T R A N S C I P T

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Wildlife Roadstrike in Victoria

Bendigo – Wednesday 6 August 2025

MEMBERS

Georgie Purcell – Chair
Richard Welch – Deputy Chair
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WITNESSES

Meaghan Willis,

Erin Ashmore,

Deborah Gwyther-Jones, and

Manfred Zabinskas, Macedon Ranges Wildlife Network; and

Karl Dawson *(via videoconference)*, Wildlings Woodend Wildlife Shelter; and

Trevor Crawford, Woodlands Wildlife Rescue.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into Wildlife Roadstrike in Victoria. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee or who are watching the live broadcast of these proceedings. I also welcome any other members of the public watching via the live broadcast.

To kick off, we will get committee members to introduce themselves to you, starting with Mrs Deeming on the screen.

Moira DEEMING: Hi. I am Moira Deeming, Member for Western Metropolitan.

Gaelle BROAD: Hi. I am Gaelle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

Richard WELCH: I am Richard Welch, Member for North-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

The CHAIR: Georgie Purcell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

John BERGER: And John Berger, Member for Southern Metro.

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

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

For the Hansard record, could I get you all to state your full names and any organisation you are appearing on behalf of. For the sake of ease we will start with Karl on the screen.

Karl DAWSON: No worries. Karl Dawson, representing the Wildlings Woodend Wildlife Shelter.

Trevor CRAWFORD: My name is Trevor Crawford, representing Woodlands Wildlife Rescue.

Meaghan WILLIS: Meaghan Willis, representing the Macedon Ranges Wildlife Network.

Erin ASHMORE: Erin Ashmore, representing the Macedon Ranges Wildlife Network.

Deborah GWYTHER-JONES: Deborah Gwyther-Jones, representing Macedon Ranges Wildlife Network.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you so much. We now welcome your opening comments and statements but ask they are kept to around 10 to 15 minutes to ensure plenty of time for discussion and questions. You are free to separate it off per organisation if you wish.

Meaghan WILLIS: Erin is our representative.

The CHAIR: Great.

Erin ASHMORE: I am happy to go first. To the Chair and committee members: thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Erin Ashmore. I am the vice chair of the Macedon Ranges Wildlife Network, a grassroots volunteer-led organisation dedicated to rescue, rehabilitation and welfare of Victoria's native wildlife. Our network is made up of 52 active members, including trained rescuers, foster carers, shelter operators and Wildlife Victoria volunteers. We operate in a region experiencing rapid urban development, increased road infrastructure and growing pressure on native species. These overlapping challenges place the Macedon Ranges at the forefront of Victoria's escalating wildlife road trauma crisis. Our lived experience and the data speak volumes.

The Macedon Ranges is now recognised as one of Victoria's most significant wildlife trauma hotspots. Figures from Wildlife Victoria show that in the 2024 calendar year alone more than 3000 rescues were logged in our region, with the majority of these due to wildlife vehicle collisions – that is over seven animals every day in one shire. In the 2023–24 financial year the Macedon Ranges represented nearly 5 per cent of all wildlife rescue cases in Victoria, and until recently we had nearly 200 per cent more road-related incidents than the next-highest region. It is a devastating indicator of a system that is under stress. Alarmingly, recent data from Wildlife Victoria and AAMI Insurance reports show that other LGAs have increasing impacts as well.

As identified, the vast majority of these cases involve wildlife struck by vehicles, especially eastern grey kangaroos and swamp wallabies. These collisions frequently result in fatalities, significant property damage and traumatised drivers. Our network witnesses the aftermath daily: injured and deceased kangaroos on the roadside, orphaned joeys and increasing numbers of wombats and swamp wallabies caught in the path of vehicles. The trauma is not just to wildlife; it is distressing for drivers and rescuers and it is dangerous to road users, and it is preventable with action.

Supporting data from AAMI's 2024 animal collision hotspots report further reinforces our experience. The report highlights that more than half of all Australian drivers have hit an animal. Sixty per cent of drivers swerve or brake suddenly, increasing accident risk. Most collisions happen between May and October between dawn and dusk and on weekends, particularly Saturdays. According to the AAMI data, more than 40 per cent of drivers admit to ignoring wildlife warning signs. This can explain the 22 per cent annual increase seen in animal collisions, according to new claims data. Victoria ranks second only to New South Wales in the nation for wildlife vehicle collisions, and we are only 1 per cent lower than them. Wildlife Victoria has reported an 18 per cent increase in vehicle strike emergency calls in the last year, with more than 13,500 hit-by-vehicle cases lodged.

I want to be really clear that this is not a conservation issue; it is a public safety issue, it is a regional planning issue and it is a data transparency issue. Most importantly, it is a solvable issue if we address it collaboratively with a level of urgency and with some evidence-based solutions. What we see on a daily basis is the same pattern week after week: animals that are hit on rural roads with over 100-k speed limits between dusk and dawn where drivers do not expect to see them; injured animals suffering alone because there is no requirement for drivers to report a collision; good Samaritans and volunteers stopping on the sides of very fast, high speed limit roads with no safety protocols or police coordination; and rescuers euthanasing injured animals on the spot, often at their own emotional and financial expense.

There are several other key contributing factors to the high rates of wildlife–vehicle collisions, particularly in the Macedon Ranges. We operate in a region where human development is expanding, habitats are fragmenting and ancient wildlife corridors are being replaced by tarmac and traffic. Rapid urban development is encroaching on native habitat. Our roads are built through or near bushland, acting as barriers and attracting foraging animals to roadsides. The lack of adequate wildlife crossing infrastructure is also a contributing factor, and limited driver awareness, particularly around risk periods such as dawn, dusk and winter months. Publicly accessible hotspot maps are lacking, but rescuers and shelters consistently identify key collision zones. These

include the Calder Freeway and areas around Gisborne, Sunbury, Wallan and Heathcote where wildlife corridors cross major roads and where habitat loss drives animals towards roadside feeding. These locations are confirmed not only by our firsthand rescue data but are also supported by the national insurance reports.

We have made eight key recommendations in our written submission. I will highlight just a few critical ones here. In terms of legislation and reporting, right now hitting a wild animal with your car is not a reportable incident unless human injury or property damage occurs. What this means is that no formal record is kept, no intervention occurs, no-one checks for joeys or suffering animals and hotspot data remains unreliable. So we know even with the figures that we have, there is huge under-reporting. We urgently need to legislate mandatory reporting for wildlife collisions with a simple statewide system that allows incidents to be logged within hours. This will save lives, improve data and help responders get there faster. We also need dusk-to-dawn speed reductions in high-risk areas. Other jurisdictions have implemented this and seen real results. Lower speeds save lives; they save life for humans and wildlife.

Our volunteer sustainability is also essential. The volunteer-based model is no longer sustainable. Rescuers are covering their own costs for fuel, equipment, treatment and training. It is emotionally and financially draining. Volunteers are burning out and they are leaving. We recommend the establishment of a structured reimbursement program, expanded training support and increased funding through programs like the wildlife rehabilitator grants. We also urge exploration of a wildlife levy on car registrations or insurance premiums to fund rescue infrastructure. In an ideal world we would see a skilled workforce supported to work alongside other emergency services, such as Victoria Police, who are often contacted for euthanasia when volunteers are unavailable or not equipped.

Technology and infrastructure – there is no shortage of promising technology: virtual fencing, thermal imaging sensors and motion-activated signs. Yet most projects are stalled, underfunded or untrialled in Victoria. In 2023 the Macedon Ranges Shire Council and Wildlife Victoria proposed a pilot of motion-activated wildlife signs, and that project still has not received adequate funding. We call on the government to immediately fast-track pilots such as this and others like it while also encouraging ecological impact assessments to be carried out before implementing large-scale fencing or interventions that could disrupt wildlife movement. Victoria's infrastructure boom has not accounted for wildlife connectivity. New roads and subdivisions cut through critical habitat, with no obligation for developers to mitigate wildlife collision risk. We recommend fauna impact assessments as a mandatory part of all major planning permits; wildlife corridors embedded into planning codes; and developer contributions towards fencing, crossings and mitigation infrastructure. Wildlife safety should not be an afterthought; it should be fundamental in every new road and estate planning process from the outset.

Moving on to driver trauma and public safety, we talk a lot about animal suffering and rightly so, but we also must acknowledge the mental and emotional toll on motorists. Drivers who strike animals, especially large kangaroos, often suffer from shock, trauma, guilt and anxiety about what to do next. There is almost no formal support for these individuals. We recommend establishing counselling pathways, helplines and clear public guidance about what to do if you hit an animal. Additionally, we need stronger safety protocols to protect roadside responders from becoming victims themselves. Volunteers at the moment are required to self-fund their own road safety equipment and signage.

Moving on – it is also a cultural issue. Wildlife vehicle collisions are not just a planning failure; they are also a cultural failure. Some drivers still see kangaroos as pests, some deliberately speed through wildlife zones and some do not stop at all, and that is why we need investment in education, starting in schools, that promotes empathy for native animals and fosters lifelong respectful driving behaviours. We must embed wildlife awareness into driver education, public campaigns and planning decisions. It is about shifting the values of a society that has become dangerously indifferent to the lives of animals we share the land with.

We believe the solutions are achievable, and many are already being trialled in other states and locations. On behalf of the Macedon Ranges Wildlife Network, I urge this inquiry to support the development of publicly accessible wildlife collision hotspot maps drawn from Wildlife Victoria, insurer and rescuer data; investing in mitigation infrastructure such as wildlife fencing, underpasses and warning signs in high-risk areas like the Calder Freeway; launch public education campaigns targeting regional drivers focused on prevention, reporting and safe responses; ensure local wildlife networks are resourced, included in decision-making and supported in

delivering frontline services; improved data collection and integration so that underreported incidents are not lost in the system; and strengthening partnerships between government, insurers and local wildlife groups.

In closing, it is really important to remind ourselves that behind every statistic is a life and not just animals. Every wildlife collision is a risk to human life and to community wellbeing. Wildlife road strike is not inevitable. If we want different results, we must take different actions now. Every animal that dies on our road, every orphaned joey and every traumatised driver, every exhausted volunteer is part of a crisis that we can and must prevent. The Macedon Ranges Wildlife Network stands ready to work with government, with councils, with insurers and with the public to reduce the wildlife road toll. Let us take this opportunity to lead with evidence, compassion and practical solutions that will protect both people and wildlife. On behalf of the Macedon Ranges Wildlife Network, thank you for the opportunity to speak. We welcome your questions and offer our full support in developing effective, humane and evidence-based policy solutions.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Were there any other opening statements, or was that from everyone?

Meaghan WILLIS: That is from us three, unless Trevor or Manfred wanted to say something individually?

Manfred ZABINSKAS: No, I am good.

Trevor CRAWFORD: I was going to offer a little bit of an insight into myself individually as one rescuer, and there are a lot of us doing it.

The CHAIR: Please.

Trevor CRAWFORD: My running costs alone for myself on the vehicle are about $600 to $700 a week, doing an average of 1450 k's, and I am reining in my rescue area more and more every day because I cannot travel as far as I used to, because it is getting busier and busier in my local region, Bacchus Marsh. Everyone is in the same boat, and every day it is harder and harder to get out of bed and go and do it because, you know, tomorrow is going to be the same. I have taken some screenshots. I pin drop every animal that I attend, and I have dropped some photos of the Google Maps to show you my pin drops in my area as one rescuer – how busy it is in the region, which is not even considered one of the busier regions. I have got those if anyone wants to have a look.

The CHAIR: Yes, great. I might get committee staff to collect them and pass them out. Is that okay? We can just pass them down the table. Thanks, Trevor. Great. Is that all?

Trevor CRAWFORD: Yes, that is about it.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you. That leaves us plenty of time for questions. Members, we will do about 5 minutes each, and then if we have time we will go through again, starting with Mrs Deeming.

Moira DEEMING: Thank you so much. I just want to congratulate you for how passionate that speech was and how much you care about humans and animals and how much thought you have put into this. I have just got some questions for more information. On your proposal about stopping and reporting wildlife collisions, I am interested to know about what level you think the duty and penalties should be. I guess I am asking: should they be in the same range as for hitting a human or not? What would your suggestions be in terms of legislating that?

Manfred ZABINSKAS: I guess that the answer is already in place, because under the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act*, if you strike an animal and then do not render assistance you are actually committing an offence under an existing Act, and the penalty units are already stipulated. So basically it would be just a case of actually enforcing existing legislation. The penalties are quite severe and appropriate. It is all already specified under POCTA.

Moira DEEMING: I did have a look at that. Thank you. I could not find where it specifically mentioned road strike, so maybe one of your recommendations could be to make that more specific as well if you are already happy with the penalty units.

Manfred ZABINSKAS: Yes.

Moira DEEMING: I am not putting words in your mouth – just perhaps that could be one of them. I was interested to hear about how unsafe your volunteers are when they are trying to do this work. That is absolutely terrifying. I would not want to hit someone doing that work, and I would not want someone volunteering and helping out in our community to be put at that kind of risk. Maybe you could expand on that. I was trying to think about what kind of accreditation you guys could possibly be given access to that is already in existence, like traffic control. Traffic controllers already have that training, and maybe it could be, since you are volunteers, something that you could have free access to or something like that. I was wondering what your ideas were, if you had any others.

Deborah GWYTHER-JONES: I do. The government recently changed the rules around all emergency services vehicles, which are now required to slow to 40 kilometres an hour. But we are not considered part of that, so you are not obligated to slow down if someone is assisting wildlife on the side of the road. I think part of the problem with that is we are not identifiable.

Moira DEEMING: You are legally allowed to do what you are doing, and yet there is no legal recognition of what you are doing in terms of a slowing of a speed limit or things like that.

Deborah GWYTHER-JONES: Correct.

Moira DEEMING: So that needs to match up.

Deborah GWYTHER-JONES: We use our hazard lights. I do not think we are allowed to use the flashing beacon lights legally. However, some rescuers do because we need to make ourselves as visible as possible. If it is a life, I would rather illegally use a beacon light than be hit by a car that does not want to slow down.

Moira DEEMING: And your life.

Deborah GWYTHER-JONES: Yes.

Moira DEEMING: Or does not see you and would have liked to have known to see you to –

Deborah GWYTHER-JONES: Correct.

Moira DEEMING: That seems to me to be absolutely commonsense. If you are not doing anything illegal, if you are allowed to do what you are doing according to the law, then there should be some kind of provision for you to do that safely.

Deborah GWYTHER-JONES: Yes.

Moira DEEMING: The other question was – actually you have already answered that one. I have been taking up a lot of time today. I think you have given really helpful, practical proposals. Thank you so much for everything.

Karl DAWSON: Would I be able to make my opening statement, if I could?

The CHAIR: Of course. Sorry, Karl. I thought everyone was done with those. Please go for it.

Karl DAWSON: Not a problem. Thank you very much. Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to speak at this important inquiry. My name is Karl Dawson, and I operate the Wildlings Woodend Wildlife Shelter in conjunction with Melanie Fraser in the Macedon Ranges. I have been a wildlife rescuer for around about 15 years and a licensed darter for 11 of those. This is all done alongside my full-time career, looking after the cybersecurity of critical infrastructure and organisations, as well as of course running a full-time shelter. Speaking of which, our shelter specialises in the rehabilitation of koalas, swamp wallabies and small native species such as phascogales and Krefft's gliders.

At a minimum I end up euthanising around about five kangaroos each week almost exclusively due to road strike. This often happens on my way to work in the wee hours of the morning, finding animals still alive, suffering, sometimes lying in the middle of the road, sometimes with plastic car parts still strewn around them; it is a pretty confronting way to start the day, and I am usually on the road between 5 and 5:30 in the morning. While most people are probably still asleep, I am pulling over and having to end an animal's life, and then it

plays out again on the commute home. It is by no means just kangaroos – it is also wallabies, koalas, echidnas and a disturbing number of birds of prey; the latter can often be because they were feeding on the carcasses of other wildlife that had not been moved far enough off the road and so get caught up as collateral damage.

There is a common quote that you cannot manage what you do not measure, and I guess that applies to wildlife road strikes as well. If we are not recording where it is occurring, then we cannot effectively manage how we mitigate it. Victoria is a pretty big place with a lot of road, and this gap in data collection severely limits the government's ability to identify hotspots, assess patterns and evaluate the effectiveness of mitigation strategies. The ability to record accurate latitude and longitude data is readily available to us all; it is just a centralised implementation and management of it that seems to be missing. It is encouraging to hear from previous submissions that this is a known and active area of discussion. I have done my part in the contribution to the apps, for all that has been touched on by previous presenters, by developing my own iPhone app for – surprise, surprise – the recording of koala incidents, given that we look after koalas. I am in no way wedded to it though and would happily use something else if something better came along. I think it is less about the app itself, though, and more about, as has been touched on, the back-end data. Standardising the database schema would be a good thing; that way data could be exported and imported between whichever app people happen to be using and/or sent up to a centralised, government-managed database if needed.

Then there is the lack of wildlife corridors and connected habitats across the state: as land is cleared for housing, agriculture and infrastructure, animals are increasingly forced to cross roads to access food, water, shelter and mates; without dedicated fauna crossings or functional green corridors, wildlife are left to navigate dangerous human-built environments, and way too many do not survive it. Over 15 years I have seen the common theme of new estates or infrastructure being built and a corresponding increase in the number of animals hit in those areas. Planning for wildlife and infrastructure design just does not seem to reach into the proactive end of the equation. Metal roadside barriers intended to improve human road safety, and I have no doubt that they do, have become death tunnels for wombats, echidnas and even koalas. Once these animals enter, they are trapped with no obvious way of escape and are funnelled directly into the path of traffic. These barriers are rarely, if ever, designed with fauna in mind. There are no escape hatches, no underpasses, no motion sensors and no exit ramps – just a cold, hard corridor to nowhere. This also creates a significant human safety issue for those of us left responding to injured wildlife, with no place to safely pull over and no option but to walk along the road to reach the animal, often in 80 or 100-kilometre-an-hour zones and often at night; even with fluoro vests, it is a dangerous endeavour. This is an issue that could be mitigated through the implementation of escape routes for the animals through the barriers, and also for humans, because not all rescuers are physically able to just jump over a barrier to get to safety if they need to. Proactively alerting drivers to the presence of wildlife on the road in known hotspots could go a long way to reducing the prevalence of road strikes, and again it is encouraging to hear that this has been a recurring theme in the discussions today.

Quite a few years back I prototyped a kangaroo deterrent solution that I had built as 'multimodal' in so much as it used light and sound as well as movement to try to deter kangaroos, in this case from crossing farmland. It may even have been presented as an idea to the Macedon Ranges Shire Council, but I am not sure if that actually went ahead. I made it multimodal because I had been trialling an active, high-frequency audio roo-deterrent device in my car for a number of years, with mixed results. Anecdotally it appears to make them take notice at slower speeds but was not really applicable at freeway speeds. The progression of AI detection models, combined with a significant cost reduction of the cameras and the computer hardware needed to run them, has made solutions based on this approach a realistic option that simply was not possible even just five years ago when I was developing my first solution. As an example, I am building a prototype at the moment for just a couple of hundred dollars in hardware and the time taken to train the AI models for each of the species of animal. A solution such as this could be deployed in a hotspot that would detect wildlife on the road in real time and either trigger active speed reduction signs so that you do not have permanent reduction in an area or even just flashing amber lights until the animals have moved off the road. There are definitely solutions that are eminently doable; we just need the political will to be able to do them.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thanks, Karl, and sorry for leaving you off at the start. We will go back to questions, and I will go to Mr Berger.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair. Thank you all for coming along today. You will hear it from my colleagues as well: we thank you for the work that you do, rescuing our wildlife as you come across these

unfortunate scenarios. For you, Erin, I have just got a couple of questions. You mentioned you have 52 active members. How many inactive members do you have?

Erin ASHMORE: Yes. We have about eight at the moment who are previous volunteers who are taking a bit of a step back. We have engaged in significant recruitment efforts over the last six to eight months. October saw us increase our membership significantly. We attended all of the local markets in our region. We attracted new members who had lots of different skills, because we also acknowledge it is not about just the direct work with animals. A lot of people are nervous about that, but they have significant skills to offer. So we were able to attract people with skills in website design and development, who have since created a new website for us so we can engage in community education in a different way. The experience of being in those local environments also highlighted to us just the lack of knowledge people have in who to contact if they do have a vehicle impact with an animal and how to access support.

John BERGER: Thank you. One of your recommendations was to improve multi-agency collaborations. Can you expand on that and what that might mean?

Erin ASHMORE: I suppose with the lack of resources the only thing we can do is collaborate around the efforts that we know will make a difference. So community education – we need our local councils to be promoting wildlife safety, and they do a fantastic job. Macedon Ranges Shire Council do provide information to local residents about safe rural fencing, but we can do better, particularly around road safety. We need to share resources where possible and utilise all avenues – social media campaigns, engagement with our local schools where those have access with the community. I think with local government, as we identified, we know where the hotspots are, we know where the peak areas are. And Karl identified as well – with urban planning processes, if local groups are consulted in conjunction with new projects, then we can maybe reduce some of the risks that we see, after projects are completed, and we can maybe avoid some of those mistakes moving forward, and that requires collaboration and partnership. It requires meaningful conversation around planning to make sure that everyone's needs are met.

John BERGER: Sure. One final question: you said in your opening submission that people are ignoring warning signs.

Erin ASHMORE: Yes.

John BERGER: Can you give us some insight into that?

Erin ASHMORE: I had another look at the recent AAMI insurance reports, and their own data that they collect from new claims motorists have identified they do not pay any attention to static road signs. There is also significant evidence available to suggest that static road signs are not as effective as road signs that maybe have flashing lights or other indicators, and that is extremely concerning. Even in that data there was an annual increase of 22 per cent on average in vehicle impacts, because motorists are not paying attention to that. We can do better there, and that does require, again, collaboration with insurance companies, with local government and with other providers who engage in community education messaging. We need media to jump on board with this as well.

John BERGER: Do you think that the signs as they currently are – a diamond with yellow background with a kangaroo on it – are sufficient to sort of say to people, 'Well, this is a spot'?

Erin ASHMORE: No, and I think the evidence shows that they are not sufficient anymore. I think in some areas there is additional marking in paint on roads and rumble strips also in certain areas. Flashing lights are shown to have far increased behaviour change in drivers than just the static road signs. But we see it in our communities when we are doing rescues: between dusk and dawn the speed limits do not vary either, and people do not drive to the conditions, unfortunately. They do not slow down when they see hazard lights on the side of the road either. We may be engaged in a rescue with an injured animal that could potentially jump back onto the road after it has been hit already. We need to do better in driver education on the whole.

John BERGER: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Berger. We will go to Mrs Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you. Just talking about signage, I feel like I should give a shout-out to the residents near Harcourt that have made their own signs and put them out in the road that say 'Beware of wombats', because there are definitely wombats in that area. So many questions – I guess I am just interested in that initial response when someone calls. In this area it is wildlife rescue, but if you are travelling in another part of Victoria, is it a different number to call? How does that all work?

Erin ASHMORE: Wildlife Victoria is a statewide emergency contact number. All of the volunteers in our network are registered with Wildlife Victoria, and the jobs come through Wildlife Victoria as a central location. They also provide recognised training to volunteers. They collect most of the data around wildlife. What often happens though: because we are known in our communities, once someone sees you or they get your number, we do receive direct calls often, and for some volunteers that is very onerous and 24 hours. Once a member of the public has your direct number, that number is often shared on social media sites as well, which, again, creates an additional challenge. But, yes, across the state, Wildlife Victoria is that number. But yes, people use other avenues. I do not know if anyone else wanted to –

Trevor CRAWFORD: Yes, it would definitely be great to have one central number, and that is getting worse and worse as time goes on. It gets busier. More groups pop up with more numbers to call and more people calling rescuers direct. The one thing that is lacking at the moment is people do not know who to call. Nearly everyone you talk to pulls up and says, 'We spent half an hour googling and we rang a number – they didn't answer. We rang another number; we waited on hold.' I think there needs to be large-scale media on what to do, like when to stop, who to call, how to drive at those times when the risk of hitting an animal is high. People just do not know. People never expect to hit an animal. It is the first one they have hit, and you hear the same story every day, but nobody knows what to do.

Gaelle BROAD: Yes, that is so true. I live in this area, so I kind of assume – because we drive so slowly, because it is a choice of you either losing your car for a few months if you do hit one or driving slowly. So that is what we are saying to kids, but it is just so prevalent now, it is incredible. Do you have a comment on that? Because in a way your groups are fairly newish. I guess originally it was more police or rangers that would respond. How did it work previously?

Erin ASHMORE: I think, as identified, many of the active volunteers have been doing this work for 15 or more years in their communities. I think more recently we have become more coordinated with our capacity to apply for grants and engage in different ways with our communities to promote. We certainly have a level of coordination from Wildlife Victoria, but they are extremely underfunded and lack capacity to provide localised support that is required across the state. So I think there are coordinated efforts and there are similar groups to ours operating across Victoria doing amazing work with no resources, basically, or extremely limited resources. But a lot of it is through self-funding, personal effort and investment, and as we have identified, people get burnt out. It is just not a sustainable model.

Manfred ZABINSKAS: Quite right. It was originally done by police and rangers, particularly rangers, back a few decades ago, and then as time went on, there was a drift away from that. In fact I do not know any rangers that actually carry firearms anymore. There are a few shires that potentially do, but most do not. When I have questioned them, they have just said for legal reasons they do not want their staff carrying firearms. Police are always on call and still are, but the problem with police is that they are under-resourced. So what we find is that even though police might be contacted and are in attendance, they get diverted – they have got their own priorities. Also, they cannot afford the time that we take to go and search for an animal if it is not in the spot that was reported, so many animals get left. Of course, notoriously, they are not trained or expert at checking pouches and assessing injuries, and we would get a lot of police that would elect not to put an animal down because they were not sure that it was injured severely enough to require it. So while they were the ones doing it and while it certainly took the pressure off us, it is not the right answer because they are not the people that are trained and expert in that field. There was a natural movement for rescuers just to take that upon themselves, to do it so that it was done properly. In my initial days, 35 years ago, we would call on farmers, and that is when I realised there is not a lot of firearm training out there either. The results were disastrous and animals were dealt with very poorly, and basically we needed to do it – there was not any other choice if we wanted it done properly.

Gaelle BROAD: Just with the reduction of speed limits and that consideration too, even at 40 you can hit a kangaroo, because they will just come out the side. And we have heard of other things like the underpasses or

the overpasses, the virtual fencing – there seem to be question marks over some of the data for that. In these various tools, what do you see as the most important priority in how to reduce wildlife –

Erin ASHMORE: I think public education across the board for all of those things – driving appropriately to the conditions, because even with reduced speed you are less likely to kill an animal or be at risk yourself. We know that around human campaigns: you reduce the speed, you reduce your risk. It is the same with animals – those same methods work for animals. You may not be able to avoid a collision, but you might be able to safely stop. The animal still may impact your car, but it is less likely to result in the death of the animal and also reduces safety impacts. We would absolutely say without a doubt: community education, and also, just on what Trevor was saying before letting people know who to contact, how to access help at that crucial time, building confidence in motorists around what to do if they do have a vehicle impact. I do not know if anyone wants to –

Manfred ZABINSKAS: But we need a change in culture as well. I did not give an opening statement or anything, but I have been around a long time. I have been doing this for 35 years. I have done some rough estimates, and I have attended somewhere between 20,000 and 30,000 road hits in my career as a rescuer. One thing that I have noticed over the years – and it is more prevalent in recent years – is that in the vast majority of cases where kangaroos have been struck and left lying on the road, typically the people who hit them are not the ones that ring it through; that has probably been mentioned. At least 90 per cent of animals that are hit do not get reported by the driver.

The other thing that is quite shocking is that in most cases there is no debris around the animal, so they are not getting hit by normal cars. I am finding that residents that drive normal cars tend to take more care, whether it is because they are worried about their car or they are just more sensible people. There are a lot of four-wheel drives and a lot of tradies and a lot of trucks and heavy vehicles, and I have learned over the years the attitude is they do not need to slow down or avoid a collision; they plough through our animals and just keep driving, and there is basically no damage to their vehicle. If you see an animal on the side of the road, out of curiosity just see if you can find bits of glass, plastic and parts of a car. In most cases you do not. They have been hit by four-wheel drives, and they are not interested in slowing down and wasting time.

Gaelle BROAD: Just briefly, when I have looked at the data available on the number of kangaroos, it seems it is quite an extensive number, and from talking to people in the area that have lived here 70 years, it was rare to see a kangaroo. What do you see as contributing to the increase in the population? Has that had an impact?

Meaghan WILLIS: That is a very fair question. It is noticeable that there seem to be a lot more kangaroos at the moment. But what in fact is happening is, because of the drought conditions, the kangaroos are moving out of their normal habitat, being the bush, and moving roadside to graze because that is where the feed is. They are also being pushed out because of the development and so forth. There is a perception, and an understandable perception – you hear they are in plague proportions, they are everywhere, and that is why people are thinking that way. But in fact it is not actually the case. Over time they will disappear back into the bush, a great deal of them, when there is more feed for them. But whilst they are getting pushed out of their habitat, while there is all fencing going up – you see a lot of properties now putting up 7-foot exclusion fences to keep the roos out – they are getting pushed out from where they naturally live, and they are congregating in much bigger groups for all of those reasons that I just said as well, because they have lost their home. So there is a perception, an understandable perception, but it is really not factual.

Trevor CRAWFORD: We are developing fertile, sustainable areas, like our new estates, that are around rivers and creeks and areas where they have always lived. So we are pushing them out of where they are now, and they are all gathering on the fringes of these areas and travelling back in at night, trying to get back to where they have lived for thousands of years. One thing I have noticed is on particular roads that I used to attend five times a week I have not done a rescue for eight months, but 4 kilometres east is now a road that we are attending every two days – and then that road goes quiet. It is almost like the population is moving around. They are not exploding in numbers in a particular area, they are actually on the move, whether it is in search of food – we have had a massive increase with the dry period that we have had through winter this year before the rain. We have had a lot more road hits over the last few months. But, yes, the hotspots are changing.

Karl DAWSON: I think Trevor and I are probably in sync on that one in that I was going to say, for example, that at our place we have maybe a small mob of 10 roos that we will see for a week, and then they go for a while. We may get some more ones moving in, and the mob that was at our place will have moved a

kilometre down the road and they will graze there for a while. So you can end up with double counting or triple counting, depending on when you are counting them, because it can actually be the same mob that has just moved to a different location.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs Broad. I might pick up from there. I just want to say thank you all for being here, first of all. I live in the Macedon Ranges and obviously see every day the impact that road strike is having on wildlife. But I want to drill a little bit more down into the huge strain that rescue and care work has on the people in the sector. I have spoken to you all I think in some capacity individually about this issue. I met with Trevor when I was a candidate. I think you told me that you had spent an absurd amount of money just in one year. One of the things that has been proposed – and you mentioned it in your opening statement, Erin – is putting a voluntary donation on vehicle registrations to help those who are responding to wildlife road strike. Even if half of road users in Victoria did this, it would equate to about $5 million a year, which is money that the wildlife sector just has not seen before. Could you explain to us the costs that are associated with wildlife rescue from road strike from the initial rescue? Perhaps, Manfred, you can speak to the ongoing costs when those animals then come into your care for up to a year.

Manfred ZABINSKAS: It is actually easy for me to give you those figures right at the moment, because I am enjoying one of those very rare years. It is the second time I have actually received government funding to cover my operational costs at my shelter. We are a modest-sized shelter compared to some others in the state, so there are certainly bigger ones. I have got 19 kangaroos in my lounge room at the moment and considerably more outside, but we are still relatively small-scale. To keep it in perspective, we are not talking about hundreds of animals. But because of the grant that I received, for the second time in 33 years, I need to keep very strict records, and so I have been keeping every single receipt and documenting and monitoring my costs. Over the last 12 months those costs have just hit $46,000, and that is absolute consumables. It does not include my fuel for going to rescues. This is just for milk, dry food, bedding and medical expenses for the animals in our care. If I want to include fuel and other indirect costs, it would be well over $60,000 a year.

Richard WELCH: For how many animals?

Manfred ZABINSKAS: At any one time probably 30 to 40 animals, but we have a lot of turnover of course.

Richard WELCH: But we could average it out. You could get an average figure of $60,000 divided by 300.

Manfred ZABINSKAS: Kangaroos are a long-term care thing, and different shelters have different costs. Some animals can be quite expensive but in care for a very short period. Unfortunately, when a kangaroo comes to us, often it is out of a pouch, which means we have got up to two years of rehabilitation before it is released back into the wild. At the moment in the house we have got 18 kangaroos that are on special milk formula, and for those 18 kangaroos alone, just for the milk, just for one type of milk formula, we are on $200 a week at the moment. So the costs are massive. I am not quite sure what I am going to do when the grant expires next month.

Erin ASHMORE: I think further to what Manfred is saying, if you are responding to multiple species, which we are – we might be going out to treat wombats with mange. We need to supply antiseptic spray; that is $40 a bottle. We need to supply equipment to extendable treatment policy. Now, that can be anywhere from $10 to $15 each. We might have multiple lots of equipment that we might need to leave with landowners who might be supporting that. For a mange treatment, Bravecto – $100 a treatment, self-funded. We have our road safety signs, which we mentioned before. We recently did a campaign to raise some funds to contribute to those costs, but they were roughly $65 a sign for our volunteers to self-purchase. We also looked at magnet signage. They are about $40 a sign, for magnets to keep us safe. We have consumables like gloves that we use on every rescue, multiple times a day – spray paint, captive bolts. If people are firearms-licensed, the cost of licensing every year, maintenance of firearms to ensure safe use and captive bolts – they require a lot of maintenance to ensure that they are effective and safe to continue using. They need to be replaced regularly as well. Most providers of them – they are about $800 each now. So if you are replacing that every four or five years, depending on how often you are using them – and we are using them often – it is expensive. There is other first-aid equipment and blankets and kits, like safe transport kits and carriers. There is so much that goes into it,

depending on the species that you are responding to. Also, it is the time taken almost to become an expert in every animal that you are responding to, because you have to know what you are going to look at to assess or then make a call to someone you think knows more. So it is the time you are taking on the phone even to consult when you are assessing. It is the time taken then to go to vets to have an animal assessed as well. At that point it is not just that individual thing. So I think even our own capacity to assess for cost, realistic cost, is almost impossible at times. But in terms of consumables it is extensive. I would say most people on this panel would spend thousands each year on just equipment that they are turning over in response to animals.

Deborah GWYTHER-JONES: And then on top of that, fuel and wear and tear on your vehicle. We all do kilometres and kilometres, especially in regions like Macedon Ranges. Your average rescue, for me, is probably 30 to 40 k's. So you do that multiple times a day, and the amount of money that we spend on fuel and then tyres – you have to factor all of that in, but that is completely self-funded.

The CHAIR: Just before I hand over to Mr Welch, I know there are so many things that we can do to address this crisis, but obviously retention and burnout across the sector is a really big problem, which of course exacerbates the problem because there are less and less people to respond to it. Do you see long-term sustainable funding as one of the main priorities for volunteers in order for this work to continue at the capacity that it needs to?

Erin ASHMORE: I think it is essential. As we mentioned in our opening speech, I do not think there is a volunteer in this country who would not advocate for a funded, sustainable workforce where they are acknowledged, the specialist skills required to respond to injured wildlife. As Manfred was saying, yes, it is a gap that Victoria Police sometimes fill in terms of euthanasing animals, but they do not have the experience. Using firearms is dangerous; using firearms in public is dangerous. It is a specialist activity. It is a very regular request, though, in responses to wildlife. It needs to be recognised as a specialist skill and acknowledged with adequate funding for that specialist skill. It is a huge gap. A lot of us who do captive bolt euthanasia cannot actually safely get close to mobile animals. When animals are injured, they are still mobile, and they can be mobile on horrific injuries. So even for the animal's distress and human distress it is imperative that we have a funded workforce.

It does not make any sense to me that VicPol would not be advocating for these resources too and demonstrating their own costs. We speak to members regularly. They do not like going to these jobs. They do not like euthanasing animals. They do not see it as part of their role, but they do it because it is a public safety issue. They actually are funded, though, for their equipment and can make those decisions on the roadside. We really need to recognise the absolute training and skill – years of training – that goes into effectively being able to do that specialist role, and Manfred mentioned it before. In the past it could get messed up very easy. We do not want to see that, but it does require an acknowledgement of the training and years of experience that go into being able to do that job well and humanely.

Manfred ZABINSKAS: Something else that has impacted on our ability to function and be sustainable too is there has been a shift over decades. I will get into some dangerous territory here, but right back when I started most wildlife shelters were run by couples. The female was at home looking after the kids and they would take on animals, and Hubby brought in a wage. While, okay, that is not the way modern society is, it worked back then. Now we have got a situation where every couple needs to have two incomes to survive. The cost of living is such that there is not the luxury of being home and having somebody able to care for animals as a voluntary service. There is so much more pressure on people now, which I think is one of the reasons we are not seeing wildlife shelters come up. Thirty years ago we would get new wildlife shelters. Some would close, some would open; we would have this changeover. That is not happening anymore. Now we have got remnant wildlife shelters that have been doing it for decades. They are burning out. They are splitting up. They are crashing and they are stopping, and then that exacerbates the whole problem further down the line, because then the remaining shelters struggle even more. So it has become a critical problem with funding as an option – as I mentioned, my costs alone are up towards $60,000 a year. It is not a case of whether you want to do it; it is physically impossible to do that and try to earn enough money to pay normal bills and survive and cover the costs of the shelter. We are in a critical stage where no matter how many people want to do it, they just cannot afford to do it. It is that bad.

Karl DAWSON: And just further on that as well, running a shelter and working full time – when I was just doing rescue on top of working full time, I at least had the ability to, once I had done a rescue, then walk away.

When you have then got a shelter, at the moment you work full time, you will then do rescues, then you go home and you have got a shelter to run and you have got animals to feed, and that can take you into the wee hours of the morning. And then you get up and you do it all again. There is no stop to it; it does not end. As Manfred said, it is not necessarily sustainable because it just feels like you are doing this around the clock nonstop, and it is a pressure cooker the entire time.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Karl.

Meaghan WILLIS: But we want to do it. We just need to be supported better, because animals deserve better.

The CHAIR: I agree. Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, everyone, very much. Trevor, we have met before, haven't we?

Trevor CRAWFORD: Yes.

Richard WELCH: In Whittlesea? Maybe in Woodend. Thank you very much for your work you do. We talk about data a lot, and data has come up a lot – rightfully so, because I think that is really the right starting point. But I think there is two bits of data. One is the scale of the problem for the wildlife themselves, and I think the rest of Victoria would be scandalised if they understood the numbers. Education programs would be great, but just if we had better data to just display the numbers, that would be a big education in itself. But there is a second bit of data that I think you can contribute that is in your control, which is your costs, because also no-one realises the weight you are bearing on our behalf. I would really encourage you to go to the effort of documenting it and putting it into our evidence, because it is a hidden cost, right? We roll along very happily letting you do what you do because it is out of sight, out of mind: 'Thank you very much.' But we do not know what is involved to the intricate degree that you can articulate very, very quickly. We never think to ask. It is a really strong part of the case of how we make your world better. We have to get into numbers and we have to get into dollars, both in terms of how we make it sustainable for you and in terms of, if we are going to invest in other infrastructure, where the best place is to put it and what the best tools are to do it. Sorry, that was my little preachy bit, but if you could provide your costs in detail, that would be awesome – that would be really powerful evidence – including training and everything: direct and indirect costs, all of them.

That does lead me to ask about the reimbursement system and processes, because my understanding, and please correct me, is in a lot of cases you will accrue almost a year's worth of expenses and then you might be able to claim some of them back. Or I think –

Deborah GWYTHER-JONES: None of them back.

Richard WELCH: The one I remember from Whittlesea was the man who euthanised – he was one of two or three who were licensed to go around and shoot from distance. He took all his petrol expenses, and he was only allowed to claim the petrol back at the end of the year.

Deborah GWYTHER-JONES: I do not think anyone sitting at this table can claim anywhere –

Richard WELCH: No, you do not get any. You just apply for a grant here and there.

Erin ASHMORE: Sometimes there are very individualised contracts that some rescuers may have because they are doing certain project work, but on average there is no reimbursement program or process for any of those costs.

Richard WELCH: So it is self-funded – fundraising.

Deborah GWYTHER-JONES: Yes.

Erin ASHMORE: We do individual fundraising through our network. We have a twice annual reimbursement application for our members, but that also depends on how many donation dollars we have. If we only have $1000 in donations, then our whole network of 52 members can only apply for their share of

$1000. And we are in a climate now where people do not have the same amount of money that they can give to causes even if they wanted to.

Richard WELCH: Yes.

Deborah GWYTHER-JONES: You cannot even claim volunteer expenses on your tax, which sort of seems – surely you can do something about that. You can collect all the expenses, but there is no avenue to claim them anywhere. Even vet expenses: my vet nurse keeps saying, 'Yes, but you can claim that.' But where? Who should I submit this to? Because there is no mechanism for reimbursement.

Richard WELCH: And for the most part how do you operate? Are you incorporated entities, charities – what are you?

Erin ASHMORE: The Macedon Ranges Wildlife Network is an incorporated association.

Richard WELCH: But not a charity?

Erin ASHMORE: We are in the process of going through a charity status application at the moment.

Richard WELCH: So wildlife shelters are eligible to be charities?

Erin ASHMORE: Yes, but it is a very extensive process. As these girls have already said, just the running of a shelter is very extensive. Then setting yourself up as a charitable organisation –

Richard WELCH: On top of that. And there is more compliance and everything else, yes.

Erin ASHMORE: You need to set up a board of management and compliance. It is impossible for most shelters. They are often linked with networks like our own that provide holistic awareness raising and donation raising, often cause-based, that might support a particular project in a shelter or particular fund at different times.

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt, and sorry to go back and forth. Wildlife shelters cannot qualify for DGR, though, like charity companion animal rescuers, right?

Deborah GWYTHER-JONES: Generally not.

The CHAIR: Yes, cool.

Richard WELCH: Again, on the data – and, Karl, it would be interesting to get your input on this as well – the way you compile data, the way you receive calls, you get multiple sources for calls, as I presume you do, Karl, as well.

Karl DAWSON: Correct.

Meaghan WILLIS: Most of our calls come through Wildlife Victoria.

Richard WELCH: Yes.

Meaghan WILLIS: I would say a majority, a large majority. The data in that regard is captured to our home, based where the job is. So our mileage could be easily captured, or it already is captured – it could be extracted from that information.

Richard WELCH: And you no matter where you get the call from, you put it into Wildlife Victoria's database?

Meaghan WILLIS: We receive a direct call from Wildlife Victoria because we are registered with them as rescuers.

Richard WELCH: But if you get a call elsewhere, does that go into their database?

Meaghan WILLIS: If we have time and if we remember.

Richard WELCH: And, Karl, for you?

Karl DAWSON: A lot of the time, once you have been around for a while, as I think you said earlier, your number ends up out and about, so a lot of the calls you end up getting are direct. But you then usually put that into Wildlife Vic so that it is recorded somewhere centrally.

Richard WELCH: Like a best efforts basis sort of thing?

Karl DAWSON: Yes.

Richard WELCH: And in terms of dispatch, who does Wildlife Vic call? Do they know 'It's a koala. I'll call Karl' or 'It's a kangaroo. I'll call you'?

Meaghan WILLIS: That is exactly right.

Richard WELCH: Or do they ring around and hope someone answers as well?

Erin ASHMORE: There is a centralised system that they operate. It is web-based. We have to log our availability. If our availability is logged, we will get a text message directly. It might go to multiple volunteers who have logged availability at that time. Someone will reply, 'Yes, I can respond.' If we are available, we can log on to active jobs, and if we have got time we can actually pick up active jobs that we can respond to. I suppose by doing it that way we are covered by insurance. If we do jobs that do not come through Wildlife Victoria, we have no level of insurance in doing a rescue on the side of the road.

Richard WELCH: So a certain proportion of the jobs you do are effectively uninsured?

Erin ASHMORE: Yes. I know myself on my commute to work most days I might stop at between two and five animals, and I do not log those. They are often pouch checks. Sadly, a lot of them result in euthanasia of joeys that have been left injured in pouch when Mum's been killed. There are significant numbers that are not reported.

Richard WELCH: If you do it through Wildlife Vic, that has the geolocation markers, presumably. But if you do it with these other ones, they do not.

Erin ASHMORE: Yes. A lot of rescuers would stop at hundreds of jobs, probably, through a year, where they are not logged.

Manfred ZABINSKAS: And there are other complications as well, because of the nature of the way Wildlife Vic runs now. Because they are very large and answerable, they have strict rules and regulations. Back in the old days we used to call on friends that we knew that had a gun – farmers. That is absolutely not allowed through the Wildlife Victoria system. So if you respond to a case and you accept a call-out, particularly for something that might need to be euthanased, we are actually strictly prohibited from passing that on to anybody else, because then there are all the issues, the legalities, the fact that they will not be covered, insurance.

Richard WELCH: This is the double-edged sword of rigour. You add rigour, which is good, but it adds complications that deter volunteer work.

Manfred ZABINSKAS: And those complications are huge, because I am not sure people realise but there is only a tiny percentage of rescuers within Wildlife Victoria that actually have access to firearms – I do not know, 5 per cent, if that. The actual role of going out to do the euthanising falls on a very, very small number of people, and that is a massive problem as well.

Erin ASHMORE: I think that comes back to what I was saying before around the time it takes to build the skill to be able to do that competently. We have a number of volunteers who have their firearms licences, but it is going to require hundreds of hours of training to be able to be competent to do that appropriately and safely.

Richard WELCH: I am being pulled up for time, but I have got one last very quick question. I personally am aware of at least four different wildlife numbers as I drive past. Ludicrously, you are driving by, even at 60 kilometres or 80 kilometres, and it is a 1300 8 something – it is a nine-digit number you are meant to get in

an instant flash. There are a couple of 13 13 11 ones, and there are others as well. Would we not be better off just having one single '777' or something?

Manfred ZABINSKAS: It has been attempted in the past. In fact I do not know how many times I have been involved in groups where we have tried to end up with a state body and a single number.

Richard WELCH: Why does it fail?

Manfred ZABINSKAS: Humans. Wildlife people in particular are extra emotional. Look, there are so many complications and complexities. After having many, many attempts over many decades, I honestly believe this is something that needs to be led by government. You cannot rely on people who are burnt out, overemotional and overstressed to get together and all agree on the one answer, because the reason we have multiple phone numbers and different organisations is because there have been fallouts between people and personalities have got involved. We have had a lot of troubles getting over those. We need greater leadership. We are still better than other states. New South Wales, their WIRES group – I think they have 21 different factions now that have split and do their own thing. We probably have three or four major groups that cover Victoria. It is still problematic; we still need a single number. But I honestly believe from experience this is something that needs to be government-led and done in a professional and proper manner.

Deborah GWYTHER-JONES: Even 000 – we are first responders. I know it is not humans in a house fire or a car accident or whatever, but we are first responders putting ourselves on the line for injured wildlife.

Richard WELCH: Yes, agreed. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: That is all we have time for. In fact we have gone over, and our next witnesses are here. Thank you so much not just for appearing today but for your great service to wildlife. It is very, very appreciated. That concludes the hearing.

Witnesses withdrew.