

# TRANSCRIPT

## SELECT COMMITTEE ON VICTORIA'S RECREATIONAL NATIVE BIRD HUNTING ARRANGEMENTS

### Inquiry into Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements

Melbourne – Thursday 29 June 2023

#### MEMBERS

Ryan Batchelor – Chair

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Jeff Bourman

Katherine Copsey

Bev McArthur

Evan Mulholland

Georgie Purcell

Sheena Watt

**WITNESS**

Mr George Buchhorn.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Buchhorn, welcome. I will just read out this standard statement.

All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the 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 the 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, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

For the Hansard record, can you please state your name –

**George BUCHHORN:** George Buchhorn.

**The CHAIR:** and any organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

**George BUCHHORN:** Well, I am a former manager of compliance with the Game Management Authority.

**The CHAIR:** We will give you an opportunity to make an opening statement of about 5 or so minutes, then the committee will introduce themselves and we will ask you a series of questions. I will just note, given the nature of your submission and your background – I am sure you will appreciate this – we just want to make sure that we focus our matters on items relevant to the terms of reference of this inquiry and preferably refrain from mentioning individuals by name. So with that, I invite you to make an opening statement.

**George BUCHHORN:** Thank you, sir, and thank you to the committee for inviting me to speak to you today. As I just mentioned, I was the manager of game compliance with the Game Management Authority from 1 May 2016 until my resignation in January 2018. My position description that I applied for said that I would be required to regularly undertake law enforcement, investigation and educational functions and work closely with regulated stakeholders. Just by way of background, prior to joining the GMA I had a 35-year career with Victoria Police with the majority of my career being a detective, including eight years with the homicide squad. I held the rank of senior sergeant for the last 14 years whilst I was with the police force, managing various police stations and crime investigation units. For a period of time I was also seconded as an instructor, training detectives and teaching leadership skills. I felt that this role was well suited to my skills.

On joining the GMA I supervised a small team of five senior game officers, who worked regionally and on their own. They had no support, which surprised me. Some of them had a police background, but they all lacked any formal training or substantial investigative background. I conducted a training skills analysis and found a real gap in their knowledge and skills compared to what they were being asked to do.

On starting at the GMA my attention was drawn to a report that the Victorian Auditor-General's Office had conducted in October 2012. It identified a lack of accountability, oversight and reporting. I was tasked with using this report as a guide on improving outcomes within the GMA, but then when I tried to increase the level of reporting accountabilities, I was criticised and stopped. I was told that I was creating too much paperwork and was stopping the senior game officers from doing their jobs. I also wanted to develop working relationships with various protest groups and rescuers, as I saw them as a valuable resource in assisting with enforcement and an invested stakeholder. I felt that if we could develop mutual trust and goodwill, we could work together along the lines of the police and Neighbourhood Watch system. Again I got no support.

I started to see that complaints that were being lodged with the GMA were being routinely dismissed without any effort being made. I also witnessed the turning of a blind eye to cruelty offences. My first real experience of a major operation was the 2017 duck opening at the Koorangie marshes near Kerang. From recollection there were about 2000 hunters there that day and about 60 compliance officers. The operation plan was prepared by one of the senior game officers who had had experience with other duck openings. This was my first. Briefings were conducted and officers deployed around the lake. The shooting unfortunately started early, at about

7:07 am; the correct start time was 7:20 am. The lake was still shrouded in darkness, but there were lots and lots of shots. We were unable to police or enforce the legislation. It was too dark, and there were too many offenders. Laurie Levy, who I have come to know, was present. He had about 40 or more rescuers with him, and they also set up a veterinary tent for injured animals, which I saw as a gap in our planning. We could have arranged that, but we did not.

Following the opening I was tasked with investigating a series of footage that was submitted by Animals Australia. I worked alone and with no support from the GMA. I was aware that prior to me even starting the investigation a report had already been sent to the minister, telling the minister that it was unlikely anyone would be processed. During my investigation I created a spreadsheet and listed a total of 28 individuals captured in the footage. I identified 20 of them. I submitted 12 briefs of evidence to the prosecution services. I recommended that four suspects be charged with cruelty-related offences, one for shooting a protected freckled duck and one for shooting a blue-winged shoveler. There were three further suspects who I had identified that still needed to be questioned at the time of my departure.

During the course of the investigation I was constantly being challenged by the GMA management team. Information was being withheld from me, and information was not being passed on. I was told not to apply for search warrants, and I was asked by the management team why I would be applying for search warrants for some of our lowest level offences. And this was a quote, 'Why are you investigating people who haven't done anything wrong?' I was also told by management that there was no cruelty and that I was not to make any reference to cruelty-related offences and to wrap it up. When I outlined the reasons why I required search warrants, at the first interview the exact scenario that I was concerned about played out. Regarding the cruelty allegations, I sought and found an expert witness, Professor Amir Hadjinoormohammadi. He is the head of avian medicine at Melbourne University. I showed him the footage that Animals Australia had sent me. He viewed that footage with me and said that it was a no-brainer that it was cruelty. He then made a statement, which I attached to those briefs I mentioned earlier.

I also investigated the burial of 185 ducks at the marshes. I was unable to locate the pit. Some months later during the course of an interview with one of my senior game officers, he let slip that the person responsible for burying the 185 ducks was known to the management team at the GMA. This information had been withheld. When I followed this up, I was told that the pit was a different pit, which then raised the question of whether there were two pits. When I asked for more details, such as the location, numbers and species, they became evasive and, despite my questions, stated that as it was not the same pit, it was not pursued any further.

I attempted to provide some innovation to the GMA to improve their outcomes. At the time there were discussions around purchasing boats for the GMA. I had discussions with fisheries Victoria, who were willing to supply the vessels and the coxswains at any time that we required them, but the GMA was determined to have their own boats. I saw this as a waste of money. For the boats that I got quotes for, just to purchase the boats themselves was \$350,000, despite then having to organise storage, equipment, training and servicing et cetera.

I also wanted to introduce some sophisticated surveillance technology. I was in discussions with a company that had a vehicle that had a telescopic mast with a camera that was capable of shooting 5 kilometres. It also had thermal capability that could detect a shot. The idea was that in the darkness the camera would still see where the shot came from and that we could then direct authorised officers to that person. They could then live stream the footage over a phone and show it to the suspect.

I guess in summary: in the time that I was with the GMA, there was no progress made since the damning VAGO report of 2012. The GMA does not have the capability or the capacity to fulfil its compliance and enforcement functions. They repeatedly failed to respond to reports. They were too quick to dismiss any investigation based on identity, yet they did not even attempt to identify a person. The interviews I conducted in 2017, albeit only 20-odd, sent a shock wave through the hunting community. One hunter told me at an interview that I 'must be very busy, as everyone is talking about it'. It raises the point that compliance is not just about enforcement, it is also about effecting culture and behaviour. If the GMA conducted a thorough investigation of people, then people would take notice. I also believe there is significant conflict of interest within the GMA, as you have a hunting regulator managed by passionate hunters – I know for a fact that all my senior game offices were hunters and held permits. Significant bias was held towards protesters and rescuers,

and I myself was actively discouraged from conducting any thorough investigations. Those are the points I wish to raise.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I will ask committee members to introduce themselves.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Bev McArthur, Western Victoria Region.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** Jeff Bourman, Eastern Victoria Region.

**Sheena WATT:** Sheena Watt, Northern Metropolitan Region.

**Georgie PURCELL:** Georgie Purcell, Northern Victoria.

**Katherine COPSEY:** Katherine Copsey, Southern Metropolitan Region.

**The CHAIR:** Ryan Batchelor from the Southern Metropolitan Region and Chair of the committee. Thank you. I will kick things off. Based on your experience, what do you think the most effective compliance activities the GMA should be undertaking?

**George BUCHHORN:** Good question. I guess I went there from an enforcement perspective; that is what tapped into my skills and experience. Unfortunately, given the size of the GMA and the small number of enforcement officers in the whole state of Victoria – and we are not just talking about duck shooting, we are talking about deer and quail – it is just impossible with those sorts of numbers to enforce any sort of regulation.

**The CHAIR:** So you believe that the size of the GMA in its enforcement and compliance and the scale of the activity that they are required to look after make their task –

**George BUCHHORN:** That is one point, but also the willingness to do it. I found that that was lacking.

**The CHAIR:** In what way did that willingness manifest itself?

**George BUCHHORN:** Well, in the number of times that information was coming into the GMA and it was not being acted upon.

**The CHAIR:** So information from third parties?

**George BUCHHORN:** Yes, that is right, from outside.

**The CHAIR:** So what do you think the biggest impediments to effective compliance activities by the GMA would be?

**George BUCHHORN:** Given the numbers, the size of the job and just the willingness to perform that enforcement function; it is just not there, I think. There was a report done by Pegasus back in 2017 that highlights that very fact. One of their recommendations is that it should be moved to a much larger department and away from the GMA.

**The CHAIR:** The enforcement and compliance elements of the Game Management Authority's activities? Okay. What would be your recommendations about how to improve enforcement and compliance activities, either at a regulatory and policy level, or at an operational level?

**George BUCHHORN:** Well, speaking operationally, because that is I guess my background, what I was trying to do with the protesters and the rescuers in gaining their trust and goodwill was a real opportunity missed, because they are in much bigger numbers and they are very passionate about what they do. My vision was like a Neighbourhood Watch scenario: if someone is out there – and I am not talking about people who are doing the right thing – who is actively doing the wrong thing and they see a rescuer or a protester, it may as well be one of us, they are an extension of what we are capable of doing. And then that very quickly would increase our capacity tenfold.

**The CHAIR:** In your time at the GMA, how would you characterise the agency's attitude towards the evidence, information, intelligence – however you want to describe it – received from animal welfare groups and individuals?

**George BUCHHORN:** Just very dismissive. As I mentioned in my opening address, I was aware that a report had already been sent to the minister that it was unlikely anyone would be processed, and that was before any of it had been investigated. When I investigated it, as I said, I identified at least 28 individuals captured in the footage and was able to put a name to 20 of them.

**The CHAIR:** And in your experience, was that the express policy of the GMA to behave in those ways, or was it implicit and/or cultural practice?

**George BUCHHORN:** I think it is implicit and cultural – and no disrespect to my game officers, they just did not have the background. They did not have the skills and training. I had to impart some of my knowledge onto them. All I got was pushback from management. I developed I think it was a 16-step plan to an investigation and took them through it step by step. It did not mean they had to do all 16 steps; if they got to step 4 and hit an impasse, then that is where you stop. But it was a systematic approach to how to conduct –

**The CHAIR:** So did the GMA have a systematic approach, a manual, guidelines that should be followed about how enforcement compliance activities should take place?

**George BUCHHORN:** No. I reviewed all of the standard operating procedures whilst I was there, and that is not part of it.

**The CHAIR:** So there was no sort of standard operating procedure in place for how to deal with or manage complaints?

**George BUCHHORN:** I tried to even get people in to teach them surveillance skills, because they were out in the bush, driving around blindly, putting themselves at risk. I wanted to get them some professional training on how to conduct a proper surveillance operation.

**The CHAIR:** And in your experience, what was the balance of enforcement or compliance action taken against hunters or animal welfare groups or individuals?

**George BUCHHORN:** There was a clear bias towards the rescuers. They were being harassed and targeted. They, I guess, in some ways were the low-hanging fruit, because they were putting themselves out there, putting themselves at risk and breaching legislation, admittedly, whilst they were doing that. I encountered that with Laurie himself on that morning of the duck opening. We positioned ourselves next to them. It was prior to 7:20. A hunter launched himself out of his tent, saw a duck and shot it but wounded it. Now, that duck fell into the water basically at our feet, and I was standing there thinking, 'What do we do now?' Laurie just launched into the water, even though it was a breach of the legislation, and rescued that duck and took it straight to their vet clinic, which again highlighted what I said before: why haven't we got this facility here? We are capable of it.

**The CHAIR:** In conclusion, you do admit that there were breaches of the law by animal rescuers?

**George BUCHHORN:** There were. But I also, even though I charged him, believe that he had a strong defence.

**The CHAIR:** Mrs McArthur.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair. Mr Buchhorn, full disclosure: I am a member of the Liberal Party; I am a member of Field and Game. Are you a member of any political party?

**George BUCHHORN:** No.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Any activist organisation?

**George BUCHHORN:** No.

**Bev McARTHUR:** I refer to an article in the *Age* on 22 February 2019 titled 'Former homicide squad detective denies lying to corruption inquiry'.

**The CHAIR:** Is this relevant to the terms of reference of the inquiry?

**Bev McARTHUR:** It goes to –

**The CHAIR:** Because if it is not, I am going to ask that you do not pursue the line of questioning.

**Bev McARTHUR:** It goes to the credibility of the witness.

**The CHAIR:** I think we have made it very clear in these proceedings that we are willing to hear evidence in relation to our terms of reference but not more broadly.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Well, Chair, we have to ensure that the witnesses are credible.

**The CHAIR:** As long as it is not dealing with matters that are beyond the terms of reference of the inquiry.

**Bev McARTHUR:** It goes to the credibility of the witness, Chair. Mr Buchhorn, you were at the GMA for roughly two years, is that correct?

**George BUCHHORN:** That is correct.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Looking at the GMA annual reports, in 2015, before you got there, court proceedings concluded were 26, with 100 per cent success rate. When you were in charge of compliance in 2016–17 and 2017–18, that number dropped to six and 11. The year after you left, 2018–19, it was back up to 20. Similarly, the year before you became head of compliance at GMA the organisation conducted 51 planned enforcement operations. In the two years that you were there it conducted just 26 and 35. The year after you left the GMA the total number of enforcement actions increased from your 32 to 115 – a three-and-a half-fold increase. Isn't it obvious that there was one factor in the GMA's poor compliance record when you were heading up the compliance – and that was you?

**George BUCHHORN:** Sorry, is that a question?

**Bev McARTHUR:** Yes.

**George BUCHHORN:** I do not know how you would like me to answer that.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Well, accurately.

**George BUCHHORN:** How do you mean?

**Bev McARTHUR:** Do you confirm that the compliance issues when you were around were much less before you got there and after you left, so actually you did not do a very good job?

**George BUCHHORN:** Well, I do not have those figures in front of me, but I refute that. Whilst I was there the GMA was going through a rebuilding process. Much of my time was trying to enhance and lift the accountabilities and the reporting conditions, because that was a major criticism in the Auditor-General's report.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Anyway, you dispute the compliance and enforcement actions at the time of your presence at the GMA and before and afterwards?

**George BUCHHORN:** I have not got the figures in front of me, so I cannot make comment on that.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Well, can you take it on notice? We will give you the question.

**George BUCHHORN:** Fine.

**Bev McARTHUR:** And noting your evidence about the VAGO report of 2012, that was not about GMA, was it?

**George BUCHHORN:** It was about the agencies at the time who were involved in the environment and natural resources. There was Game Victoria at the time, and the discussion when I was there was that that criticism reflected on what Game Victoria, which then became the Game Management Authority, was doing. I acknowledge that there was –

**Bev McARTHUR:** Are you – sorry.

**George BUCHHORN:** It was acknowledged by the GMA that that report was reflective on them as well.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Mr Buchhorn, have you been in contact with any MPs or their offices about this inquiry?

**George BUCHHORN:** No.

**Bev McARTHUR:** You left the GMA in about April 2018; is that correct?

**George BUCHHORN:** 18.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Greg Hyams was the CEO then; is that correct?

**George BUCHHORN:** Greg Hyams, yes.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Is he there now?

**George BUCHHORN:** No.

**Bev McARTHUR:** How many were in the compliance team then?

**George BUCHHORN:** Myself and five.

**Bev McARTHUR:** How many are in the compliance team now?

**George BUCHHORN:** I do not know.

**Bev McARTHUR:** What was the compliance budget when you were there?

**George BUCHHORN:** I do not know.

**Bev McARTHUR:** You do not know? But you were head of compliance.

**George BUCHHORN:** Yes.

**Bev McARTHUR:** How do you not know what the budget was?

**George BUCHHORN:** I am sorry, I was there to do a job. I was not looking at budgets. That was –

**Bev McARTHUR:** But wouldn't you have had to account for everything you did?

**George BUCHHORN:** No, not financially.

**Bev McARTHUR:** No?

**George BUCHHORN:** Not financially.

**Bev McARTHUR:** You did not have to account for everything you did?

**George BUCHHORN:** I tried to save them money, and I do not know to this day whether they ever did proceed with those boats.

**Bev McARTHUR:** What can you tell me about the document *GMA Compliance and Enforcement Policy May 2020*?

**George BUCHHORN:** I cannot.

**Bev McARTHUR:** What can you tell me about the document *GMA Compliance Strategy 2020–2025*? Nothing?

**George BUCHHORN:** No.

**Bev McARTHUR:** So you are an advocate of compliance, yet you cannot give us any information about these important documents?

**George BUCHHORN:** I am sorry. I have not been with the GMA since 2018. You are talking about documents that have come out years later.

**Bev McARTHUR:** But you have come here to give us evidence about the poor compliance of the GMA –

**George BUCHHORN:** About my time at the GMA.

**Bev McARTHUR:** yet you are not cognisant of what is actually in the compliance documents now?

**George BUCHHORN:** No.

**Bev McARTHUR:** No – not interested.

**George BUCHHORN:** I did not say I was not interested.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Are you interested?

**George BUCHHORN:** Sorry, yes.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Well, why wouldn't you have investigated?

**George BUCHHORN:** Well, I will now.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Thank you, Mrs McArthur; your time has expired. Ms Purcell.

**Georgie PURCELL:** Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Mr Buchhorn for appearing today. You spoke before about the way in which rescuers were specifically targeted by Game Management Authority officers. Was this more of a cultural thing, or were officers specifically instructed to do so?

**George BUCHHORN:** It was more of a cultural thing.

**Georgie PURCELL:** Thank you. In the duck season recently gone we saw a rescuer charged by the GMA for failing to dispatch a wounded duck because they were trying to take that duck into the veterinary treatment tent. Was it common practice to try and find different ways in which rescuers could be charged for being present on the wetlands?

**George BUCHHORN:** I believe so, yes.

**Georgie PURCELL:** Thank you. Do you think that the Game Management Authority is any different now, after the Pegasus report and your departure, from what you know?

**George BUCHHORN:** To be honest, I do not know. I do not know who is there anymore. I have been told stuff anecdotally. It does not sound like it has changed much.

**Georgie PURCELL:** Thank you. Do you think it is possible for duck shooting to be properly regulated or monitored in Victoria?

**George BUCHHORN:** No.

**Georgie PURCELL:** And why is that?

**George BUCHHORN:** It is because of the number of wetlands. A lot of them are on private land. Just the sheer area to cover and the lack of resources – the size of the GMA when I was there just could not possibly hope to cover that sort of territory.

**Georgie PURCELL:** Thank you. When we ask the Game Management Authority about enforcement, particularly on private land, they have expressed to me in the past that they have the ability to go onto private land. Did they ever monitor private land in your time there?



**George BUCHHORN:** No.

**Georgie PURCELL:** So they just have the ability to do so, but it was not deployed?

**George BUCHHORN:** Look, I am a bit rusty on the legislation nowadays. But yes, I believe we did have the ability to go onto private land.

**Georgie PURCELL:** But in your experience, they did not do it?

**George BUCHHORN:** No.

**Georgie PURCELL:** Thank you. On particularly opening weekend we obviously have deep concerns about that sort of being the big event of the duck-shooting season. Do you think that GMA resources were put in places where they thought they could make the best compliance effort or where duck rescuers would be?

**George BUCHHORN:** Well, the focus was on where the duck rescuers were going to be. That is why I was positioned there. I guess the deployment of the other people around the marshes that day was done as best as possible, but there are restrictions on different agencies and what different agencies can and cannot do – can they enter the water, can they use boats. We had Victoria Police there that year, who had boats, so that made a bit of a difference. But still, just the sheer number of hunters, all the early shooting – we did not have the capability and capacity to approach hunters who were wading out into the water.

**Georgie PURCELL:** Thank you. Could you tell us some more about any of the innovations that you tried to introduce to improve impressions post Koorangie – sorry, any innovations that you tried to improve enforcement outcomes post Koorangie and how they were received by the Game Management Authority.

**George BUCHHORN:** Well, as I mentioned, I wanted to provide coaching and mentoring to the protesters and the rescuers. I believe that they are good people, and with a bit of guidance and certainly having some trust in us, we could make a big difference really quickly at very little cost. And also to train them and coach them in doing things without breaking the regulations, to stay within the rules. But that was not supported. I also used some of my contacts out at the forensic science laboratories to try and enhance our forensic capability, and at the time when I left we were well into discussions about the centre providing ballistics and DNA assistance where we required it, which would greatly enhance our capacity to enforce.

**Georgie PURCELL:** Thank you. Do you think that at any point there has been a lack of independence of the Game Management Authority, whether that be through interferences with duck shooters on the board or with shooting lobby groups?

**George BUCHHORN:** Yes, there were a number of occasions where that bias was evident. There was one occasion where we went along to a game bird farm. They asked us to come and do an assessment on how they were releasing birds for shooting. I had never seen it before, so I was just watching what they did. They had a rise, and they had these pheasants in cages. They were releasing them through a chute of bent corrugated iron. The birds would rush through, take to the air, and then the hunters were lined up down below the ridge and would shoot them as they came over the top. The people from the GMA who were there – one of them was one of the managers – thought it was all okay. They asked me what my opinion was – this was away from the hunters – and I said, 'I'm really concerned. There's cruelty going on here.' This group of hunters – there were about four or five of them – was so focused on the next bird coming over there rise that they were not paying any attention to the birds that were crashing to the ground. A lot of those birds were wounded, and no-one was doing anything about it because they had paid a lot of money to do this and they were just waiting for the next bird.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Purcell. Ms Watt.

**Sheena WATT:** Hello. Thank you, Mr Buchhorn. Sorry we gave you the last slot of the day. I had just a couple of questions for you. In your experience how does the GMA assess where it is that they undertake their compliance activities during the season?

**George BUCHHORN:** I think it is very ad hoc, and a lot of it is not well structured and not well targeted. They tend to focus their efforts on where the protesters are going to be. Part of that makes sense, because if

there is going to be conflict that is likely where it will flare up. But then there are all these other wetlands that do not have any enforcement on them.

**Sheena WATT:** Are there any other key drivers of location other than where there may be protesters? Is it about numbers of shooters or previous sites?

**George BUCHHORN:** They would do waterfowl counts and look at the species that were on the wetlands, and if there were protected species there, then steps would be taken to close those wetlands. I understand that is what happened with Lake Buloke, where there are a large number of birds but also a lot of protected birds there as well. So I understand that Lake Buloke was closed.

**Sheena WATT:** Is it a rather fixed program or is it quite dynamic across the season?

**George BUCHHORN:** They have a program for the senior game officers to go and patrol different wetlands in the build-up to the duck season to get a sense of where the birds are, what species are there and what protections need to be put in place. There is work done prior to the actual opening. It is the enforcement and prevention of offences being committed where it all starts to come apart.

**Sheena WATT:** Yes. Thank you. I appreciate that. I might go to another bit. In your submission you talked about a representative from Field and Game attending interviews.

**George BUCHHORN:** Yes.

**Sheena WATT:** I am just sort of trying to understand –

**George BUCHHORN:** How that happened?

**Sheena WATT:** how that happened. Is there actually any sort of official role for Field and Game as stipulated, or what was it that meant that Field and Game were able to sit in on an interview?

**George BUCHHORN:** There is nothing preventing them from being there from a legal perspective. It was interesting that when I was being told I could not apply for search warrants and I then explained why I required search warrants – the main reason being that if I had footage of an individual and that individual is sitting across from me, I can go, 'That's you' – that is not evidence from an investigating official. I cannot prove identity by saying, 'That's you.' What I need is corroborative evidence, and that is what the search warrants might have given me: seize firearms, seize clothing and look to see whether we have the same mix and match of hunting apparel to what is in the footage – the firearm is the same. All that sort of stuff then starts to add weight to the identification, but because I was not allowed to have search warrants, I could not get that corroborative evidence. That interview that I went to was the first one, and I notified the office that I was doing this interview. I got there, and then this gentleman from Field and Game was sitting at the table. I asked him why he was there, and he said that he was there to provide support and advice. And I thought, 'Well, that'll be interesting, because the moment you start providing advice, you're interfering, so then you'll be told to leave.' And I had police with me. But I thought, 'If you just sit there and you're just providing support, that's okay.' And then, anyway, I showed the guy the photo, and he said, 'No, that's not me.'

**Sheena WATT:** So with what you have just shared with us, do you have any recommendations based off that experience for the committee to consider with respect to reform of that?

**George BUCHHORN:** Well, I was disappointed because this was the exact scenario that I had explained. The man from Field and Game told me that he had told the office that he was going to be there, but they had not passed that information on. And it was my concern that I was being open about where I was and what I was doing. Do I need to not do that now and just turn up unannounced?

**Sheena WATT:** Okay. Thank you. My last question is – we heard earlier about shotgun education programs and more education perhaps needed on behalf of the hunters. Are you familiar with that program, or do you have any particular recommendations around shotgun user education programs?

**George BUCHHORN:** There was discussion about that before I left – about conducting shotgun education and, you know, trying to improve the capability and the capacity of hunters to do the right thing and not wound

as many birds. There were lots of things that I saw, particularly in the footage, that were examples of how not to do it. I am not a hunter, but I could see that that is not how you do it.

**Sheena WATT:** Okay. Well, I figured, given your years of experience as a police officer and having worked around, I imagine, firearms during that time, you would have some significant experience from that.

**George BUCHHORN:** Yes, yes. I have been around firearms a lot.

**Sheena WATT:** And I note that we have got others on the committee that have that previous experience in police as well. Thank you very much for your evidence and your submission and being here today. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Bourman.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Mr Buchhorn. Mr Buchhorn, the Pegasus report was leaked at the end of February 2018. The report was commissioned as a result of compliance failure whilst you were the manager of game compliance. It would have been reasonably foreseeable that any reflection on the GMA's performance during the time in question could be taken as a reflection of your own performance. You tendered your resignation from the GMA about the same time – I am not entirely sure exactly when. But you appeared on the 7.30 report on April 2018 dropping a bundle on your former employer. The Pegasus report was commissioned as a result of compliance failure, and as leader that would have been your failure. Were your complaints on the 7.30 report and subsequent complaints just a convenient deflection?

**George BUCHHORN:** No.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** As the manager of compliance at that time, how can it not be?

**George BUCHHORN:** Well, I was working on my own. Everything that I tried to do was being undermined. I was not supported within the management team. I quickly realised that I was a square peg in a round hole and that I held different values to them, and they made my life as difficult as they possibly could.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** It is safe to say that that management team is no longer the same management team. We have a different CEO now.

**George BUCHHORN:** I do not know.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** I thought you would have at least known that. Did you make any formal complaints before you took it to the media?

**George BUCHHORN:** Yes.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** To –

**George BUCHHORN:** IBAC.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** And what did they do?

**George BUCHHORN:** They said it did not meet their threshold.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** Okay. Did you go to the minister? There are ombudsmen. As a former police officer –

**George BUCHHORN:** I had a meeting with Lisa Neville.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** Okay. And what did she do?

**George BUCHHORN:** She recommended that I contact the Ombudsman.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** And the Ombudsman –

**George BUCHHORN:** The Ombudsman conducted a very scant investigation, in my view, because my main concern was – I mentioned before the briefs of evidence that I submitted – nobody was charged, and I do not know what became of those briefs. And that was my main request for the Ombudsman: 'Can you find out?'

And if you don't want to take my word for the fact that I think there is sufficient evidence for a locally successful prosecution, get them independently assessed.' But what they did and what she told me they did was they sent a report to the GMA to answer, and that was it. I do not know what the response was. I never saw it.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** Was Lisa Neville actually the relevant minister at the time?

**George BUCHHORN:** She was the police minister.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** GMA is not under the police.

**George BUCHHORN:** Sorry?

**Jeff BOURMAN:** The GMA does not answer to the police, it answers to the ag minister.

**George BUCHHORN:** It was through the Animal Justice Party that that meeting was arranged.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** That is unfortunate. Mr Buchhorn, did you leak the Pegasus report?

**George BUCHHORN:** No.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** Do you know who did?

**George BUCHHORN:** No.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** Okay.

**George BUCHHORN:** I did not know it was leaked; I thought it was released.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** Yes, it was released all right; it was just an unauthorised release. You talked about what went down in Koorangie. Was it 2017 or something like that?

**George BUCHHORN:** Yes, 2017.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** You were there?

**George BUCHHORN:** Yes.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** You were the head of compliance at the time?

**George BUCHHORN:** Yes.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** What did you do?

**George BUCHHORN:** How do you mean?

**Jeff BOURMAN:** Well, you were the head of compliance, it was within your power to do something. I have heard a story about Laurie Levy and launching and things like that. But, as a former detective senior sergeant, you would know that as a leader, whether you can hold the tide back with a broom or not, it is your job to get into it. What did you do?

**George BUCHHORN:** Well, on that afternoon there was a report of a number of birds that were being hidden by hunters. There was a particular camp that was nearby there. Other hunters were complaining about them – that they were shooting everything that moved. Be it ducks, be it galahs – they were just shooting everything. So we rushed back out to the lake, we found the camp, we checked everything and we found nothing. When I became aware of the pit that had the 185 ducks in it, I was hopeful that they might be the ducks that we had not found earlier. But I was unable to locate where exactly that pit was found, so I was not able to draw a connection between that particular camp and that particular pit.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** I mean, in a way, it seems to me that the evidence was not there. But also I will say that I do not support illegal hunting or shooting or anything like that so if the pit existed, I wish you had have found it. But we cannot go back in time. I was listening to some of your talk, and it sounded like you were recruiting informers. You were trying to recruit informers out of the rescuers and protesters and things like that.

**George BUCHHORN:** Not informers, no. I wanted to use it like a model of Neighbourhood Watch.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** 'Coaching and mentoring' was what you said.

**George BUCHHORN:** Yes.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** It seems to me you were after the shooters as much as you have accused the management of being after the protesters. I am listening. I am a former police officer. I never made the lofty ranks, but I am well aware. It sounded to me like you had a bent to go after the shooters.

**George BUCHHORN:** No, it was going after people doing the wrong thing.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** The forensic science laboratory at Macleod is usually wildly behind. Sometimes it was years behind. Do you think, as a former detective senior sergeant, it is appropriate that the services there be tied up for duck hunting, particularly as shotguns do not leave rifling or have any real way of tying them to a firearm cartridge.

**George BUCHHORN:** Well, they do.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** Well, do you think it appropriate for –

**George BUCHHORN:** In impressions, ejector marks – there are a number of ballistics.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** That is the cartridge case, not the pellets.

**George BUCHHORN:** That is right, and that is what gets left behind.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** Do you think it appropriate, for what is basically a statutory offence, to be tying up the FSL for that amount of time?

**George BUCHHORN:** They were happy to assist.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** I will take that as a non-answer.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Thank you, Mr Bourman. Ms Copsey.

**Katherine COPSEY:** Thank you. Thanks for being here today to share your experience. Were you still at the GMA around the time that the recommendations of the Pegasus report became available? I am mainly interested because I was wondering if you had any direct observation of the attitude of the GMA to that report.

**George BUCHHORN:** They came and spoke to me. At the time I was working on my own out at Attwood with Fisheries Victoria. They provided me with office space out there. So yes, I was interviewed by the people who prepared the report, but no, I did not know that it had been leaked.

**Katherine COPSEY:** But in terms of reception by the GMA, that was after your time there?

**George BUCHHORN:** Yes, well, because I was kept away, I do not really know what the office environment was like during that time.

**Katherine COPSEY:** But from your observations, post your time at the GMA and from the outside, with those caveats, do you have confidence that the Pegasus report recommendations have been implemented by the agency?

**George BUCHHORN:** No, I do not.

**Katherine COPSEY:** Thank you. I am interested in your observations around the ability or the will to enhance the investigative and evidence-gathering capacity of the GMA and the lack of interest at that time, which you reported, from management into investing in things like cameras or that sort of thing. Could you expand a little bit on your observations there?

**George BUCHHORN:** There was a time when there was a person living up near Mansfield – it is not directly related to birds, but it was related to hunting – and this family were being harassed by deer hunters and rang me in complete despair as to what could be done. I went up there and saw the opportunity for cameras. We even went to the extent of putting up a windmill to mount a camera on, because there was nowhere to put a camera. The farmer had a windmill that he was wanting to put up. I said, ‘Well, let’s put it up for you.’ So we did, so we had something to mount the camera on. That little gesture meant all the world to him, that someone was finally taking him seriously and trying to do something about it.

**Katherine COPSEY:** That family in particular, had they contacted the GMA?

**George BUCHHORN:** Many times, yes. It was disappointing when I went up there because the particular game officer was on leave at the time – that is why I stepped in – and it was maybe 3 k’s from his office.

**Katherine COPSEY:** Thank you. Yet there was appetite to purchase the boats at a similar time. Do you know why there was such an appetite for having that on-water capability?

**George BUCHHORN:** I do. The attitude was that they wanted to have their own toys and not rely on another agency, even though the likelihood of GMA using their boats for more than a couple of hours a year is unlikely. Fisheries Victoria told me that they had boats that were being used for less than half an hour a year – and that is Fisheries. So they had plenty of boats that they were more than happy to help us out with. It meant that we did not have to maintain them. We did not have to store them. We did not have to drive them. We had all that support if we wanted it but were told, ‘No, we’re getting our own.’

**Katherine COPSEY:** I appreciate you are not within the organisation anymore, but there have obviously been lots of recent technological advances, including the availability of things like drone technology.

**George BUCHHORN:** We were looking at that at the time. Parks Victoria were leading it, and we actually supplied them with some money to help with their development and getting one of their guys trained up as a commercial pilot.

**Katherine COPSEY:** Thank you. I am interested in your reflections on cruelty. You have given evidence around the lack of investigative processes and skill within some of the officers. Do you feel confident that GMA officers were able to accurately –

**George BUCHHORN:** Identify cruelty?

**Katherine COPSEY:** Yes.

**George BUCHHORN:** No, not at all. Watching that footage and seeing what was happening to these ducks – I am just a layperson; I am not a vet – but to me that was cruel, and there was lots of heated discussion about whether the birds were alive or dead. I just saw suffering, and it was wrong. That is why I went and found the professor to give me that expert evidence to say, ‘I agree; you’re right.’

**Katherine COPSEY:** To try and give some objective standard that you could –

**George BUCHHORN:** Yes.

**Katherine COPSEY:** Thank you. You have spoken a bit about the resource difficulty in terms of the area that the GMA has to cover. The committee has been told that it is not possible for people who live near areas that might potentially be available for duck shooting to get a straight answer as to where shooting is permitted in Victoria. Does that surprise you based on your experience?

**George BUCHHORN:** No, because I have read somewhere that there are so many wetlands – and a lot of them are not even on maps – that how are you supposed to police them if you do not know where they are?

**Katherine COPSEY:** Do you believe that cruelty is an inherent part of the practice of duck shooting?

**George BUCHHORN:** Absolutely. There is so much wounding. You know, if we go into a dry season, birds that have been wounded and have found their way back to the lake are likely to die if the lake dries up, because they cannot fly away.

**Katherine COPSEY:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Buchhorn, thank you so much for coming in today. You will receive a draft copy of the transcript for review before it is published on our website.

With that, today's hearing is adjourned.

**Committee adjourned.**