

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Wednesday 20 May 2026

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

John Pesutto – Deputy Chair

Jade Benham

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Aiv Puglielli

Richard Riordan

Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Michaela Settle MP, Minister for Agriculture; and

Kate Houghton, Secretary,

Beth Jones, Deputy Secretary, Agriculture, and Chief Executive, Agriculture Victoria,

Deborah Hall, Executive Director, Forestry and Fibre Industry,

Dr Trevor Pisciotta, Executive Director, Animal Welfare and Agriculture Regulatory Policy,

David Burns, Executive Director, Agriculture Policy and Programs,

Sally Fensling, Deputy Secretary, Corporate Services,

Etienne Gouws, Chief Financial Officer,

Dougal Purcell, Executive Director, Agriculture Sector Development and Services,

Charlotte Austin, Executive Director, Biosecurity Victoria, and

Angela Avery, Acting Head, Agriculture Science and Technology, Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, and I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments that you repeat outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, and it is broadcast live on the Parliament's website. The broadcast includes automated captioning. Members and witnesses should be aware that all microphones are live during the hearings, and anything you say, even if you say it quietly, can be picked up and captioned.

As Chair, I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream tonight and other committee members.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check, and verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Minister for Agriculture the Honourable Michaela Settle – welcome – as well as officials from DEECA. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 10 minutes, after which time committee members will ask you questions. Your time starts now.

Michaela SETTLE: Thank you, Chair, Deputy Chair and members. Good evening. I would like to begin by acknowledging that we meet today on the lands of the Wurundjeri people. I acknowledge them as the traditional owners and pay my respects to their elders past and present, and I extend that respect to any First Peoples that are joining us here today.

Visual presentation.

Michaela SETTLE: Agriculture matters to every Victorian. It matters to the family buying milk and bread before school. It matters to the worker packing produce, the truck driver moving stockfeed, the small business in a regional town and the farmer making decisions through difficult seasons. Victoria's agriculture sector puts food on our tables, supports regional jobs and underpins local economies. That is why agribusiness is one of the

five priority sectors in Victoria's *Economic Growth Statement*. Victoria has earned a strong reputation for quality, safe and sustainable food and fibre. That reputation has been built by farmers, workers, researchers and regional communities across the state. The sector is facing real pressure from drought, fires, floods, storms, rising inputs and changing markets, but despite that, Victorian agriculture continues to grow, adapt and deliver.

Victoria leads the nation in food and fibre exports, punching well above our weight. In 2024–25 Victoria produced 28 per cent of Australia's total food and fibre exports from just 3 per cent of Australia's land mass. Victoria also exported a record \$22.1 billion worth of food and fibre products – that was a 3 per cent increase and means Victoria exceeded our 2030 target six years early. Those figures reflect farmers and food manufacturers across Gippsland, the Wimmera, Sunraysia, western Victoria and the whole state. Victoria's products are now traded in 174 countries, and that is a mark of the quality and trust attached to Victorian food and fibre. Since 2019–20 the share of export product going outside our top five markets has increased from 39 per cent to 47 per cent, and that helps make the sector more resilient when global conditions shift. At the farm gate our sector generated \$22.2 billion in gross production in 2023–24. The sector supports around 150,000 jobs in agricultural production and food manufacturing, with 85 per cent of those jobs in regional Victoria. So when we support agriculture, we support regional towns, family businesses, local workers and communities right across Victoria.

Strong biosecurity underpins agriculture. It protects our economy, our environment, public health, animal welfare, export markets and regional jobs. Agriculture Victoria works with industry and other jurisdictions to respond to risks, including avian influenza, varroa mite and foot-and-mouth disease. These threats are not abstract – they can affect farm productivity, animal welfare, trade access and confidence across whole industries. That is why preparedness, surveillance and response capacity matter so much. In 2025–26 Agriculture Victoria undertook 460 investigations that ruled out animal, marine or plant diseases across the state. That work protects Victoria, supports producers and helps maintain our market access.

Victoria's 21,000-plus farm businesses are supported by Agriculture Victoria staff, with regional presence and technical expertise. The regional presence matters – farmers need practical advice, technical knowledge and people who understand local conditions. The government has also committed \$1.5 billion to support the transition away from native timber harvesting. That transition is significant for workers, businesses and communities. It requires practical support and a focus on jobs. Grants have contributed to 192 new jobs and the retention of 524 jobs. That is about helping communities through change, while keeping people connected to work and to local opportunity. We also stand beside farmers through drought, bushfires, floods and storms. Those events do not just damage assets, they affect feed, fencing, stock, cash flow, family wellbeing and confidence to plan for the next season. Over the past three years, more than 2200 events and consultations have been delivered to close to 14,000 farmers. This kind of support is important because recovery is rarely simple – it takes time, clear advice and trusted relationships on the ground. The government's role is to work with farmers and communities, not from a distance, but alongside them as they respond and rebuild.

Agriculture Victoria also delivers world-class research through AgriBio and five regional smart farms. That research helps farmers lift productivity, improve sustainability and respond to changing conditions. It also strengthens Victoria's competitive advantage in food and fibre. In 2025–26, external co-investment will be above 50 per cent, contributing around \$44 million to agriculture, science and technology programs. Every dollar invested in agriculture research delivers an estimated \$7.82 in benefit to farmers, and that is why continued investment in research, innovation and applied science is so important for the future of the sector.

The January 2026 bushfires had a significant impact on Victoria's agricultural sector. For many farmers, fences were lost, pastures were burnt, feed was destroyed and livestock welfare was put under pressure. Those impacts are immediate, but they can also carry on well beyond the fireground – replacing fencing, restoring pasture, managing stock and rebuilding confidence take time. Agriculture Victoria has maintained a strong regional presence through recovery, including practical recovery support, animal welfare advice and connection to available assistance. The government is providing \$62 million to support the recovery process. This is about helping farmers and regional communities get back on their feet, while recognising the scale of what has been lost and the work that still lies ahead.

Biosecurity and animal welfare remain clear priorities, and that is why the government is investing a further \$16.9 million. This funding will strengthen surveillance, early detection systems and expertise to respond to increasing biosecurity threats. The funding also supports RSPCA Victoria to deliver critical regulatory services

on behalf of the state. RSPCA Victoria plays an important role across agricultural settings and domestic animal welfare. Funding will also support animal welfare organisations across Victoria. This investment recognises that animal welfare, biosecurity and public confidence are closely linked – strong systems protect animals, support producers and help to maintain community trust.

This budget continues to support farmers, farming communities and the wider agriculture sector. It includes \$4.1 million for the National Centre for Farmer Health, the Victorian Rural Women's Network's leadership and mentoring program and phase 1 of the Bendigo Livestock Exchange roof project. These initiatives matter because agriculture is not only about production; it is also about people, leadership, health, safety and the infrastructure that keeps local industries moving.

The budget also provides \$2.2 million to extend the fox bounty program. Fox predation remains a real issue for farmers, wildlife and biodiversity. For sheep producers in particular pest animal pressure can mean direct loss and additional stress. In partnership with the Commonwealth government, \$1.8 million is provided to the Rural Financial Counselling Service, and \$1.6 million will continue the Drink Victorian program and support a craft beer and cider strategy.

Over the past year the government has delivered programs to protect, grow and support the sector. Under the \$120 million Gippsland plantations investment program, 3.5 million seedlings have been planted. That program supports future fibre supply, regional jobs and long-term transition. The *Safe Food Victoria Act 2026* establishes a single food safety regulatory body, and we have of course supported our farmers through drought with \$146 million.

I know the long delays and difficult seasons, and that is why I know that agriculture matters to every Victorian. It matters to our regional communities, and it matters to us all.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Minister. We are going straight to Ms Benham.

Jade BENHAM: Thank you, Chair. Evening, Minister, officials.

Michaela SETTLE: Thank you.

Jade BENHAM: Obviously, a very large passion point for me is the ag sector, so I will be doing all the sections tonight – lucky you.

Michaela SETTLE: Fantastic.

Jade BENHAM: The ag output funding is \$511.7 million in 2026–27. That is 4.7 per cent less than last year's budget. So after inflation, which is 4.6 per cent, and wage growth, how is this anything but a real cut to frontline ag services, including biosecurity, which we will get to?

Michaela SETTLE: Thank you, Ms Benham, for your question. I appreciate the question. Obviously that is around output funding, and the decrease in overall output funding mainly reflects the timing of forestry investment commitments that have happened across this year. But of course, as every farmer knows, every season is different. Agriculture is a very responsive portfolio, and we depend on a range of factors, including the phasing in and out of programs and of course being ready to respond to any biosecurity threat that might arise or any sorts of climate impacts that farmers may need support around, like the drought funding from last year.

Jade BENHAM: Or renewables projects, which we will also get to. Let us talk about animal welfare and biosecurity then. 'Safeguarding the future of Victoria's agriculture sector and supporting animal welfare' – this is budget paper 3, page 26: can you provide a breakdown of funding related to biosecurity and separately to animal welfare?

Michaela SETTLE: Yes, of course. The \$16.9 million covers, as you said, both biosecurity and animal welfare. As stated, this includes \$7.6 million for biosecurity, but of course that adds to the significant funding that we have provided in previous years for biosecurity.

Jade BENHAM: So that biosecurity funding will continue from previous years plus an extra \$7.6 million?

Michaela SETTLE: That is correct. Of course I would point out that biosecurity is absolutely business as usual for the department, and I know that the department is working every day on research and tracing and tracking and understanding any biosecurity threats.

Jade BENHAM: Those threats being foot-and-mouth, fire ants –

Michaela SETTLE: One thing I have discovered in the short time I have been in the portfolio is there are many new and interesting biosecurity threats that we are always aware to. It can be anything from varroa mite in bee populations –

Jade BENHAM: Varroa mite is here.

Michaela SETTLE: Yes – to tomato potato psyllid, foot-and-mouth and avian flu. Of course there are many.

Jade BENHAM: Grapevine viruses. Has the department done any work with the grapevine virus – and I cannot remember off the top of my head – GPGV? Is that on the radar yet?

Beth JONES: Sorry, which –

Jade BENHAM: Actually, to save time, if I could get a list of potential biosecurity threats to the Victorian ag sector, that would be really handy.

Michaela SETTLE: It is going to be a little bit hard to provide something like that, because the whole thing with biosecurity is it is incoming, it is around our export markets, it is hard to know –

Jade BENHAM: Yes, but we know what is coming; we know what is a threat. We know that foot-and-mouth disease is a real threat. We know fire ants will get here eventually, just like we knew varroa mite would eventually get here, because bees can fly across a river. So if we can get maybe the top five biosecurity threats that the department sees, that would be terrific.

Michaela SETTLE: Of course but we obviously cannot cover off on all, and that is why we have such a strong research program.

Jade BENHAM: Obviously. But the top five for the coming season would be terrific.

Michaela SETTLE: Yes.

Jade BENHAM: The budget for biosecurity and ag services has been almost halved in just two years, down to \$130 million from \$254.3 million. This is going from the 'Department Performance Statement', pages 21-22. Given your own presentation highlights the increasing risk of avian influenza, foot-and-mouth – like we said – varroa mite and lumpy skin disease, why are we halving the budget for biosecurity?

Michaela SETTLE: Since 2022 we have invested \$182 million into biosecurity work, and obviously on top of that this year there is \$16.9 million for biosecurity –

Jade BENHAM: \$7.6 million, though, you just said for biosecurity.

Michaela SETTLE: Yes, biosecurity and animal welfare. \$7.6 million directly to biosecurity, but of course there has been \$182 million invested in biosecurity since 2022.

Jade BENHAM: Yes, but if we are talking about how much is invested, the budget keeps getting smaller and smaller. So if it is – and it should be – a priority, why are we cutting the budget?

Michaela SETTLE: Yes, I beg to differ on the terminology around cutting. As I said earlier –

Jade BENHAM: Less money is cutting.

Michaela SETTLE: Well, we are talking about outputs here. Obviously it is a very responsive portfolio, so last year's budget reflected our response to avian flu. And if we are required to protect our industry in the future, we will. It is a responsive portfolio. It is about being there for farmers when they need it.

Jade BENHAM: Two years ago we had the varroa mite threat. It is half the budget from two years ago for biosecurity. So what happens if lumpy skin disease turns up this year?

Lauren KATHAGE: What is the performance measure?

Jade BENHAM: The department performance measure, pages 21-22, safeguarding the future for Victoria's agriculture sector, under the 'Agriculture' heading. Besides the point, that is merely a courtesy. And going back two years, we are half the budget. Two years ago we had varroa mite, and the department needed to deploy measures very, very quickly. So what happens if there is an outbreak of lumpy skin, foot-and-mouth or fire ants in this financial year?

Michaela SETTLE: A part of the \$182 million that we have invested in biosecurity preparedness is making sure that we always have the surge capacity there should something arise. We had the avian influenza, as I said, which peaked in 2024. And of course, this is all on top of the funds invested in 2024-25.

Jade BENHAM: But given that it is half of what it was two years ago, if you need to surge capacity, do you then have to call in a Treasurer's advance? What facilitates that surge capacity?

Michaela SETTLE: I will have to ask as well, if you can explain, in pages 20-21, where the half figure comes from. Biosecurity – I am having a look here.

Jade BENHAM: From 2023-24. I am happy to hear from the department. Thank you.

Beth JONES: Yes, thank you. If I understand what you are referring to on page 22 of the budget papers there, I think you are making a comparison between the 2024-25 figure of \$254 million compared to the lower figures.

Jade BENHAM: Yes.

Beth JONES: What I would say is that \$254 million figure in that year reflects the significant avian influenza response we had. We had quite an influx of funding, including from other jurisdictions, to support our national response, which has inflated the budget. To your question, and as the minister said, that goes up and down each year above a kind of base, depending on what the biosecurity responses are. In response to your question around preparedness, we have a base level of preparedness that has unfortunately been well exercised through things like avian influenza. That is paid for through the core budget, and that is also represented in the overall output figure. That has us very well positioned for biosecurity emergencies.

Jade BENHAM: What were the frontline staff levels like for biosecurity two years ago with the avian flu deployment as opposed to now?

Beth JONES: Thanks for that question too. Our staffing levels in biosecurity have been maintained since that time – absolutely. What I would –

The CHAIR: Apologies, Ms Jones. We are going to come back to Ms Benham. We are going straight to Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good evening, Minister, Secretary and officials. Thank you for joining us. Welcome to PAEC. I have got the same line of questioning actually, Minister. It is in relation to the output initiative in budget paper 3, page 28, which is 'Safeguarding the future of Victoria's agriculture sector and supporting animal welfare'. Minister, why has biosecurity been prioritised in this way in the budget, and what are you doing to protect Victoria's agriculture industry?

Michaela SETTLE: Thank you, Mr Galea, for that question, and of course it is a very important question. Biosecurity is of the utmost importance to protect our trade, our farmers and of course the livestock that they work with. In this budget we see an additional investment of \$7.6 million in biosecurity, because we know protecting our agricultural sector means protecting the future of regional Victoria. Since 2022-23 we have committed an additional \$182 million to strengthening Victoria's ability to prevent, prepare for and respond to any biosecurity threats, and that is a significant uplift. It reflects the reality that these risks are increasing, both here locally and also of course globally. Through the protecting Victoria from biosecurity threats program, delivered across the last two budgets, investment is helping us to respond to serious risks like foot-and-mouth

disease, H5N1 avian influenza, lumpy skin disease and also of course plant pests. Importantly, it also means we are playing our role nationally, meeting cost-sharing obligations and supporting responses in other states, including the red imported fire ant program.

What we have seen recently is that this investment is making a real difference. Whether it is the avian influenza outbreaks in 2024 and 2025 or the responses to tomato potato psyllid and tomato brown rugose fruit virus this year, our improved preparedness and response capability has been critical. The additional funding in this budget will continue strengthening biosecurity and supporting animal welfare, and that includes surveillance, regulatory services and animal care and rehabilitation. Our focus remains very clear: we are maintaining strong preparedness for a potential H5N1 outbreak while continuing to build our early detection capability, our specialist workforce and our emergency response systems, because at the end of the day strong biosecurity is not optional; it is essential to protecting our farmers, our industries and our economy.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister. I do want to come back to some of those points that you mentioned about H5N1 and the fire ants as well. But just before I do, in terms of technological investments – we have talked about previous budgets as well – there are some baseline capabilities established that we went through last year. What technological investments have been made in this budget to build on those baseline capabilities, and can you assure the committee that those frontline services and operations will not be affected?

Michaela SETTLE: Yes, I can assure the committee of that, and thank you very much, Mr Galea, for your question. As I mentioned in my substantive question response, we see in this year's budget a continuation and a strengthening of the baseline capabilities. Through the safeguarding the future of Victoria's agricultural sector and supporting animal welfare initiatives we are investing a further \$16.9 million, which builds directly on the systems, workforce and preparedness measures already put in place. In practical terms, last year's investments established stronger foundations in areas like surveillance, diagnostics, communications and workforce readiness. This year we are enhancing those capabilities through targeted technological improvements, particularly in laboratory diagnostics, surveillance systems and data collection tools. These upgrades are improving the speed, accuracy and efficiency of tracing and response activities during a biosecurity incident. We are also continuing to mature our emergency workforce arrangements and response systems, including better planning for surge capacity and concurrent emergencies, which ensures we can respond quickly and effectively when our farmers need us.

Importantly, none of this comes at the expense of frontline operations. Core activities like surveillance, early detection, emergency response capability and on-the-ground biosecurity work are being maintained and strengthened. In fact the continued investment ensures those frontline services are better supported with improved tools, better data and clearer response frameworks. You can see that in the work underway, whether it is enhanced H5N1 preparedness, expanded surveillance for risks like red imported fire ants or new waste management strategies to handle large-scale incidents safely. Overall, this year's technological investments are building on what we have already established, making our systems smarter, faster and more resilient, while maintaining a strong and well-supported frontline response capability.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister. You did just touch on, again, H5N1 preparedness. Can you outline the current situation, the current threat posed from avian influenza but also what you are doing, if you can expand on the preparations for a potential future outbreak?

Michaela SETTLE: Thank you. Yes, thankfully, at the moment we remain absolutely free of it, but we are aware of course that it exists nearby and it is incredibly important that we are prepared should that come. It is through this government's significant investment in strengthening our biosecurity system we saw the successful response to the H7 avian influenza outbreak in 2024 and 2025, where our increased preparedness capability and coordination enabled rapid containment and eradication in partnership with industry. Some of that outbreak took place in my electorate, and I saw firsthand Agriculture Victoria really get in there and support communities through what was a pretty awful time.

Building on that foundation, our focus is now firmly on preparedness for a potential H5 outbreak, which is of course the much more communicable version of the avian flu. That preparedness includes strengthened surveillance and early detection systems, enhanced laboratory diagnostics and rapid testing capability and a clearly defined day one response plan to ensure that there is immediate action in the event of an incursion. We

are also continuing to invest in our specialist workforce and emergency response capacity, including training and exercises to ensure that we can respond effectively even in complex or concurrent emergency situations.

The lessons learned from each outbreak help inform our work for the next, and Agriculture Victoria will keep working really closely with the affected industries and businesses to help them with recovery and to enhance our preparedness and to help them build resilience. Importantly, we are working closely with industry, wildlife experts and land managers to monitor risks, support early reporting and protect high-risk species. Alongside this, national collaboration remains critical, with additional Commonwealth support helping to enhance frontline equipment, testing technology and field response capability. All of this means Victoria is in a good position.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Benham.

Jade BENHAM: Minister, your own electorate is impacted by transmission line projects and the impact that will have on agricultural land. Have you done any advocating within your government for stronger protections for affected farmers?

Michaela SETTLE: Thank you very much. Look, I do understand, and as you said, it goes through my electorate, and I have met with many of the farmers in my electorate to discuss the transmission lines. I understand that that can be very difficult for many farmers and farming communities. Those decisions around where they go obviously sit across other portfolios, but Agriculture Victoria has a really important part to play in this.

Jade BENHAM: Have you done any advocacy within your government, Minister, to protect farmers?

Michaela SETTLE: I do not think there is a week goes by that I do not speak to the minister in charge of this. But I would say what my department does, in support of our agricultural –

Jade BENHAM: I am asking – it is your electorate. You are now the minister for ag. During this budget process, have you advocated to your government for stronger protections for farmers who are at risk of having their productive land compulsorily acquired?

Michaela SETTLE: Agriculture Victoria, on my behalf, report into every planning process, the EES that has revolved around this, and I know that they are very committed to making sure that all of those other ministers who are responsible for these decisions are aware of the value of our agricultural land.

Jade BENHAM: Yes. And no doubt the department do an incredible job. They should be funded far more robustly, in my opinion. I am asking you now: as the local MP and the Minister for Agriculture, were you advocating during this budget process? How strongly have you advocated to this government to protect those farmers?

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Ms Benham, there is a point of order.

Michael GALEA: Ms Benham knows that she is not here to ask the Member for Eureka questions in her role as a local MP.

Jade BENHAM: I am not. I am asking her as the Minister for Agriculture.

Michael GALEA: You literally just said, 'As a local MP'.

Jade BENHAM: Well, she is also the Minister for Agriculture.

Michael GALEA: You did not say that. You said, 'As a local MP'.

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Mr Galea. I am going to rule on the point of order. Ms Benham, perhaps you wish to rephrase your question to the minister.

Jade BENHAM: The reports that the department has provided with regard to these projects – are we able to get a copy of those reports?

Michaela SETTLE: They are on a project-by-project basis. So, for example, the –

Jade BENHAM: With regard to WRL and VNI West.

Michaela SETTLE: Certainly that is input into the EES, which will be public. I do not believe the EES has been published yet on the WRL, but it is a public document.

Jade BENHAM: Great. If we could get a copy, that would be tremendous. Has the government undertaken any –

Michaela SETTLE: Once the EES is released, then I am sure that you will be able to get that in the public forum.

Jade BENHAM: We would like it now. I would like to see – you just mentioned those reports that the department has done –

Michaela SETTLE: That is not within my portfolio. That is for the Minister for Planning.

Jade BENHAM: Not the Department of Agriculture Victoria? Ms Houghton?

Kate HOUGHTON: We provide input into the planning process. That is with an independent planning panel. That panel then recommends their report to the Minister for Planning. So once we provide that, that is in an independent system, and it will come through the EES when it is publicly reported.

Jade BENHAM: So it is with the Minister for Planning now?

Kate HOUGHTON: Well, it should be. I mean, I am not the secretary for the department of planning, but that is the process. In terms of timing, I cannot comment on timing.

Jade BENHAM: But the department would have made a submission.

Kate HOUGHTON: Yes, we did.

Jade BENHAM: Yes. Are you able to provide that submission?

Kate HOUGHTON: No, because it is in an independent planning panel process. But it will be made public once that determination has been made.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. Can we talk about the cumulative impact assessment of transmission lines, renewable developments and mining proposals on Victoria's productive agricultural land as of 2026? Has the government undertaken any cumulative impact assessments?

Michaela SETTLE: As I have said to you, the department, in terms of land use, provide information. Those decisions are complex, and they do not sit within our portfolio. But Ag Vic is certainly a key input into most of those decisions. Ag Vic has a role to ensure that the sector's needs, issues, impacts and priorities are understood and considered by decision-makers as they work through those complex decisions.

Jade BENHAM: So all of these reports and submissions you have made to these panels have executive privilege, so we cannot get them?

Kate HOUGHTON: It is not executive privilege. It is part of the planning panel process. There is an independent advisory committee.

Jade BENHAM: I understand that.

Kate HOUGHTON: So that is within their remit to determine, and that will be made public in terms of what the Minister for Planning then determines.

Jade BENHAM: I want to talk about the amount of productive agricultural land Victoria stands to lose. In the government's own policy paper on offshore wind, the *Offshore Wind: Policy Directions Paper*, it is illustrated that the total agricultural land in Victoria is 227,444 square kilometres – agricultural land today

available for onshore renewables. Now, this is considering offshore wind does not happen – 127,000 square kilometres. That to me is well over 50 per cent of Victorian agricultural land that has been earmarked for renewable projects.

Michaela SETTLE: Can you point me to the budget paper reference?

Jade BENHAM: It is the government's own *Offshore Wind: Policy Directions Paper*, page 19. It is budget paper 3, page 26.

Michaela SETTLE: I think that you will need to address this question to the Minister for Energy and Resources. It is not within my remit.

Jade BENHAM: So you do not want to defend agricultural land.

Members interjecting.

The CHAIR: Members can cease their interjections. Ms Benham, I am sure you know what I am going to say. Please do not put words into the mouth of the minister. She is just trying to answer your question. Just because you do not like her answer does not mean she is not answering it. Now, Minister, did you want to proceed?

Michaela SETTLE: Only to say that I will always advocate for the agricultural sector – that is my job, and that is what I expect of my department. In all of these decisions we make very clear the value of the agricultural sector, both to the communities that live there but also to our broader economy. I will always advocate for consideration in complex decisions that are being made. I will certainly put forward –

Jade BENHAM: Have you advocated or have you had any advice regarding the amount of agricultural land in this state that is listed and marked in that paper for renewable energy projects, as the Minister for Agriculture?

Michaela SETTLE: The paper to which you refer is the Minister for Energy and Resources, and I am not familiar with the detail –

Jade BENHAM: But it is agricultural land, and as the Minister for Agriculture, I would expect that you would have an interest in how much agricultural land would be –

Michaela SETTLE: I have a very strong interest in it. As I have said to you, Ms Benham, I will always be a very vocal voice to support the agricultural industry in any of these complex decisions being made.

Jade BENHAM: So what advice have you given to the minister for energy?

Michaela SETTLE: We advise –

Michael GALEA: That is not appropriate to ask. You cannot ask what ministers advise each other.

Jade BENHAM: Have you given any advice to any department, including DEECA, on the land earmarked for renewable energy projects?

Mathew HILAKARI: This is not a question about the budget.

Jade BENHAM: Have you sought any advice? Have you taken any interest in what that policy paper says, that is publicly facing and causing huge angst amongst the community?

Members interjecting.

The CHAIR: Excuse me, members. Ms Benham, your time is up. We are coming back to you. There is no need to throw your pen down. We are going to go to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. I want to talk about something you highlighted in your presentation, and that is around drought. Obviously that puts intense pressure, not just on

farmers but regional communities as well. Can you update us on government support for drought-affected farmers?

Michaela SETTLE: Yes, certainly. The agricultural community across Victoria have experienced some very severe rain deficiencies all across the state. I was very proud to serve on the Premier's drought taskforce, which brought together people from across the community, across industry and the banking industry to find ways that we could best support farmers but also the broader communities that they represent and feed into. A very comprehensive drought package was put together, but I would also point out that when we see those rainfall deficiencies, we are always there to support farmers. We were there in the 2015–16 droughts, and in the 2018–19 droughts we were there for farmers. During this most recent time we have invested as much as \$146.5 million into the drought support package. That was about providing both immediate relief but also longer term resilience because we do understand that these weather conditions will continue to come across the state, so people need to build resilience. We are seeing that support flow out into the communities now, with \$115 million that has been committed or delivered, and that has seen more than 13,700 farmers supported through events and also one-on-one advice. As I say, this is also about building future resilience. Nearly 3000 farmers have been able to upgrade their water infrastructure and 1100 have re-established parched pastures. These are really practical investments that will improve resilience for future dry conditions.

The Premier's drought taskforce has met five times and listened, as I say, directly to farmers and regional communities across Victoria, and Agriculture Victoria continues to monitor those conditions. There was a pretty universal 'whoop' this weekend when we saw that rain come across the state, and I know that that has been very welcomed by farmers. But of course we need that rain to continue to ensure that we can fill dams and top up those water supplies. We will continue to stand with Victorian farmers, providing the support they need not only to get through this drought but to really make sure they come out stronger on the other side.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. What sorts of conditions are affecting farmers that mean they require support?

Michaela SETTLE: The drought can have impacts in many, many ways. The significant rainfall across the state has really had great impacts across many farmers – whether you are in the Wimmera or the Mallee, which I visited in my early weeks in ag, you can hear positivity returning to those communities. But of course it does have a very long tail, and we know that further rainfall is needed to help farm businesses across the state to really get into that recovery phase. Since the beginning of the year, particularly in the northern and western parts of the state, we have seen encouraging levels of rain. However, we see that many areas, especially in the south, are still experiencing well below average rainfall. I know last year when I visited the south-west to see the dairy farms there, I saw them coping with the impacts of those low rainfalls – because of course drought affects farmers and each different farming system in different ways. For the dairy industry, it is quite heartbreaking to see, because of course that is a day-to-day operation. They are sending out milk every day. They cannot turn off animals, which is perhaps something that other farms might do in a drought situation.

We have supported more than 13,700 farmers with advice events and one-on-one engagement, helping them to navigate these complex conditions, because of course many of them now – well, we are already well into the sowing season, but they are having to make decisions. Prior to the autumn break they were making decisions about what they should put in. I know from my farming days, we once did what they referred to as dry sowing – when you plant without knowing if the rain is going to come – and that is a fairly terrifying thing to go through. I think I have told people this story before – I watched my then-husband do a rain dance one day and he said, 'This is \$80,000 of rain falling today.' That is the difference. When you have dry sown, you really have to – we were right on the edge of the autumn break and we had to see that rain come through.

We have supported more than 13,700 farmers with advice events and one-on-one engagement, and I think a really important part for me in the drought package has been providing that technical advice. I know that we were able to provide a second visitation for farmers in the south-west, because when you are making those really tough technical decisions, having someone experienced from Agriculture Victoria by your side is a great advantage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you so much. Just for the record, on the wind directions paper, I think it is good to emphasise that the paper that was being referred to by the Member for Mildura states that it is implausible that we would use that much agricultural land for wind farms, and that is why we are not going

down that road. That is why it is good to just put that on the record, because I would not want anybody to be misled. So on the drought support grants –

Members interjecting.

The CHAIR: Members cease their interjections.

Lauren KATHAGE: It is embarrassing, isn't it, to have the truth out there. Minister, you have talked about the sorts of conditions that are facing farmers and regional communities. Can you explain about, I guess, the intent and then the rollout of the farmer drought support program or package?

Michaela SETTLE: Yes, of course. It really speaks to that resilience piece that I was talking about earlier. The farm drought support grant program provides practical and immediate assistance to help farmers manage the impacts of drought now, but also into the future. When I went visiting some farms last year as a parliamentary secretary, we went and met with a farmer who had used that grant to buy much bigger water storage tanks, which really puts him in a position into the future. A very important part of it is that resilience. Of course there are \$5000 grants for farmers across all of Victoria, but in the south-west, where we know they have experienced a prolonged period of rain deficiency – more than two years – they were \$10,000.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We will go back to Ms Benham.

Jade BENHAM: Thank you, Chair. It was tough sitting through that. I am going to try once more. Given that the department said that there is no executive privilege with regard to the submissions that have been made regarding Western Renewables Link, VNI West and other large-scale renewables, are you able to supply this parliamentary committee with copies of those submissions?

Members interjecting.

The CHAIR: Members!

Michaela SETTLE: Perhaps let me make it clear that Agriculture Victoria are at every table when there is any discussion of land use, but if you would like that to be explained in more detail, I am more than happy –

Jade BENHAM: I would just like the submissions that have been made with regard to these. On what basis are you refusing to provide them?

Kate HOUGHTON: It is in an independent advisory committee under the planning provision. That is our input to that. That is in a different process which the minister does not have jurisdiction over. It is the Minister for Planning. We are providing that. The Minister for Planning then will get advice from that independent advisory committee, and then we will go –

Jade BENHAM: But it has come from this department. We are just asking for those documents. Surely you can provide them. I get the process. Why are you refusing to provide them? I just want to know why you are refusing to provide them.

The CHAIR: Ms Benham, the Secretary has answered this question – I have counted – five times now. I am going to ask the Secretary to answer it again, and then I would suggest you move on. Secretary, if you want to explain –

Jade BENHAM: I would suggest it is a contempt of Parliament, to be fair.

The CHAIR: Ms Benham, be very careful making accusations like that.

Jade BENHAM: What are they hiding? This has all been so secretive. Does the minister agree that you are turning productive farmland into an industrial wasteland?

The CHAIR: Excuse me – no, Ms Benham. Secretary, just for the record, do you want to say again – I think for the sixth time – your answer.

Kate HOUGHTON: The inputs that we provide from Agriculture Victoria will go into the planning provisions process, which is an independent advisory committee. That then gets reported to the Minister for Planning, and then the Minister for Planning will make her decision.

Jade BENHAM: I get that; I am just after the submissions.

Kate HOUGHTON: That is the process by which we provide the submissions.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. Does the minister agree that this Labor government is turning productive farming regions into industrial energy corridors and industrialising the regions whilst reducing direct support to the agriculture department?

Michaela SETTLE: No.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. Great. Let us talk about wild dogs, shall we?

Michaela SETTLE: Yes, certainly.

Jade BENHAM: How much is the total funding allocated in 2026 for fox control, wild dog management, deer management, feral pig control and rabbit programs?

Michaela SETTLE: In this budget we have \$2.2 million to extend the fox bounty, and I would like to note that the per head bounty has increased from \$10 per scalp to \$14 per scalp.

Jade BENHAM: Yes, I got that. Wild dog management?

Michaela SETTLE: That is right. The dingo support package, which was announced in September 2024, is \$2.6 million, and of course in the 2025–26 budget there was \$9.2 million over four years for the vertebrate species management program.

Jade BENHAM: None of that applies to the wild dog management program in the north-west?

Michaela SETTLE: As I said, \$2.6 million from September 2024 was in the dingo support package, which applies to both the north-west and the north-east but particularly provides supports in the north-west.

Jade BENHAM: We do not have a program in the north-west, so –

Michaela SETTLE: Well, I beg to differ. I think what you will find is that –

Jade BENHAM: We do not have a wild dog program.

Michaela SETTLE: as we speak there are bulldozers on the ground putting up the Yanac exclusion fence, and I think the farmers there are very happy. We have worked collaboratively with them.

Jade BENHAM: You think they are very happy, do you, Minister?

Michaela SETTLE: For having the Yanac fence? They are indeed. They have worked collaboratively with the department of agriculture to design that.

Jade BENHAM: Wild dogs are mauling lambs, sheep and other stock across the north-west and the north-east. That \$2.6 million that you speak of, how exactly is that going to manage to stop the lambs that are being mauled every single night? It is not going to buy much exclusion fencing.

Michaela SETTLE: Thank you for your question. I would like to say at the outset that I completely understand the really difficult situation those farmers are in. I have been a farmer myself. I have seen what foxes do to lambs, and it is pretty horrendous. It is not just about your assets, it is about the relationship that you have with your animals and animal welfare. So let me say very strongly I understand what the farmers in the north-west are going through, and I know that Agriculture Victoria is working with them consistently to find nonlethal ways of control. There are a variety of things that are being tested at the moment. They include companion animals like llamas and dogs. There is also, as I said, the Yanac fencing going up, and there are also cameras.

Jade BENHAM: How many dingoes were culled as part of the dingo support program last year?

Michaela SETTLE: The dingo support program is about supporting north-west farmers. It is a nonlethal –

Jade BENHAM: So, none?

Michaela SETTLE: It is a nonlethal response. But for details of that you would need to go to the Minister for Environment, who oversees that program.

Jade BENHAM: How many kilometres of exclusion fencing is being provided?

Michaela SETTLE: The 16 kilometres of electric fencing is part of a low-cost exclusion fencing trial, and that is going –

Jade BENHAM: 16 or 1600?

Michaela SETTLE: There are two different projects. The Yanac dingo exclusion fence will provide 70 kilometres, and that runs along the south of the edge of the Big Desert and protects farms across that region.

Jade BENHAM: So where is the 16?

Michaela SETTLE: The 16,000 electric fencing is part of that for properties in the north-west.

Jade BENHAM: The ones that were affected by bushfire?

Michaela SETTLE: I think I will have to ask my –

Beth JONES: Ms Benham, as a part of the support program we have been working closely with landholders, as you know, to trial different types of approaches to reduce predation or manage predation. That is including a range of fencing trials, which is the 16 kilometres the minister has referred to. In addition to that, we have now got a cluster fencing approach that we are developing with five or six most impacted landholders in the north-west to have a contiguous approach to managing or keeping dingoes out of private property and impacting on lambing.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. So keeping them in the Big Desert national park.

Michaela SETTLE: But you referred to bushfire, so you might in fact be referring to the Walwa River Road fire – the Tallangatta exclusion fence?

Jade BENHAM: No, I was referring to the Wyperfeld National Park fire, which burnt five properties. I thought that might have been the exclusion fencing. Is that part of those?

Beth JONES: Sorry, so it might be another thing there, Ms Benham. There is exclusion fencing separate to the fire, but I understand there has been some reinstatement of fire-damaged fencing as a result of fires.

Jade BENHAM: As well as the exclusion fencing.

Beth JONES: Correct.

Jade BENHAM: Okay.

Beth JONES: Separate things, yes.

Jade BENHAM: Excellent. Fantastic. Thank you so much. The pest management programs – what pest management programs have had funding reduced, delayed or scaled back since the 2023–24 financial year?

Michaela SETTLE: There is a range of pest management programs. Are you referring to the vertebrate or the invasive species?

Jade BENHAM: I am asking you which ones.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We are going to Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair, Minister, officials. Minister, you referred to \$62 million in bushfire recovery support in your presentation earlier. Can you please elaborate for the committee on the bushfire impacts that this initiative is responding to?

Michaela SETTLE: Thank you very much for that question. The 26 January fires had a devastating impact on our farmers and our rural communities. I think there was over 150,000 hectares of farming land impacted, and obviously that is both a financial toll but also of course an emotional toll on those farming families and the communities. The process of recovery for farm businesses and communities is challenging and will take considerable time. I have certainly visited the fire-impacted areas of the north-east and met with farmers and community members. Agriculture Victoria continues to maintain a strong presence at community and recovery events and hubs to liaise with impacted farmers and provide information and advice.

The \$62 million in bushfire recovery support is responding to the very significant and widespread impacts, which have been devastating for farmers and rural communities. Across the state the scale of impact has been substantial: over 1400 farm businesses affected, as I say, covering 150,000 hectares. Over 45,600 livestock were lost, more than 10,000 kilometres of fencing destroyed, over 500 sheds damaged or lost and more than 560 pieces of machinery and vehicles destroyed. These are not just statistics. They represent major disruptions to farm operations, to livelihoods and to entire communities. The recovery challenge is significant and will take time, which is why this support package is focused on both immediate relief and longer term recovery. I encourage impacted farmers to seek out support that is available. This is ongoing support, including from the bushfire and drought relief programs, and information is available for farmers on the Agriculture Victoria website. This investment and support responds to the scale and complexity of these impacts, supporting farmers to recover, rebuild and continue operating through these events and on the long road of recovery, as we always have.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. On the same note, can you give examples of some of the specific programs that this funding assists, including recovery grants?

Michaela SETTLE: Certainly. Of course there is the immediate response that we need to provide to people, and then there is the longer term response that is required through recovery. One of the most critical responses in the immediate term is the emergency fodder support program, because for farmers with livestock the pastures have gone and oftentimes their supply of fodder has gone, so it is a really key priority early on, making sure that we can get that fodder out there to farmers. I know that 527 requests for emergency fodder were actioned and there were more than 19,000 bales of fodder delivered to affected farmers. This provided immediate relief at a time when feed supplies had been destroyed and access was limited.

In terms of the recovery, our central program has been the primary producer bushfire recovery grants. They provide up to \$75,000 to help farmers with clean-up, repairs and getting their businesses back up and running. As at early May 391 applications had been received, 282 grants approved and over \$7 million in payments delivered to farmers. Primary producers have until 21 October to apply for those recovery grants. Those grants help address immediate recovery needs, such as repairing fences, replacing infrastructure and restoring operations. On a larger scale, the more macro recovery, primary producer bushfire recovery concessional loans offer up to \$250,000, and they are available to support the replacement of damaged equipment and infrastructure and assist with those short-term business costs. All of these programs sit alongside Agriculture Victoria's strong on-the-ground presence, working directly with farmers through recovery hubs and community engagement. This demonstrates that this government and these budget measures are providing targeted, practical support where it matters most, delivering immediate relief and backing farmers every step of the way as they recover, rebuild and get back on their feet.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. You just mentioned Agriculture Victoria. Can you elaborate on the role that Agriculture Victoria undertakes to support farmers and the farming community in bushfire recovery and relief?

Michaela SETTLE: Thank you for that question. Can I just say at the outset that I have unending admiration for the work of everybody across Agriculture Victoria. I have seen them through biosecurity risks, through drought and of course through this fire situation, and they are some of the most extraordinary and dedicated people I have ever come across. It is in their blood and their hearts, I think, most of the people who work in AgVic, and it is really wonderful to see.

Under the state emergency management plan, AgVic is the lead response support agency for agricultural and animal welfare, meaning that it gets in there and coordinates support for livestock and companion animals during an emergency. In the immediate response phase Agriculture Victoria acts as a relief lead agency, providing direct animal welfare assistance and coordinating relief services for affected farmers and communities. As I mentioned in my previous response, a key priority during the recent bushfires was the provision of emergency fodder and working closely with the VFF, who are a great partner with AgVic, ensuring that farmers can continue to feed their livestock throughout that period. As communities move into recovery, Agriculture Victoria takes on the role of recovery coordinating agency, overseeing support for landholders and primary producers as they rebuild. This includes leading the delivery of financial assistance with the disaster recovery funding arrangements in partnership with the Commonwealth to help farmers clean up, repair and restore their businesses.

Again, I really want to acknowledge the incredibly important role Agriculture Victoria staff play in these events. They are on the ground in very difficult circumstances. They work directly with farmers and communities at some of their toughest times. Again, I would like to say: thank you very much for your dedication and commitment.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. With the remaining time, can you give one specific example of an on-the-ground challenge faced by Agriculture Victoria in bushfire response and recovery?

Michaela SETTLE: Yes, of course. Bushfire is always a very difficult situation to be in, and there are many challenges when anyone goes into any sort of emergency area, and those challenges are pretty real.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Minister. Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good evening, Minister and officials. Just starting on page 22 of the 'Department Performance Statement', I can see the government is tracking the number of grants awarded through forestry programs. The Auditor-General has recently investigated grants under the \$320 million forestry transition program and found significant gaps in record-keeping and oversight processes. For example, the department spent \$1.35 million on 10 site rehabilitation grants, but the Auditor-General found no evidence that work had been carried out. Can I ask the Secretary to explain why the department did not require applicants to provide a scope of works for these grants.

Kate HOUGHTON: Yes. Thank you for the question. The \$1.61 million for the sawmill site rehabilitation – that is what you are talking about?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: The 10 site rehabilitation grants, yes.

Kate HOUGHTON: Yes. Funds were specifically – \$1.35 million was provided for the rehabilitation of those former industrial sites. What we could not demonstrate was that the funds were used on rehabilitation works, because the program did not require the recipients to provide evidence of completion of the works. However, what the department have done is we acknowledge that the program design did not require the evidence of it, but we have verified that the payments were made to eligible sawmills – not that the work had been done but that the payments were made in line with the guidelines and paid to eligible sawmills to support their rehabilitation.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Why was evidence of completion not required?

Kate HOUGHTON: It was a design fault within the program guidelines, I understand. It was not evidenced, but it still was within the eligibility and within the guidelines of the whole broader program.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Has that design fault been rectified for future grants?

Kate HOUGHTON: Yes. I will go to the CEO of Agriculture Victoria as to the steps that the department has made. Thanks.

Beth JONES: Just to add to that answer, the design of the program reflected the fact that it was known that the rehabilitation of sawmill sites would be a requirement if they were closing down. Based on previous experience in transition, we knew that would be a payment made. So the payment was actually – rather than a grant, it was a compensation amount provided. But we do take on board absolutely the need for some clarity in

those guidelines and the way the evidence is required, and we have got an action plan that we have since put in place in response to VAGO's audit that is a fairly deep commitment to how we will make sure that the record-keeping, the guidelines and that design take that on board for the future.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Can I ask, though: is it not standard due diligence to require successful businesses to demonstrate how they have used the funds when you are giving out a grant? Is that not standard practice?

Beth JONES: Yes. I can continue with that. Thank you. Yes, it is standard practice. I think what was different about the nature of the payment was, as I said, that it was a compensation amount that was a foreseeable cost that was going to be borne by sawmills. We had benchmarked it against previous transition costs, saw it as a compensation amount, not a grant, and therefore it was provided recognising that, as I said, as compensation as opposed to a grant that would be reimbursed or require an evidence base. So it was treated a little bit differently, but we take on the learnings from what VAGO found in relation to that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. VAGO cites gaps and inconsistencies in multiple other programs – for example, eligibility verification for caseworkers, cheques for grant payment milestones and businesses receiving support packages and redundancy claim payments. Can I ask: since the audit, has the department gone back to ensure the \$320 million was actually spent supporting workers and sustainable programs and was not just pocketed?

Beth JONES: Thank you for that important question too. I want to be really clear that VAGO did not find that any actual overpayment or underpayment had occurred. It was really a question of the record keeping that was associated with the various transactions that have happened. We have gone through and actually provided the evidence to VAGO as well, which backs up or is the evidence base for every single payment, and we are absolutely confident that every single payment that is made under those programs in turn is verified and there is an evidence base. We have taken on board the learnings in relation to the record keeping and the checklists et cetera, that they are all in the one place, as opposed to being dispersed through different record systems in the department. It was more about having the evidence base and the documentation in the one place. It was not about whether or not the payments should have been made in the first place.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. This committee heard earlier today the minister for advanced manufacturing comment in relation to the Heyfield mill, of which the government owns a minority stake, that it was assumed this mill is processing native forest timber from other states. Can I ask: with respect to this portfolio, did the department consider this as a risk to be accounted for when grants under the forestry transition program were distributed?

Beth JONES: I might just throw, if I could – Ms Hall is probably best placed to answer that question.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Sure. Thank you.

Deborah HALL: This department portfolio considered that the individual businesses would need to make their own commercial decisions about where they would source their timber from, including whether that was from plantations within the state, from interstate, internationally or from their private arrangements, and the forestry settings of other states are not matters for the Victorian government. We are unable to restrict timber trade, including in the way that we disburse payments to be spent by other parties. The trade in timber is governed by the Commonwealth constitution. Section 92 of the constitution provides that trade and commerce between states must be free. The department and the portfolio are obviously undertaking a range of other supporting activities to enhance timber production and timber availability within this state, and that includes planting new plantations as well as supporting innovation in the way that existing plantations can be used.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes. Thank you. But in relation to this particular program for Victoria, as these grants in the program were to transition Victoria away from industrial native timber harvesting, can I ask: was due diligence undertaken by the department to ensure that these grants were not simply being used to fund the continuation of native timber harvesting in other states?

Beth JONES: Yes, absolutely. There are a whole range of due diligence practices in place across every aspect of the forestry program. The payments or the support provided under the program support workers, businesses, communities and innovation, as you know. It is there for those purposes, but it does not get ahead

of, I suppose, any commercial decisions that are made by businesses. But yes, there are a whole range of safeguards in place for how grants are provided, and the design of the guidelines is to contemplate a whole range of risks.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Puglielli. Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you. Minister, welcome to your first appearance.

Michaela SETTLE: Thank you. It is a pleasure.

Mathew HILAKARI: I hope you have enjoyed it thus far. Excellent. Minister, I might take you to the National Centre for Farmer Health, and I will refer to budget paper 3, page 27, which mentions this investment. Why is farmer health a core issue for agriculture, Minister?

Michaela SETTLE: Look, it is a very important part of our support for farmers and regional communities. There are increasing levels of uncertainty for farmers and farming families. At the best of times it is hard to run a small business, but there is that extra layer of anxiety of course with unpredictable weather patterns and the sort of natural isolation that working the land brings with it. Farmer wellbeing is an absolute core concern for us in the agricultural sector, because we know that the success of that sector depends on the people and the families that sit behind it. Farming is a uniquely demanding industry. There are complex decisions being made dealing with climate variability, drought, natural disasters and market pressures. That combination places significant strain not just on farm businesses but also on the health, safety and wellbeing of the people who run them. As I said earlier, I managed the family farm for 10 years. We went through the millennial drought, and I certainly know the impact that it had on me and my family. It was a really difficult time. This sounds strange, but you just get sick of talking about it. The only thing that the farming community is talking about is the lack of rain – ‘How are we going to survive?’ – and that just adds extra pressure to family life.

The National Centre for Farmer Health is a really important initiative. They moved – I think it was about a year ago, in 2024 – into new premises in Hamilton. I was really delighted to go there and cut the ribbon, as it were. They are such a good organisation in terms of the support they provide. I think for a lot of farming communities they are a trusted voice. They are not just going out to a doctor who will not necessarily understand what they are feeling. It is about really making sure that we are tailoring programs specifically for them, because we know that when farmers have got that support around them they are better business managers, they are better for the whole community. I have got a particular love for the National Centre for Farmer Health.

Mathew HILAKARI: I can tell.

Michaela SETTLE: Yes, I know. They are really wonderful people. When you go and visit them their passion for looking after their communities just is written all over them. You can really feel it. It is a great, great organisation.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you for sharing some of your personal experiences here in evidence. It is really important and appreciated. Could you go into any more detail around what the centre undertakes? Your passion is rubbing off on this committee I think, and we would love to hear more about it.

Michaela SETTLE: You want to know more? Of course. It has been a long-term partner, the centre. It did move in 2024 – the building – but we have been partnering with them since 2008. They have been around. The centre, as I say, is based in Hamilton, and it is a partnership with Western District Health Service and also Deakin University. Basically at the core the centre delivers practical services and programs to improve the health, wellbeing and safety of farmers, farm workers, farming families and agriculture-dependent communities done in a really practical way. I know when I was up there they were talking to me about the fact that a farmer might come in to ask for advice about a program that is around, but it is an opportunity for them to say, ‘Hey, can we check your blood pressure while you’re here?’ It is as much about creating that safe space where they are comfortable to come in and get that support. We are investing \$900,000 to make sure that those wonderful services at the centre keep being there and delivering real results for our farmers.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister. I am hoping you could also touch on the Look Over the Farm Gate program, which is one of the programs that I believe is funded across this budget as well.

Michaela SETTLE: Yes. The Look Over the Farm Gate program is delivered through the National Centre for Farmer Health. It is around providing support and funding for get-togethers in the community. I go back to my previous response: when you are living through drought and every conversation at the dinner table is about the precarious state, let us face it, that your finances are in, it is really important to get out and to communicate. Farming is a pretty isolated workplace at the best of times. It is important to make sure that our farmers are getting out and engaging on something beyond the drought and the difficulties they are facing. Those grants are about getting communities together. There have been over 150 events run, and they have been attended by 38,000 people. That also sits alongside the Rural Financial Counselling Service, making sure that families and farmers have access to both financial and emotional support.

Mathew HILAKARI: That is fantastic. I am really glad to hear about that. Minister, with the same reference to budget paper 3, page 27, can you explain how this funding supports the centre to partner with Agriculture Vic as well?

Michaela SETTLE: Yes, of course. The \$900,000 allocated to the centre means that they can maintain delivery of their core services in safety, wellbeing and health for farming communities, but it means that Agriculture Victoria can continue to work directly with them to deliver really practical support on the ground. The centre plays a critical role in supporting mental health across farming communities and programs like mental health for ag provide practical peer-supported approaches. We find peer support in the agricultural industry is a really important trusted voice. It is a very strong peer-to-peer community, so programs like that work very well. There are tools like Ifarmwell, which was designed by Australian farmers to help manage stress, uncertainty and everyday pressures on the land. The centre also leads the Primary Producer Knowledge Network, including the Campfire platform, and this work connects farmers with information networks and resources to support mentally healthy agricultural workplaces.

Mathew HILAKARI: You mentioned a little bit the challenges of financial stress and risk. The Rural Financial Counselling Service is in the next paragraph down in the budget. Could you talk to some of the work that they undertake?

Michaela SETTLE: Yes. They are a really important partner for us, and of course they are also supported through the budget. They provide counselling and information –

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mr Hilakari. The time has come to an end. Minister and officials, thank you very much for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request. The committee will take a very short break before beginning its consideration of the portfolio of regional development at 6:45 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.