

TRANSCRIPT

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

John Berger

Katherine Copsey

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Georgie Crozier

David Davis

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Michael Galea

Renee Heath

Sarah Mansfield

Rachel Payne

WITNESSES

Bernie O'Sullivan, Chief Executive Officer, and

Daniel Grigson, Manager, Engineering and Asset Services, Macedon Ranges Shire Council.

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 broadcast of these proceedings. I also welcome any other members of the public watching via the live broadcast and in the public gallery today.

To kick off, we will just get committee members to introduce themselves to you. We will start with Moira up on the screen.

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

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

Richard WELCH: Good morning. I am Richard Welch, Member for North-East Metropolitan Region.

The CHAIR: Georgie Purcell, Member for Northern Victoria.

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

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you so much for coming along and appearing before us 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 the hearing, and then transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

For the Hansard record, could you both please state your full names and the organisation that you are appearing on behalf of.

Bernie O'SULLIVAN: Bernie O'Sullivan, Chief Executive Officer, Macedon Ranges Shire Council.

Daniel GRIGSON: And Daniel Grigson, Manager, Engineering and Assets, at Macedon Ranges Shire Council.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you. We now welcome your opening comments but ask that they are kept to around 10 to 15 minutes to ensure plenty of time for discussion and questions.

Bernie O'SULLIVAN: Terrific. Thank you, Chair, and good morning to you. Welcome to Bendigo. We really do appreciate you being here and holding this inquiry. It was never in doubt that we would present to this inquiry and appear today. We acknowledge the important work that you are doing with this inquiry and thank you for the chance to speak to it.

Our shire, Macedon Ranges Shire Council, is at the front line of the wildlife road strike crisis in Victoria, and I do not say that word 'crisis' lightly. With one of the highest rates of wildlife vehicle collisions in the state, it is not an abstract issue for us; it is a daily reality we are facing. Reports to Wildlife Victoria alone indicate that thousands of native animals have been struck by vehicles in our region since 2019. However, we know these figures significantly under-represent the true scale of the issue as many collisions go unreported and data is

fragmented across agencies. Council is working with Wildlife Victoria to access updated data to support more accurate mapping and response planning.

Road strikes in our shire are not only frequent, they are increasingly dangerous. I can personally attest to this, recently striking a kangaroo on the Calder Highway in the middle of the day. Animal strikes now make up approximately 5 per cent of all vehicle crashes locally, and disturbingly, Gisborne and Woodend were both named among the top five Victorian hotspots for wildlife collisions in 2023. These collisions, as we know, affect not just wildlife, not just motorists, but also deeply impact the broader community in place, and they are putting increasing pressure on our already stretched wildlife carers and volunteers.

So what can we do about it? Macedon Ranges Shire Council is taking steps to respond, but we need your help. We have integrated wildlife strategy and safety into our road mobility and safety strategy at council. We are developing GIS heat maps to target hotspots and we are committed to data-led, place-based solutions, but we are constrained. Under current state regulatory frameworks councils cannot reduce speed limits in wildlife corridors without state department approval, even when the local risk is clear and evidence-based, and respectfully I would say that is not a fast process.

There is a role for innovation too. Technologies such as responsive signage and wildlife detection systems are promising, but they are out of reach for many councils without external funding or technical support, so we strongly support greater investment in research, infrastructure and shared data platforms that enable better statewide responses but also sharing across local government boundaries. As we know, as people we traverse boundaries every day, and so do livestock and wildlife.

Finally, I want to highlight that this issue is growing. Wildlife Victoria received over 130,000 calls from the public last year, a figure increasing by 15 per cent annually, and vehicle strikes are the number one reason people contact them. The scale of this crisis for animals, for public safety and for local communities requires coordinated action, and you as a committee and your recommendations can make a big difference here.

I thank the committee for considering this matter and urge you to support reforms that give councils more flexibility, more resources and more tools to protect both wildlife and people on our roads. We would be happy to answer any questions. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you so much. I might kick off with some questions. I live in the Macedon Ranges –

Bernie O’SULLIVAN: Great choice, Chair.

The CHAIR: and it is certainly an everyday experience for me as well, dealing with wildlife on the roads. I have found as a local representative this is an issue that a huge part of the community cares about, whether it is for animal welfare reasons or road user safety reasons. Can you tell us a little bit about the engagement that you get from community members on this issue that comes through to council and the role they expect of you, which might not always be possible?

Bernie O’SULLIVAN: We have a passionate, coordinated community in the Macedon Ranges Shire Council. In terms of environmental awareness and protecting our wildlife, that is a really strong and focused thing for both council and our community, so we receive lots of feedback from both passionate individuals in the council and also local community groups and township groups concerned about this. When we drive on our roads, and particularly through the Macedon Ranges Shire Council, the dead and injured wildlife on the roadsides is so evident. We see that in terms of the response from our community coming through our customer response calls to our customer support centre, and we see that through the feedback directly that our councillors receive, so much so that we have over the last couple of years had motions that our council have supported on wildlife road strike in terms of calling for action, and also calling for action at a federal level, and motions that we have taken to the Municipal Association of Victoria but also federally to the Australian Local Government Association. So we are hearing it from lots of different sources, and our residents want council to act more quickly, with more resources, to do a whole range of things: to put in electronic responsive signage, underpasses, overpasses, narrow roads. In a rate-capping environment we have got a really tight budget, so we are doing what we can but we need help.

The CHAIR: You spoke a little bit to the difficulties that come with things such as reducing speed limits in the council. It is certainly something that I have experienced as well, trying to bring about that change and the roadblocks that come with it. Can you tell us a little bit more about the difficulties that come with council partly having a role in this and the state government partly having a role in this as well?

Bernie O'SULLIVAN: The state government is the decision-maker at the end of the day in terms of speed limit zonings. Often our proposals for speed limit changes are driven by the community. That might be a petition that comes to council and is considered and reviewed by our engineering team and broader staff. If that is supported, we will make a case to the Department of Transport and Planning at a state government level. That can be a slow process, and the decision is ultimately in the hands of state government. What we are saying here today is there is an opportunity to make that process quicker and more agile and, frankly, provide more autonomy to local councils and regions to manage speed limits in a way that gets better outcomes for our wildlife. I might ask, Daniel: do you want to just maybe step through that technical process we go through with the Department of Transport and Planning?

Daniel GRIGSON: In terms of the process for speed limit changes, whether that is an increase or a reduction, essentially, in accordance with the Victorian speed zoning guidelines, which is a DTP document, we will assess the speed limit for the road and then make a recommendation to DTP, who will then go through the process themselves and final sign-off by the minister for that speed limit change. That process can generally take, depending on priority, six months to 18 months. We have some speed limit changes, not all related to wildlife per se, but for other reasons – vehicle accidents, that type of thing, development increases – but depending on where they sit with the priority, it does sometimes take up to a year and a half to get those changes through. Just because we recommend a speed limit reduction in an area does not mean that it is going to end up being approved.

The CHAIR: Yes. That is certainly something that you are probably very familiar with, that there is an ongoing campaign in Romsey where there is a road with a high rate of wildlife road strike, where I know that the council has made continued representations for that speed limit to be reduced and it still has not been. Obviously one of the things that is going on in Macedon Ranges council is that it is changing so much and there is a lot of development and they are bringing people to our community, but it is also impacting the native wildlife and environment and habitat. On that note, is there anything that you can pinpoint that you think is increasing road strikes in the Macedon Ranges council area?

Bernie O'SULLIVAN: Well, firstly, I will make a couple of comments. Chair, I think you hit on a really relevant point around growth pressures. In Macedon Ranges Shire Council we are trying to grow sustainably and sensibly to manage our growth in a way that supports growing communities and fosters jobs but also in a way that respects the fact that we, under state legislation, have a distinctive area and landscape and a beautiful environment – that is why people want to move. Some of our towns that will see more significant growth will be Gisborne and Romsey. That puts pressure as houses get put in commercial areas, industrial areas – lots of concrete, impervious surfaces. That pushes animals further to the boundaries, often to roads. That is one of the significant issues for us.

The really significant drought and dry period that we have been having right across the state – including really significantly affecting farmers in the Macedon Ranges – has pushed livestock out of the bush onto roadsides where there might be a little bit more green drain from roads, and that is also contributing. So hopefully if we continue to get decent rain and a break, that will assist a little bit.

I should say too, just based on a previous point, that while we might feel everyone in the community wants to sensibly reduce speed limits in relevant locations to address wildlife strike et cetera, that is not always the case. As we know, in our communities we welcome, as a democracy, a broad range of views, and we also have a range of our citizens that say, 'No, don't reduce the speed limits. We want to go 100 on this unsealed road,' or 'We want to go 80 in this location.' So there is an opportunity here, whether it is council or the work of the committee, around engaging and making the community aware of the risk to their personal safety and to the community and to wildlife if we do not make some of these sensible interventions.

The CHAIR: Yes. Are council currently integrating any wildlife connectivity or road strike mitigation measures into your own planning processes at the moment?

Bernie O’SULLIVAN: Yes, thank you. The first thing I would say is, based on the feedback we received from lots of different people when we were putting together our mobility and road safety strategy, it became really clear through that process that we needed a theme on wildlife and road strike. That is theme 4 in our strategy, and that starts to talk to some of the concrete actions that council can do. We are also compiling our customer support data when we get feedback from people to our centre and aligning that with Wildlife Victoria reports to be able to better use data to identify those hotspots, know where they are, and to start to really address those. So those are a couple of things. Anything else, Daniel, that you wanted to raise?

Daniel GRIGSON: I think you pretty much hit the nail on the head there, Bernie. We are looking at using the data that we have collated, and I have some basic data that I have put together here. In terms of the amount of animals that we have collected from roadsides, from January last year to 30 June this year – so 18 months – we collected approximately 750 animals from roadsides. That does not include arterial roads, as it is the responsibility of the state to collect any dead animals on those roadsides, or animals that have been removed by Macedon Ranges Wildlife Network or Wildlife Victoria or any other volunteers or people that may have removed them. So we do think that figure is quite understated.

In terms of using that data, we are actively applying for grants and looking at opportunities. One of the opportunities we are looking at at the moment is mobile VMS signage that we can put in wildlife corridors. That will have a flashing ‘slow down’ kangaroo image or koala image in those areas, just to give people a bit of additional warning. Bernie touched on signage previously. We do put signage in some locations, but putting in kangaroo or wildlife warning signage is only one thing. A majority of the time the more warning signage that is put in, the less effective it becomes. I know even where I live, if you hit a kangaroo going 40 kilometres an hour in a suburban area – there is kangaroo signage there, but generally if you are focusing on the road and you are seeing this warning signage everywhere you are going, it becomes less effective to drivers.

The CHAIR: Yes. Finally from me, on that note: there have been some other jurisdictions around the world that have had huge success reducing wildlife road strike. Just last year I went to Amsterdam to see some of the things that they have done. They have brought it down by about 90 per cent in some areas. One of the things they introduced was that VMS signage and even infrared signage that warned road users in real time that there was an animal on the road. If the state government was willing to invest in any of these measures, is that something that Macedon Ranges would participate in a trial of?

Bernie O’SULLIVAN: We would be really interested in that. As Daniel indicated, the static signs, or even the electronic signs saying, ‘Look, be aware,’ people become conditioned to. The idea of using infrared sensors linked to road signs, so you are getting live, real data, would be incredibly helpful. Sign us up – if there were to be trials that the state was leading or supporting. We need different solutions to tackle this problem, because we are not making a dent at the moment.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you. I might hand to Mr Welch now.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Georgie. Thank you, Mr O’Sullivan, and thank you, Mr Grigson, for coming in. I have loads and loads of questions actually. I could start anywhere, but I will start with the data. What central database do you report your cases of road strike to? Where do they go?

Daniel GRIGSON: In terms of the data we have, we will notify Wildlife Victoria of that. We have an active relationship with them, and we are meeting with them again in August. Really their dataset is a probably a lot better than ours. We have our local CRM data that goes into our council’s customer request system. That is really the source of truth that we have, and then we are working with Wildlife Victoria. In the past, we have got their latest data. So we get it across Victoria, and then we can focus down on the Macedon Ranges region and then plot those hotspot areas, whether it is a road in Romsey, Gisborne or Woodend, and see where those main corridors are.

Richard WELCH: I agree with the approach. I think one of the key problems we have got, as far as I am aware, is there are at least five separate databases. Sometimes that unhelpfully skews the data, because as people say, ‘We’re going to use this system this year,’ suddenly that system reports a massive rise because everyone is using it now, so it is unhelpful in that way, even though we know it is a universal problem. If we are looking at government investment, then that data has to be accurate, because if we are going to put hardware –

Bernie O’SULLIVAN: ‘What’s the single source of truth?’ I think is what you are saying.

Richard WELCH: We do not have a single source of truth. For all the best intentions, you do not either. We have got one, but we know that is not universally the whole story.

Daniel GRIGSON: It only tells one side of the story really.

Richard WELCH: We have got groups actually coordinating from New South Wales into Victoria and volunteers and things like that. Do you get any funding to the council around road strike? Equally, do you provide any funding to local volunteer groups et cetera?

Daniel GRIGSON: I do not believe we receive any ongoing active funding, speaking from an engineering perspective. We apply for grants, such as a TAC road safety grant that we are looking at to get VMS signage. I think we may provide some minor grant opportunities to local community groups and organisations that may do some work in this.

Richard WELCH: But they are time-limited, specific purpose type grants rather than a revenue income stream.

Bernie O’SULLIVAN: Yes, that is right. At council we have a range of community grants, small project grants, but the sorts of projects we are talking about in terms of making improvements, particularly to roads, to reduce wildlife strike take a fair bit of investigation, research and a significant amount of money to make road improvements. It is usually out of the realm of those community grants. As Daniel indicated – and it is a good point to make in known hotspots like the Macedon Ranges – there is no recurrent funding from state government or federal government to say, ‘We want you to make a longer term dent on this.’ Doing a one-off is like a drop in the ocean. We do our best to respond to ad hoc grants. One of the things that we have appreciated with a few of the grants at a state level is from time to time they say, ‘Here’s a grant to do the planning and design before the construction.’ I think even that would help some councils like us to say, ‘What are your few really big hotspots? Do the planning and design first. Get that ready for construction,’ because sometimes it is hard – it might be just for a construction grant – to have the capacity to actually do the background to know what you need. Is it an underpass, overpass, narrowing the road, for instance.

Richard WELCH: This will sound like a leading question – I do not mean it in that way. Would your evidence be that we are getting ad hoc grants to address a systemic problem?

Bernie O’SULLIVAN: I think there is an ability to really significantly improve our focus on the issue of how we collectively work at a local, state and federal level to focus on wildlife strike in known hotspots. At the moment it is a grant-by-grant approach that is not necessarily focused on addressing wildlife road strike. We could change that, but we need dedicated focus to do that, clearly aimed at where the highest risk areas are.

Richard WELCH: Are you able to quantify what road strike costs the council, directly or indirectly? You can take it on notice if you would like.

Bernie O’SULLIVAN: I may take that one on notice. As Daniel indicated, just on our local roads in terms of animals that have been removed – 700-odd in the last 18 months – yes, you can put some figures around that. But it is not just the tangible costs. For instance, at Macedon Ranges Shire Council, when I hit that kangaroo a couple of months ago on the Calder, I think it was Daniel’s area said, ‘We’ve got seven council cars in workshops with wildlife strike – all of those kangaroos.’ So yes, it is once again a tangible cost but an intangible cost to wildlife, to our communities and, frankly, to safety. Recent surveys are even indicating that 61 per cent of people would dangerously swerve to miss wildlife. That is incredibly concerning.

Richard WELCH: Yes. And the question is not geared to diminish those other dimensions, but I think it is a useful data point that there is actually a financial cost to road strike as well, which would be helpful for us to know.

Bernie O’SULLIVAN: Yes, absolutely. Thank you.

Richard WELCH: You talked about the length of time it takes to get road speeds addressed. Are these requests going in one at a time – ‘Here’s a road we want to look at. Send it in. Here’s another road. We send it

in'? Is it one by one as they come up ad hoc, or is there any opportunity to say, 'Here's our comprehensive review of our council area, and these are the bunch we want you to look at'?

Bernie O'SULLIVAN: That would be very nice. It is generally road by road.

Daniel GRIGSON: Yes. It is generally road by road if there is a specific purpose that we are focusing on. For example, we lowered the speed limit on Romsey Road between Woodend and Romsey earlier this year to 80 kilometres an hour. That was due to a number of vehicle accidents there and also road strikes in that area. But, for example, we are also putting in a request at the moment in Gisborne South, which will be for the lowering of a network of roads in that area or adjusting – some increase, some reduction.

Richard WELCH: Is it just impractical to have perfect knowledge of every road and every hotspot, or do you think you are approaching a point where the mapping starts to give you –

Daniel GRIGSON: I think we are getting to a point where we can understand what the main roads are through data, and Romsey Road is one of those ones that has the highest amount of road strikes within our shire according to our data. But I think, as Bernie touched on, lowering speed limits is also a sensitive subject in terms of community feedback; some people are for it, some people are against it, and it is not the be-all and end-all either. Like I said, I have hit a kangaroo at 40 kilometres an hour from the side of a road. The difference between 80 and 100 is a significant difference in terms of the severity of an accident and a crash, but it is not the be-all and end-all to stop wildlife being struck.

Richard WELCH: Is there any sense that you have found that the road strike patterns are seasonal?

Bernie O'SULLIVAN: In terms of the drought conditions we have been experiencing, if you are including that in seasonal, yes, absolutely. We know really dry climate times push animals onto roadsides out of more forested areas, so yes, that would be contributing. But we do know there are particular wildlife corridors, and it is a really significant thing in the Macedon Ranges about how we know our wildlife corridors, map those and also try to support and protect those as well where we can.

The CHAIR: Maybe one more.

Richard WELCH: One more. I had better choose wisely.

The CHAIR: We will come back if we have time.

Richard WELCH: I will stick to roads then. I accept the point that lowering speeds cannot be just the blanket solution. In fact, it is not a blanket solution.

Bernie O'SULLIVAN: It is not a silver bullet.

Richard WELCH: It does not stop you hitting things actually. Do you in your policy or in your general cultural conversations around it have a tipping point as to when you try to address it by speed and when you try to address it by other measures, within a hotspot?

Bernie O'SULLIVAN: Absolutely. If a particular road has been identified – if our staff have identified it – usually we are hearing from the community and our staff are picking up dead animals. For instance, we might have a petition from the community. The team will go out and review that road, and we will investigate it and look at the whole suite of different intervention opportunities, from 'Can we do anything?' right through to a speed limit change, narrowing the road to slow drivers down, underpasses, overpasses – some of those are incredibly expensive as well – and VMS boards, as Daniel said. The staff will work through that, but they will also be thinking, 'Where are we going to get the money to do this?' And we get back to that situation with grants. Do you want to talk any more, Daniel, about that analysis that the team would go through?

Daniel GRIGSON: Yes, absolutely. It has been touched on. We will go and do a full analysis of the road, so do a site visit; look at any history; look at the publicly available crash stats data as well, which captures a good picture of accidents on a road; look at our data around animal collection; look at other CRMs that have come in from residents along that stretch of road in the past – do a full analysis to see if there are any viable options there. When it does come to, say, speed limit reduction, that forms one element of it. There is the crash history and there are other criteria around the geometry of the road, where the road is located, how many properties are

fronting onto the road and the type of area that it is in. Is it reasonable to lower a rural road to 60 kilometres an hour when the rate of compliance with that limit is probably going to be quite low? If the road still feels like an 80- or 100-kilometre-an-hour road, people are generally not going to be compliant with the speed limit, so we are not really going to get the intended outcome, and then that can lead to additional safety risks to other drivers on the road. So yes, it is a hard thing, I suppose, when we come to doing it. We get a lot of requests for signage as well, but that goes back to what I was saying previously –

Richard WELCH: It is a bit of an art as much as a science.

Daniel GRIGSON: Yes. We cannot put signs on every single road within the shire just because there might be a kangaroo or a koala there at one point in time. We really need to have that strong data, supported by the data that we have and the data from those other groups, such as Wildlife Victoria, to really key down and lock into those hotspot areas and look at doing solutions that are probably more effective than just a static sign or a speed limit reduction – looking at things like wildlife fencing or, as Bernie said, underpasses, overpasses or VMS signage.

Richard WELCH: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mr Welch. We might go to Mrs Deeming on the screen.

Moira DEEMING: Thank you so much. All of my questions were actually asked. I think the only other thing that I would maybe say – it did drop out a bit. You have identified these hotspots and you are building a dataset as best you can, and we have identified the problems with that. I think the only other question I had was about whether you had commissioned designs for the fact that your situation is so much more urgent than the others, considering the stats. But I think you answered that just then, so I actually do not have any other questions. I really enjoyed your presentation. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mrs Deeming. We will go to Ms Broad then.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you very much. I am just interested – we talk a lot about some of the tools that can be used, but I guess the big question I see is what is causing the issue. When I talked to residents that are in this area having lived here 70 years ago, they said it was very rare to see a kangaroo. Yet we have got, like you said, a growing crisis. When I have looked at the breeding rate of kangaroos, it is kind of like, ‘one in the pouch, one on the ground’, you know, so it is very, very fast. What do you think has led us to this point where it is a crisis, where we have such a high population of kangaroos?

Bernie O’SULLIVAN: Just as there is no single intervention, there are a range of reasons why we are seeing an increasing number of wildlife road strikes. We have talked before about the growing pressure. As our communities grow, our animals are pushed out of some of their more natural environments. That places pressure, so we need to be incredibly thoughtful around residential and commercial growth. We think a lot around environmental strategies and how we are supporting biodiversity and wildlife corridors. We know seasonality is important – dry times bring animals to roadsides. Also, I reflect on – having even driven on the Calder Highway for a long time, there used to be some pretty good wildlife fencing along the Calder, in part, and historically you would never have seen wildlife strike there. Obviously, that fencing has gone by the wayside, and now you see so much of it. So I think they are some of the factors that we are seeing. Our cars probably have the capacity now to drive even faster as well, over the decades. Thinking about electric vehicles as well, they are pretty quiet. We even know in car parks you need to make sure you are not walking out into the back of one, and we are thinking about that as they travel on roads as well. So there is no particular factor but a selection of factors, particularly in the Macedon Ranges. It is not necessarily particular to us, but it is a hotspot. We know there are lots of different factors but it is the same result. Hitting an animal, whether it is at 100 or 80 – probably the same result for the animal, unfortunately. It might increase or lessen the damage for the vehicle, damage for the person. But we need some new creative solutions here in targeted attention and investment. Otherwise the figures are telling us it is just going to keep getting worse and the impact will keep getting worse.

Gaelle BROAD: Would you say that there has been an increase in hobby farms? Because I have heard it said that with increased dams in the area, there is greater access to water, which encourages further breeding.

Bernie O’SULLIVAN: Certainly through the Macedon Ranges Shire Council we are quite different to the much bigger sort of broadacre farming community further north and out to the west of the state. We have the full range – my family is a farming family in the Macedon Ranges Shire Council – right through to smaller farmers, and over time we have encouraged farmers to diversify their risk, have off-farm income. As we support growth, ideally we are not putting people into sardine cans and having communities that are on such small blocks, so we have encouraged those rural zonings, lifestyle zonings, where there are big blocks, and that can attract some additional dams and water sources.

As we think about protecting prime agricultural land, which is a really important concept, whether it is in the Macedon Ranges or across the state, that also influences wildlife and their movements, and so when we think about how land gets fragmented within our communities, across our councils, that is something we need to be careful about, not just from affecting prime agricultural land but movements of animals.

Gaelle BROAD: Yes, I had heard about farmers in the region from Kyneton, and they were selling their stock because they could not compete with the need for feed; the kangaroos were eating everything they had. Now, you touched on this earlier with Georgie with her questions too, but I just want to understand: state government, in my perspective, has responsibility for wildlife management, but it seems that local council is doing a lot in this space: who do you see as being responsible for wildlife management?

Bernie O’SULLIVAN: I see it as a collective responsibility. We have all got roles and responsibilities to play here, and it would be a cop-out to say council should not be involved in some shape or form. And I should say too when we are talking about speed limit changes and recommendations from council to state government through the Department of Transport and Planning, we work really well with our regional representatives from DTP; they are incredibly helpful and thoughtful. They are also constrained by the challenging resources and processes that they need to work through. The more state policy direction and support and funding that we can get as councils – 79 councils across the state – that helps us enormously, so that direction of focus and attention and investment. When we think about one motion that we took to the national Australian local government conference a year or so ago that called on the Australian government to include wildlife trauma and fatality metrics in federal road safety funding models, that would be something I would be saying at a state level, how do we increase a focus on reducing wildlife road strike in our funding models for road improvements in Victoria? Councils, we are good at trying to find money and apply for grants, but it is incredibly helpful if grants have a focus and sometimes are contingent upon certain things being achieved; we will then direct our efforts to that. So, collective responsibility – but we are doing what we can at a council level with constrained budgets, and in a rate-capping environment it is pretty tight.

Gaelle BROAD: I guess I just did want to focus on that too, the cost shifting. I was part of the local council inquiry, and there were a lot of areas where state government responsibilities are putting pressure on local councils. I guess I hear you talking about even the crossings and the flashing lights, but then I think there are so many councils now that do not have school crossing supervisors as well, and it comes down to priorities of where you invest the funding. I have also heard of other councils that have got staff redundancies underway to try and reduce costs. How do you see local councils having a role – how would you be able to fund initiatives like this?

Bernie O’SULLIVAN: Funding significant improvements in our roads to address wildlife strike is really challenging for council. When we go through that annual budget process – and in the process we have a draft asset plan out there at the moment, getting feedback from the community – there are a huge number of assets, a huge number of roads, roughly 800 square kilometres of sealed roads and similar for unsealed, across our network.

I think I presented to you, Gaelle, at the state financial inquiry into local government sustainability, and at a federal level cost shifting from levels of government to councils is really significant. In some cases that is really clear, where there are MOUs about 50–50 funding, and councils are putting in 60 per cent, 70 per cent, 80 per cent. It is to some degree a bit less clear in terms of wildlife management. Clarity around roles and responsibilities – the role of the state, the support that they can give us from a direction, a policy and a funding point of view – would be really, really helpful. From a council point of view, we find we are doing the best we can, but we know it is a drop in the ocean.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you. The state administers the authority to control wildlife program and also the harvesting program. My understanding is there were thousands less tags issued than in previous years. Do you think that is contributing to increased numbers and the accidents that we are seeing?

Bernie O'SULLIVAN: I would need to have a closer look at the data on that one to comment more accurately. We know authorities to control wildlife and commercial harvesting are just one element of sustainably managing wildlife populations and kangaroo populations. I do not have that data in front of me, but it is one piece of evidence that we would look at.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you.

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

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair. Thank you both for your attendance today. Daniel, I am interested in the comments you made about people being complacent with signage. I know I have been driving for many years and the signs have not changed; they have been the same year on year, a diamond on a yellow background with a kangaroo sitting on it.

Daniel GRIGSON: But are you still paying as much attention?

John BERGER: I do, because I have a rural background, so I have an appreciation of it. Is it time for us to educate through new signage, which could possibly have suggested speed limits on it as part of an awareness program for people who are not used to driving in regional and rural Victoria?

Daniel GRIGSON: Yes. I would probably just talk about one element of that first. In terms of drivers driving in rural environments, we have probably had, in the Macedon Ranges particularly, a lot of people move from a more urban environment, especially during COVID and those type of things, as we touched on, to hobby farms and larger properties. A lot of people that probably have not grown up driving in those same environments and may be more used to a city environment now are travelling on a rural or semi-rural road every day. They might not be used to the typical things that happen or driving on unsealed roads and the way that you have to operate a vehicle differently to a sealed road.

In terms of changing of signage, I think there obviously needs to be a balance. VMS signage is, I guess, more attractive signage, a sign that stands out more to motorists. The yellow diamond warning signage is used for a multitude of things, from road narrows, curve warning, pedestrian warning, wildlife warning, kangaroo warning signs, so there could be reform in that space. Obviously that stuff is governed by Australian standards, and if part of it were to be replaced, it would have to go through a lengthy process to be adopted to ensure that it is suitable for the roadside and it is not causing distraction to drivers or anything like that. Suggested speed limits are used currently on curve warnings, so if you are driving on a 100-kilometre-an-hour road and there is a curve that you need to take, the suggested speed limit is 60. Those signs are used in that scenario, and there is –

John BERGER: I know what they are, but do you think they would be useful in preventing road strike?

Daniel GRIGSON: Yes, so at dusk drive at a suggested speed limit of 60 kilometres an hour. But then a suggested speed limit is not the speed limit, so a driver can still drive faster than that, and then that may cause frustration with other drivers on the road, say, that are behind them, causing people to be aggravated and potentially overtake under unsafe conditions. So it could lead to further impact. It may not be the ideal solution. But I think education probably is required around being aware and driving to the conditions of roads. We just had a triple fatality towards Darraweit Guim a few weeks ago. The media at that time – and we are still waiting to see the final police report – indicated that one of the drivers had swerved to dodge a kangaroo, which potentially led to that head-on collision. I believe that collision was about 7 am, so prime time for wildlife on the road, that dawn time. Education is possibly one piece to assist in driver awareness and driving to conditions and understanding the environment that they are driving in. Updating to signage, absolutely, as well, if it is done in a sensible and pragmatic manner that does not cause further distraction.

Bernie O'SULLIVAN: So we would not dismiss it – it could be a solution – but the education around that would need to be really significant.

John BERGER: In terms of that education process, do you see that insurers might have a role in all of that, given that they are –

Bernie O’SULLIVAN: I think that is a great idea. Yes, they are part of the ecosystem of parties that should be concerned about this. We are all feeling increased premiums across the board for a whole range of things, so I think that is a good suggestion. If I can say something too, one thing that is particular to the Macedon Ranges that we have not touched on today is around public transport. That is something that we are thinking a lot about. We get feedback from the community around particularly the Calder Highway train line, sort of north–south. But we have got big communities of people – we have talked a lot about Romsey today and Lancefield – where east–west travel is challenging for us. That means with not fantastic transport routes – really good bus networks – east and west, that is driving people and encourages people to drive cars a lot more than they would if there was a really effective bus network between east and west that was joining up to meet trains and traversing those townships that are not lucky enough to have a railway station within walking distance. That is something that at Macedon Ranges Shire Council we are looking a lot more towards and I think is relevant in this discussion as well.

John BERGER: If I could just go back to that insurance part again, you as a council have got the highest rate of road strike around at the moment. I just wonder: would there be any data from any of the insurers that would suggest to you that this is something that they could get invested in to help your shire with it?

Daniel GRIGSON: From the data that we have from insurers – so from Suncorp Group, AAMI – they named Gisborne and Woodend in the top five. They have also noted from their national driving behaviour report 50 per cent of Australians have hit wildlife while driving. That could be anything from – we have focused a lot on kangaroos, but there are foxes, rabbits, koalas, wombats, kangaroos, everything. Probably one of the most concerning stats from their report is that 61 per cent of Australians would dangerously swerve or brake to avoid hitting wildlife. So I think that really goes back to that education piece that you were talking about. The cost of collisions with vehicles is a cost that we realise as well. As Bernie touched on before, I think this year, from the latest that I have heard, we have had 11 council fleet vehicles collide with animals, not all within the Macedon Ranges area. So it is definitely a cost to us from an insurance repair perspective.

John BERGER: You mentioned the removal of physical separation along the Calder; what was the reason behind that, or is it still there?

Bernie O’SULLIVAN: There is still fencing there, but I am assuming that has not been maintained over time and that has enabled animals to get through that fencing. It certainly would be something worth reviewing, because if we are having a maximum speed of 110 on the Calder Highway, two lanes both ways, and a service lane and then, as I experienced, a kangaroo suddenly coming straight across the lanes of traffic at that level with multiple cars in multiple lanes – incredibly dangerous and absolutely devastating for wildlife as well. So certainly it would be something to look at, in terms of whether that needs to be maintained again.

John BERGER: If I could have one more go?

The CHAIR: Of course.

John BERGER: The vegetation on a lot of the internal roads seems to be increasing year on year for one reason or another, whether some timber has fallen or something like that; is there any move by your council to do more removal of vegetation either side so people have got a warning, whether it is at least 5 or 10 metres, that there is an animal there that could be of danger?

Bernie O’SULLIVAN: I would say a couple of things. Firstly, from a local roads point of view, our aim as a council is to make our local roads as safe as possible. We certainly try to comply with the relevant clearances either side that enable people to better see wildlife, if at all possible. We had, back on 9, 10 June 2021 a really significant storm event, for instance, in the Macedon Ranges Shire Council. That claims process through state and federal government disaster funding took three years to finalise, those claims from that event. But that put a huge amount of timber and debris on the sides of the road that we have been cleaning up over time. It is not perfect, but we do really try to keep those roadsides safe. The other thing I would say too that is a consideration is clearance along roads, native vegetation legislation; we need to make sure that there are not other impediments there that make it slow for councils in the state on arterial roads to ensure that there are good lines of sight and clearance.

John BERGER: Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thanks, Mr Berger. Great questions. That is all we have time for. If members have any other questions, we might send them through on notice, if that is okay. We will leave the public hearing there. Thanks so much for coming along and speaking to us today and your great work.

Witnesses withdrew.