I am sorry.

Georgie PURCELL: We have heard from the Game Management Authority in the past that it is near impossible to prosecute under POCTA due to exemptions that exist within all the regulations and legislation that duck shooting operates under. Would you say that that is the case?

Trevor PISCIOTTA: There are certainly exceptions under POCTA for activities conducted consistent with other statutory framework. In this case if you are undertaking duck hunting consistent with the *Wildlife Act* and regulations, you are exempted from POCTA. In addition to that, if it was able to be demonstrated that an

activity was not in compliance with that framework, say it was outside of the authorised duck-hunting season or in some other way not consistent with that regulatory framework, I am not aware of the specific barriers that GMA might be referring to in relation to pursuing prosecution under POCTA. Obviously POCTA is a relatively old piece of legislation. There is a proposal, obviously, for a new animal care and protection Bill, the exposure draft of which will be released before the end of the calendar year. There is a view to improve some of those provisions, but I am not aware of the specific issues that GMA might be referring to.

Georgie PURCELL: Correct me if I am wrong, but it sounds like you just said that essentially POCTA does not apply.

Trevor PISCIOTTA: POCTA does not apply to activities conducted under the *Wildlife Act* and regulations.

Georgie PURCELL: Okay.

Trevor PISCIOTTA: This is a similar approach that is taken to a range of activities undertaken under other statutes.

Georgie PURCELL: Yes, thank you. I just wanted to clarify because I do feel like it is slightly misleading to have that in the presentation at the start when it does not apply to native bird shooting, but we will move on from that. I am interested to know – we have spoken a bit about private property today, and obviously DEECA has a big hand in wetland closures – what you do in the instance where there are threatened species on a private property.

James TODD: As I think you have heard, we undertake the priority waterbird count prior to the season, and that may lead to the closure of certain wetlands during the season. Then there are emergency closures as well that occur, and I think you have heard about those. Obviously in relation to private land, access is an issue in terms of being able to observe threatened species that might be on those. Where we get information about a private wetland, we would certainly be approaching the landowner about the possibility of, first of all, assessing the wetland for the presence of threatened species and obviously then talking to them about their intentions in terms of whether they are going to allow hunting on their private wetland. I am not aware of that happening routinely, I must say.

Georgie PURCELL: But you rely on tip-offs from the public? There is no active counting on private land?

James TODD: No.

Georgie PURCELL: Okay.

James TODD: But I should say also that of course in terms of the regulations if there is hunting on private land and threatened species are accidentally or deliberately shot, then obviously it is a matter for the conservation regulator potentially to investigate outside of the duck season, which would be the GMA's responsibility.

Georgie PURCELL: Thank you. I just wanted to talk about lead shot, which is obviously not allowed for ducks but is allowed for quail. A recent study by Melbourne University found that 81 per cent of quail carcasses had had an average of 1.6 pellets embedded in them, and shooters tell us that they take them home to feed their families. Obviously lead is not just an environmental risk, it is a health risk as well. Does DEECA put out any warnings concerning the use of lead shot for quail and the impacts that it could have, and if not, why not?

James TODD: We do not. The issue of whether lead shot can be used for quail hunting is really a matter for DJSIR and the GMA.

Georgie PURCELL: Okay. Thank you. Can you please just walk us through the process for responding to requests from the public for the closure of wetlands on the basis of resident safety or amenity or also on sighted protected species?

James TODD: Do you want the answer to both of those?

Georgie PURCELL: Yes. And from members of the public, I guess a bit of feedback my office regularly gets is that often ordinary members of the public have trouble getting that information through and actioned.

James TODD: I will deal with the threatened species first. Both DEECA and the GMA would routinely get information about the alleged presence of threatened species in a particular wetland. That would then result in an investigation. So GMA and DEECA would send out officers to look at that wetland, and if the presence of threatened species meets one of those triggers that we referred to before or is close to one of those triggers, there may be a recommendation put forward to close. In terms of the second –

Georgie PURCELL: Public safety and amenity.

James TODD: Public safety? Well, that is really a matter for the police in terms of if it is an issue around firearms –

Georgie PURCELL: The police refer us to you. But go on.

James TODD: Okay. Well, in terms of what is permissible on public land and whether shooting is permissible on public land, to change that would require a change to the regulations. That happens infrequently. Obviously if it is investigated, it is done in combination with the other agencies and with VicPol. I am not aware of when that has happened recently – in any recent history.

Georgie PURCELL: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thanks, Chair. Good afternoon. Thank you all for joining us. In response to the Chair's questions there was a discussion about pest control with native birds. Ms McCormack, if I can ask you, you did mention briefly localised issues with canola. Could you please expand on those issues? How widespread or localised are the issues?

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: Yes. Do you mean in terms of what I mean when I say 'localised'?

Michael GALEA: Yes.

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: Yes. So it is more around crops that might be located around a dam or some other water where ducks are there. That is what I was meaning by saying 'localised'. It is localised in that area close to a dam or the water.

Michael GALEA: So we are talking very small scale – proximity to a dam, not a region or anything. Thank you.

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: That is right. That is our understanding.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. And Mr Pisciotta – I hope I am pronouncing that correctly – I did have some questions surrounding POCTA as well. I am just trying to establish this for the application and where it does and does not apply. You said that is a question for the GMA, but you are not aware of any prosecutions. What are the circumstances in which a native bird hunter would fall foul of the POCTA Act? For example, if they were to windmill a duck, would that be an offence under POCTA?

Trevor PISCIOTTA: Sorry, I missed –

Michael GALEA: If they were to windmill a duck, which is a process of –

Jeff BOURMAN: Cervical dislocation.

Michael GALEA: Yes.

Trevor PISCIOTTA: Thank you for the question. In general, section 6 of POCTA sets out the circumstances under which the Act does not apply, and the circumstances are limited to specified activities conducted in accordance with specific Acts or codes of practice under POCTA as well as the humane slaughter of a farm animal or the treatment of animals by veterinary practitioners. The *Wildlife Act* and its regulations is

one of the Acts named under that section. The general principle is that with activities that are done in accordance with the *Wildlife Act* and its regulations, animal welfare is dealt with through that Act and its regulations, and POCTA does not apply.

The question of what constitutes non-compliance with that regulatory scheme and where the boundaries are – I am not trying to at all avoid the question, but it is probably a matter for the Game Management Authority because they enforce those regulations. But they also have the power to enforce POCTA. They are authorised officers under POCTA, and so if they were to determine that a particular activity was not compliant with the *Wildlife Act* and its regulations, they could then investigate and determine whether to take regulatory action under POCTA.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. So to clarify, a breach of, for example, the *Wildlife Act* could also constitute a breach of POCTA.

Trevor PISCIOTTA: I would say a breach of the *Wildlife Act* could constitute a breach of POCTA.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. And with the ongoing review of the animal welfare laws, does the department have a view as to the inclusion or not of native bird hunting as part of this?

Trevor PISCIOTTA: I would say generally, obviously, the final form of the animal care and protection Bill will be a matter for government, and ultimately, for the Parliament. But certainly it is proposed – and I think this was set out in the plan for animal care and protection that was consulted on late last year – that the new legislation will continue to try to strike the balance between furthering animal welfare while continuing to allow for lawful activities involving the use of animals. So I would expect that that would include some provision to allow for continued hunting, where that is regulated under other Acts. The exact kind of legislative mechanisms by which that is done – whether that is identical to POCTA or slightly different – I think is still to be worked through, but I would expect to see some similar mechanism that allows for lawful activities to continue.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Ms Jackson, perhaps – or you can pass it on to someone else – in terms of resourcing, what resources does DEECA invest in, I guess, bird hunting as a whole, whether that is abundance surveys, and you mentioned the sort of semi compliance role before too. From the whole scheme of it, what is the extent of DEECA's involvement in manpower and advice?

Carolyn JACKSON: Yes. Thank you. I might talk to it at a high level. I do not have the exact dollar figure, for example, for everything but I can certainly talk about it. The Arthur Rylah Institute, which you have heard from, are part of the department, so they do undertake a range of surveys and studies and research into native birds. We have also got the policy function, which sits in the biodiversity division – so in terms of briefing the minister to do an emergency closure, for example, that sits with us. Also from the Office of the Conservation Regulator – so not in my team but part of the department – we do have authorised officers who are available for the GMA, to assist with compliance activities as required. Then out of duck season they obviously undertake compliance and enforcement and monitoring activities. So we have kind of got a range of different activities that occur within my area but also then the Office of the Conservation Regulator. James, did you want to add anything?

James TODD: I can probably give a bit more specificity. I think as you heard from the Arthur Rylah Institute, they are commissioned to coordinate the priority waterbird counts prior to the season and those surveys, analyse the data and draft the report. That is approximately \$30,000 per annum for that. The other cost of GMA staff and DEECA staff involved in those assessments is just absorbed within the departmental and agency cost. Then the other bit that Carolyn refers to is the conservation regulator. The costs to the conservation regulator vary from year to year, but in 2021–22 the cost incurred by the conservation regulator to assist the GMA with compliance activities was \$19,800, which they charged back to the GMA.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. If I can just finally ask: I understand there was a 2022 memorandum of understanding involving the GMA and DELWP in relation to the counting of all the priority wetlands, and my understanding is that DELWP had half of the responsibility of that. Can you tell me how many hours were involved in that project?

James TODD: I do not have that information in front of me.

Michael GALEA: Can I get that on notice?

Carolyn JACKSON: Was that hours?

Michael GALEA: Yes.

Carolyn JACKSON: We can try and get something on notice for you, if that would assist.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

The CHAIR: When we asked Arthur Rylah how much the abundance surveys cost, they said 'Not much,' because they just do the data analysis; someone else does the counting.

James TODD: Yes.

The CHAIR: So we are trying to find out –

Carolyn JACKSON: The full picture.

The CHAIR: how much it costs to count the birds that is used to inform policy decisions. If you are able to tell us from your perspective, whether that is an approximation of FTE costs or third-party contractors that you may engage. Apparently someone has a helicopter. I do not know if it is you or the GMA that does that. That is what we are trying to get to. We do a lot to support the scientific understanding of bird populations to support sustainable hunting. How much does that cost the Victorian government and the Victorian taxpayer?

James TODD: I can say that there are a few elements to that. I think you heard from ARI about the statewide surveys, which I think are the helicopter surveys you were referring to. We can pull information together on that plus the amount of time that goes into the priority wetland counts.

The CHAIR: Because presumably DEECA staff now, if they were not counting birds, would be doing something else. There is a resource allocation question there, that 'we are prioritising here for a particular reason', that might be available for other purposes.

James TODD: That is right.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you. This morning the GMA chair advised us that the authority does not have any land management responsibilities. It seems a bit at odds with there being around 200 state game reserves. Just as Parks Victoria has land management responsibilities for a lot of land that sits under DEECA, wouldn't it make sense for the GMA to manage state game reserves and for the fishing authority to manage fishing access points?

James TODD: I guess what I would say is that state game reserves are open to hunting during a specific period of time. For the rest of the time they are managed for other objectives, including their conservation values, their recreation values et cetera, so those routinely come under the auspices of the relevant land manager.

Bev McARTHUR: If we were to end duck hunting – and we have heard a lot about the millions of voluntary man-hours that go into supporting wetland areas like Connemara and Heart Morass and so on – is your department in a position to pick up the slack when all those volunteers disappear? Are you going to continue maintaining wetlands?

Carolyn JACKSON: We have an annual budget and an ongoing budget allocation for a range of activities, and we obviously have a number of committees of management that have a number of volunteers that undertake land management or oversight of land across the public land estate – so scout halls, community halls and those kinds of things. If those kinds of committees of management were returned to us – or other sites – and assuming that there was not someone else to take ownership or no other interested party, we would make sure that we were overseeing those and maintaining those within the allocation that we have got.

Bev McARTHUR: Okay. How much money have you put into Winton, and what are the outcomes there?

Carolyn JACKSON: I do not have that level of detail.

Bev McARTHUR: Will you take it on notice?

Carolyn JACKSON: I am happy to take Winton on notice.

Bev McARTHUR: Great. Now, isn't it the case that duck hunting is permitted on certain Victorian Ramsar-listed wetlands but not others?

Carolyn JACKSON: I am not sure about that. I will have to hand over to James, sorry.

James TODD: Sorry, the question again?

Bev McARTHUR: Isn't it the case that duck hunting is permitted on certain Ramsar sites but not others?

James TODD: I actually do not know the answer to that, the specificity.

Bev McARTHUR: I can tell you it is.

James TODD: Okay.

Bev McARTHUR: Given that there is hunting on certain Ramsar sites but not others, what sort of robust and measurable impact is there on the effect of how the health of the wetlands differs from one site to another? Surely you would be assessing where there is no hunting on wetlands and where there is hunting.

Carolyn JACKSON: I am not aware of any work that has been undertaken. That is not to say it does not occur, but I am not aware of any work. So I can follow that up for you too.

Bev McARTHUR: Thanks awfully. The *Barmah Strategic Action Plan* expired at the end of June this year and has not, apparently, been replaced. Has the evaluation of the *Barmah Strategic Action Plan* been started, concluded and evaluated so that we can establish as to whether the moira grass in the Barmah wetlands has recovered?

Carolyn JACKSON: I will take that on notice also.

Bev McARTHUR: Now, you mentioned the conservation regulator – you mentioned this – and that in many instances people have been taken to court. Can you give us that detail?

Carolyn JACKSON: I am not from the Office of the Conservation Regulator. I am happy to pass that question on to Kate Gavens and the team for a response.

Bev McARTHUR: Good. So your department is responsible for the management and funding at Winton?

Carolyn JACKSON: I assume so, but I am not aware of any particular level of detail for Winton.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, who is responsible for Winton?

Carolyn JACKSON: I would assume it would be us.

Bev McARTHUR: Great.

Carolyn JACKSON: Yes. I just do not have that level of detail in terms of how much we spend at Winton, for example.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, you will find it out, that will be good; and its evaluation, of how useful taxpayers money has been in the Winton Wetlands.

Carolyn JACKSON: I can provide a point of clarification, Mrs McArthur. I am happy to find out what level of detail I can provide, but with expenditure we do not necessarily do it by specific location. There might be a natural resource management program, for example, that is run across the state, and there will be a range of outcomes there. I will not necessarily be able to give you a specific cost or expenditure per location.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, how does this work? We have got taxpayers money being invested in a wetland. You think you cannot tell us how much is being invested or whether the money is being well spent – you are confirming that?

Carolyn JACKSON: No, that is not what I am saying, Mrs McArthur. What I am saying is we do have a range of projects, and those projects may occur across different sites. We will definitely be able to tell you how much we are spending on those particular projects, but we do not necessarily account for every single site individually. I am not saying we cannot do outcomes – that is a different question – but in terms of expenditure, we do not. There will be some projects that are targeted to a particular area and we will be able to tell you that is exactly how much we spent, but for other projects that are statewide we capture the expenditure at a project or a region perspective, not necessarily site by site.

Bev McARTHUR: Okay. We have heard a lot about wetland closure processes and how there seems to be a lot of interference in that by politicians. Laurie Levy told us that if he wants a wetland closed, he just rings Ms Purcell here and she gets it done. What involvement does DEECA have in the wetland closure process? And do you have any suggestions for the committee on how it could be done better?

Carolyn JACKSON: I think in terms of the process James articulated earlier, we do receive reports of threatened species from a range of sources. Once we have received that report, we do send staff out to investigate, and they will be GMA and/or DEECA staff. For example, if there was a particular threatened species that was reported on a wetland, staff will go out as quickly as possible and undertake an assessment to confirm whether those threatened species are in fact there or not. If they meet or are close to that trigger level which we talked about before, we then start the process to recommend to ministers that an emergency closure takes place. I cannot comment on where those reports come from, only that we receive a number of them throughout a duck season, and we do look into those and take action as necessary.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs McArthur. Ms Copsey.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. Thank you very much for crunching the numbers on wetlands. We have been looking for that figure throughout the hearing, so it was great to hear it today. I am struck by the scale of the task in trying to determine the location of threatened and endangered species prior to the season each year. What kind of uplift in resources would be needed in order to undertake a thorough examination of the presence of endangered species at wetlands across all of the areas where hunting is commonly practised in Victoria? I know you look at particular locations, but what kind of uplift in resources would be necessary?

Carolyn JACKSON: I do not have that level of detail for you. What I can say is you are right that we do not look at every single wetland as part of the process – I might get the number wrong, so I might have to ask James for the exact number – but we do look at a significant number of wetlands across the state. They are the ones that are the greatest used wetlands, so we are really trying to make sure that those wetlands that are likely to have hunters onsite are assessed prior to the duck season. It is over 100.

James TODD: 135.

Carolyn JACKSON: 135 wetlands are surveyed every year, so it is a significant amount. I do not have a figure for you about what resources would be required to undertake the rest, but it is probably worth noting, as James has talked to, there are wetlands on private land that we cannot necessarily access. So even if we did have additional resources, it is not something that we are currently able to access on a ready basis.

James TODD: I was just going to say the question of resource allocation is obviously a common one for departments. If we were asked, we could certainly come up with a view about the relative benefit of additional resources and how far that would get us from a risk management perspective.

Katherine COPSEY: Yes. I am just curious: what sorts of numbers of hunters present qualify a wetland for that kind of assessment?

James TODD: Sorry, which –

Katherine COPSEY: Hunters being present. If it is the popular –

James TODD: The waterbird assessment, the count.

Katherine COPSEY: Yes.

James TODD: I do not think there is necessarily a magic number. I think what there will tend to be is that there will be well-known areas that are used by hunters and then in combination with that are areas where we think there is the likelihood of threatened species being present.

Katherine COPSEY: How far back do we go to find a season where there were not 86A closures during the season – so for other reasons? Does it happen every year, I guess, is what I am asking?

James TODD: It is very frequent. I cannot really say whether it happens every year. I suspect you might have to go back a fair way. Having said that, because we were in lockdown with COVID, that may have not happened in those years. But obviously there have been previous seasons back in the sort of mid-2000s on the back of the millennial drought where there was not a duck season at all; vis-a-vis there would be no section 86.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. Acknowledging the huge effort that goes into this analysis in preparation for the season, each year we do see examples of non-game and threatened and endangered species harmed and shot whether deliberately or otherwise. Do you think that that is an inevitable part of a duck-shooting season operating?

James TODD: I would say that –

Katherine COPSEY: Do you think we can avoid it?

James TODD: it cannot be avoided where there is hunting on wetlands where threatened species occur. There will always be injuries and there will always be off-target impacts for a range of reasons.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. We have had some evidence from members of the public who, you know, are trying to locate where in their neighbourhood shooting might be taking place. Thank you for providing us the map with all of the permitted areas. What I would note is those community members were looking for a greater level of specificity about where they would be likely to encounter hunters so that they could avoid those areas or at least know ahead of time. Are you able to provide community members with that sort of information?

James TODD: Do you mean beyond what is on –

Katherine COPSEY: Beyond what is on the map and on the online app.

James TODD: I think we would have to take that on notice. I mean, my only comment is that it is not always going to be possible to provide that level of specificity because of some of the licensing arrangements and others that occur on public land, which move through time, essentially. So it is difficult to be able to provide that at that sort of granular scale.

Katherine COPSEY: I ask because those community members have been trying, with limited success I would say, to obtain that information from the GMA, and when the GMA presented to us, they instructed us that it was really a matter for DEECA, as it related to land use. So I noted in the overview of the submission that popular hunting spots was information that the GMA could provide, but I conclude from hearing from both of you now that there is not really anywhere else that residents can go to get that up-to-date information.

James TODD: That information is available online. It is obviously available through apps and the like, but as I said, there is a limit to how granular we can be about that, yes.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. The last question I had was around – well, I think Mr Bourman sort of covered it – the types of land use that exclude the general public. We have also thought of a couple of examples, I guess, during the break, around waterskiing and wakeboarding, and I was thinking of motocross, but I am not really aware of another recreational activity, I would suppose, that shuts off such large areas of public open space to the public. In your experience as land managers, can you think of any other examples that, you know, are of a similar impact on those other uses to native waterbird shooting?

Carolyn JACKSON: No I think is the short answer. As we have talked about, there are a range of other uses. They have probably a smaller impact. But I guess with hunting, while there are a significant number of

sites and land sizes, I guess, where you can go hunting, the use of that land will depend on – a daily, potentially hourly, basis, so there might be instances where sites that are available for duck hunting have no hunters there, or there may be many hunters. I appreciate that that may mean that members of the community do not necessarily go to those areas, but we cannot say that those areas are out of bounds or anything like that for other uses, and whether they are being used by hunters or not will depend on the day.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Sorry, on that point, though, there are listed wetlands where exclusions apply for the general public during the season, aren't there?

Carolyn JACKSON: Yes.

The CHAIR: Ms Watt.

Sheena WATT: Thank you. I am the lucky last one, and I have got a few questions. I will start with the priority waterbird count you mentioned. Is that a public document? What is the status of that actual report with respect to accessibility by the committee?

James TODD: I would have to take that one on notice. I am not actually sure whether that is published each year or not. I can do that.

Sheena WATT: Okay. Yes. The status either way, if we could have that.

Carolyn JACKSON: We will take that on notice.

Sheena WATT: If it is in fact available, if it could be provided, that would be great.

Carolyn JACKSON: Of course.

Sheena WATT: Just on Ramsar, we have had a couple of questions on that. I just want to understand: is hunting on these Ramsar sites consistent with our obligations under the Ramsar convention?

James TODD: I think we would have to take that one on notice as well.

Sheena WATT: Yes, okay. I am very happy. Mr Bourman started his questions around Aboriginal cultural heritage, and I am going to ask some further ones, consistent with a few of our other witnesses today. Starting with the question of the natural resource agreements that have been made under the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act*, I just know that under those settlements there are provisions for hunting rights for traditional owner groups. How many of those have been granted to traditional owner groups, thereby allowing exemptions under the *Wildlife (Game) Regulations*?

Carolyn JACKSON: I will take that on notice. I just want to make sure I give you the right answer, so I will take that on notice.

Sheena WATT: In terms of where the agreements need to be, though, do you have to have a native title determination before being eligible for a natural resource agreement?

Carolyn JACKSON: Sorry. I just missed part of the question, I am sorry, over the cough.

Sheena WATT: Do you have to have a settled native title agreement before being eligible for a natural resource agreement and therefore getting an exemption? Where does it sit in terms of your eligibility as a traditional owner group for an exemption? Do you have to have a native title agreement that has been settled –

James TODD: No.

Sheena WATT: or can you negotiate that before native title has been granted?

James TODD: No. These are under state law?

Sheena WATT: Yes.

James TODD: Under the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act*?

Sheena WATT: Yes.

James TODD: Yes.

Sheena WATT: Yes. Okay. That is actually very helpful. So you will take on notice about how many have indeed been granted those agreements, the natural resource agreements made under –

James TODD: Sorry, just to qualify. Are you interested in the number of natural resource agreements that have been struck?

Sheena WATT: I am interested in, yes, how many agreements but how many traditional owner groups have exemptions to hunt on their lands –

James TODD: Okay.

Sheena WATT: therefore being exempt from other provisions of the *Wildlife (Game) Regulations*. Because we have really only heard evidence from one traditional owner group – recognised traditional owner group – with very strong positions on this, so I am just trying to get an understanding of the broader application of hunting by traditional owner groups.

James TODD: Hunting in general, as opposed to native bird hunting?

Sheena WATT: Native bird hunting.

James TODD: Specifically native bird hunting?

Sheena WATT: And quail – ducks and quail, consistent with the terms of reference of the inquiry. The other one that I wanted to go to was, the GMA had put out a hunter knowledge survey that showed that only 25 per cent of the survey respondents had responded correctly about if they could identify sites of cultural significance when they came across a signposted site. Now, I am really concerned about sites of significant cultural heritage and their protection in our state; what does DEECA understand to be the number of signposted culturally significant sites on state game reserves? You can take that later.

Carolyn JACKSON: I think we will need to take it on notice in terms of the number of signed sites.

Sheena WATT: And are there any works by DEECA, either in partnership with traditional owner groups or through agreements that have already been struck, about extending the number of signs at these sites where hunters camp and hunt to make sure that hunters know that they are traditionally very significant sites? Do you have any plans to extend the number of signs?

Carolyn JACKSON: Yes, we will take that –

Sheena WATT: Are you funding it? Are you doing anything about it? Where can I find out what is happening with that one? Because we did hear evidence about Lake Boort in particular, and some very troubling damage that has been done to some scar trees and some other camping sites and others. The other one is yes, I do understand that there are some traditional owners that have expressed concern about the signage of their sites. Is there also a program about what we do if there is a significant site that is not signposted, yet is damaged? What are the responsibilities and enforcement actions that can be taken?

Carolyn JACKSON: So I think that, to my earlier point, sits with DPC. There is a First Peoples–State Relations team in DPC, and they also look after the authorised officers for cultural heritage disruption and damage. So there are authorised officers, just like we have got them in the conservation regulator, and –

Sheena WATT: Do they work with DEECA?

Carolyn JACKSON: I am sure they do. I am sure they would work with our authorised officers, but that responsibility sits with DPC, and so the enforcement of damage or otherwise would sit with DPC under the *Aboriginal Heritage Act*.

Sheena WATT: What are the structures that exist to hear about reported cultural heritage damage to DEECA, then?

Carolyn JACKSON: So –

Sheena WATT: If damage is done, which we heard is happening, they are not reporting it to the GMA because no-one has gone to the GMA and reported sites of significant damage. The enforcement officers do not sit with you, DJSIR, so how do you know when sites are being damaged? Do you have to hear back from DPC? Are there some sort of formal reporting arrangements for the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action to know when sites are being damaged, and therefore to consider further protection efforts?

Carolyn JACKSON: I will take that on notice, and just confirm for you how it all works.

Sheena WATT: Yes. So I think the points I want to make are that: reporting is not happening, education is not happening, awareness is not happening, and there is clearly a lack of information flow around sites of significant cultural heritage, and this is affecting economic development and traditional owner relationships in our state. That is it for me. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Last question on signs. It struck me when we went out as a committee on the first day of the hearings and also when we went out to Kerang and Koorangie on the last day of the hearings, that there is no – for just random people who might be walking past – actual signage that there is a hunting season underway nor expected dates of it. There is a sign saying there is a state game reserve, and I am not sure how many people understand what that means, because I certainly did not have a full appreciation of that in February. Has the department done any work to scope what better signage there might be at places where hunting is both permitted and also where people are excluded from during certain times of the year?

Carolyn JACKSON: I am not aware of any work that we have done, but I can certainly follow that up and see if there is any particular work happening across the department on signage.

The CHAIR: That would be useful.

James TODD: I know that when there are closures, either pre season or emergency, then there is signage obviously related to those, and there are often compliance officers onsite as well to make sure that people are aware of the requirements. But your question is more broadly –

The CHAIR: On that – I appreciate the difficulty in doing that at short notice – my experience this year was that there was not.

James TODD: For areas that were closed?

The CHAIR: Yes.

James TODD: Okay.

The CHAIR: Areas that I visited on the last day of the season did not have a sign that they were closed to hunting. There were no hunters there, so clearly the information had got out to the hunting community. I am not saying it is a fault at that end. Maybe it does not matter too much in reasonably remote parts of Victoria. But when we have got a state game reserve that is within 600 metres of a Woolworths, which we visited, it does strike me that there is more that could be done to alert people to the uses of particular land in parts of Victoria at particular times of the year. Anyway, I will leave it there. One final question, Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: We are told that birdwatching is going to become a flourishing industry, if it is not already, when duck shooting is potentially banned. Have you done any work on how much you would need to invest in facilities to enhance the birdwatching industry?

James TODD: I would suggest –

Bev McARTHUR: Like the Winton Wetlands.

James TODD: I would suggest that anything that we have done is very preliminary.

Bev McARTHUR: Sorry?

James TODD: Very preliminary in that respect.

Bev McARTHUR: Preliminary. Right.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you very much for your attendance today and your evidence at this hearing, for the prior briefing you gave the committee and for the further work you are going to get to us on notice. We really appreciate that. A transcript of today's hearing will be made available to you shortly for review before it is published on our website.

The committee will adjourn for 5 or so minutes to reset for the next set of witnesses. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.