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

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Richard Welch – Deputy Chair
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WITNESSES

Ian Slattery, Wildlife Rescuer; and

Brenda Argus,

Michelle Mead, and

Jo Fischer-Morrissey, Wildlife Rescue and Information Network.

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.

We will just have committee members introduce themselves to you quickly, starting with Mrs Deeming on the screen.

Moira DEEMING: Thank you. I am Moira Deeming, Western Metropolitan Region.

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

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

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

John BERGER: And I am John Berger, Southern Metro.

The CHAIR: Thank you. 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. 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, can you all please state your full names and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of. For the sake of ease, we will start down here with Ian.

Ian SLATTERY: Ian Slattery is my name, a Wildlife Rescuer in central Victoria, representing myself.

Michelle MEAD: Michelle Mead. I volunteer with Wildlife Rescue and Information Network as a committee member and publicity officer, and I am here as part of WRIN.

Brenda ARGUS: Brenda Argus. I am here on behalf of Wildlife Rescue and Information Network. I am treasurer, secretary and a shelter operator with WRIN.

Jo FISCHER-MORRISSEY: Joanne Fischer-Morrissey, and I am representing Wildlife Rescue and Information Network also.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you. We now welcome your opening comments, but we ask that they are around 10 to 15 minutes maximum just to ensure we have plenty of time for discussion and questions. I am not

sure if you would like to do it separately as individuals or organisations, but I will leave it up to you to kick off. If we are running too tight on time, I will let you know.

Michelle MEAD: We are doing it as a group, Jo and I in particular, but Brenda is here also to answer some of your questions, so we will start.

The CHAIR: Awesome. Sounds great. Go for it.

Jo FISCHER-MORRISSEY: We are very pleased that this inquiry is taking place and hope that we are able to effectively contribute to what you are doing. We believe that as a society we need to develop an understanding and a greater appreciation of the country that we live in and the animals that we share the country with, and we need to learn to live with them and cannot continue to destroy their habitats and force them into smaller areas that they do not have a connection with.

The points we are making are in response to the particular points of inquiry. The first one is the legislative and regulatory framework and its ability to monitor wildlife road strike and promote driver education and public awareness. A lot of the things that we will be talking about in our presentation have already come up in some of the previous presentations. With regard to monitoring wildlife road strike there needs to be coordination between different organisations that monitor road strike, and we suggest that a database or some technology is developed that can be used across different organisations. That is a suggestion that has already been put forward.

Regarding education and public awareness, federal, state and local governments need to work more effectively with wildlife organisations and insurance companies to educate the public about our unique wildlife – how to avoid collisions, what to do in the event of one occurring. There could be events that become part of the culture in Victoria, such as a wildlife awareness month that could take place annually to try to increase public awareness. Obviously reduction in speed limits needs serious consideration, but there are complications, as has been pointed out, with speed limit reduction. Driver education and public awareness are currently not effectively done, except on some insurance companies' websites. Specifically, Youi and AAMI have information about road strike and what to do in the event of it. To enhance this education and awareness, an educational template could be developed that could be used as a foundation across different levels of government and different organisations. Without each of us having to create our own educational template, if there was one developed that could be shared broadly, we could adapt it to our particular circumstances.

Let us jump to the next one. Number 2: training and expenditure in rescue and rehabilitation organisations attending to road strike incidents. Training at the moment is currently done largely by one individual, which is Brenda, in our organisation. Our suggestion is that there is the development of an online training site, with certification following completion of training, that once again could be used by different organisations, and this could be used as a foundation for upskilling people to take on various roles, including rescuers, phone operators, transporters, carers of injured animals. There are evidently two organisations that have developed this: Warriors 4 Wildlife, in Victoria, and Bonorong, in Tasmania, so they could be investigated further as a potential foundation. Having sufficient funds to cover costs for volunteer organisations is a tremendous challenge. There are very limited grants that are available. Currently DEECA offers $2000 per year as a potential grant for carers and $3000 for shelters. Also getting sufficient carers to look after the animals that are injured is very much needed, and it is an occupation that is unbelievably time consuming and requires very specialist training and skills.

Impact of road strikes on motorists. As I said earlier, the insurance companies – two that I know of – have developed websites, and obviously it is in the interests of the insurance companies to help work with other organisations to reduce wildlife road strike. I do not know how many people here have actually hit wildlife, but it is very distressing for people in the vehicle when they hit an animal. Many people do not know what to do in this situation. So educational information needs to be developed and should be widely distributed so people learn what to do to keep themselves safe, but also how to approach and help the animal and who to contact when there is an accident. And then the effectiveness of current methods of collating data is –

Michelle MEAD: I better take it.

Jo FISCHER-MORRISSEY: Take on from there if you like. Can you take over?

Michelle MEAD: Sure. Like we said before, a lot of what we have got written down here obviously has been covered by your speakers before, so I am going to try and make it relevant to WRIN as much as I can. In relation to the effectiveness of collecting data, we know that it is very much organisation-based, so the individual groups are collecting their own data using whatever methods they have got, and for small groups like us, those methods are fairly primitive. We do not have a lot of money to spend on that sort of thing when our money is going towards the other things that matter, like caring for the wildlife. I like the idea of a universal app – that was mentioned earlier on – and maybe that could be something that government legislate, so it is a requirement that groups put their data into this app and that way it can be accessible by all. We could sell our own individual methods of recording, and perhaps that universal app could be what we then put that data into later on. That is a really good idea. I think we need to have mandatory reporting of road strikes. It needs to become legislation that we actually report the road strikes. That has to be done by your emergency vehicles, your council that are picking up the animals and also by individuals. So I think in order to get the data, we need to make sure that people are actually recording it, and then we can collect it once we have got it recorded in an effective manner, I guess.

I really listened with great interest to the talk about the infrastructure and the technologies. That is definitely the future, and that is definitely the area that wildlife groups like WRIN want to move into, because I think, yes, we can support the animals that come into care, and that is wonderful, but if we can stop them coming into care, that is the ultimate goal. I think that listening to your speakers before, they talked about the trials maybe not being effective, and that is because you have got to understand these trials are being run by groups that do not have a lot of resources. They are doing it because of their motivation to see some sort of change, and they are doing it probably not to the highest standard, because they have not got the funding to do it to the highest standard. These trials can be done at a gold-standard level that is achievable, but they need to have money invested in them to do them at that gold-standard level, and that can only come from government. The organisations cannot fund them. Yes, you need to have measured outcomes, and yes, you need to maybe set up blind trials where the motorists do not know there is a trial going on, so they are not influenced by the blue posts that we talked about. It can be done. The trials can be done better, and I think that is what needs to happen. And going back to the very basics, as speakers mentioned before – learning about the behaviour of our native wildlife beforehand so that when we set the trials up we have got all the background information we need. I really think that that is the future, and I am excited about that. I think that has to happen, and I just think there is a whole industry there that we need to explore, so hopefully there is a motivation that comes out of this to really get into that area.

The final thing I want to talk about, and this is the one that I have been involved with a lot lately and has the most impact on me and where I feel the most change needs to take place, is in developments – the result of our kangaroos being driven off sites, then having nowhere to go, and then we see them in our streets. The primary example of that that I have been involved with recently, of course, is the Retreat Road situation in Bendigo. That could have been an example of how we could do things right, where we could actually showcase to the region and the world that this is how we live with wildlife. There was an opportunity to share that space. There was an opportunity to bring wildlife people into the conversation early, rather than at the very late stages, and work together to find some really good solutions there. Idealistically, I would have loved to have seen the space shared, but at the very least I would have liked to have seen us included in the final decision-making as to how those kangaroos were going to be removed from that site. The way it occurred in the end was pretty tragic and heartbreaking for those of us that were involved. It did not have to be that way, and we are disappointed that it occurred that way. So definitely we need legislation at the level of development, where a developer must consider the wildlife on that site at the very early planning stages, not just think of them as an afterthought and something we have to kick off at some stage. We have to consider them at the start. It was not just kangaroos impacted at that site; it was birds, there were a lot of trees cut down. The locals in the area were devastated by what happened and the habitat that was destroyed. They were not consulted. We were not consulted. I think there are just better ways of doing this. My hope for the future is that this becomes such a high priority that it is not just an afterthought but it is just something that happens naturally – living with our wildlife and sharing our space becomes the natural way of doing things. That is my hope.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Ian SLATTERY: Thank you. I would echo all the views and opinions expressed by my colleagues on my left here. There are a few points I would like to make, and I will keep this fairly short. There clearly needs to be a change of attitude towards our wildlife. At the moment we tend to view wildlife, particularly in the example

of kangaroos – farmers will look at their back door and see a mob of 50 kangaroos on their paddock and think they have got to go out and shoot them, because they wrongly believe that they are a pest and they are eating the crops and eating them out of house and home. It is what I find to be a typical human response that, if something gets in our way or we find something to be an inconvenience, the answer is you just go out and get rid of it, and this is not the answer.

We need an attitudinal change, which includes developing respect for our native wildlife. Kangaroos are a classic example. You will probably hear from some presenters today, 'Kangaroos are a pest. They're in plague proportions. We need to cull them.' I would dispute that most strenuously. I have been in this game of wildlife rescue for 15 years. I have done a lot of research and advocacy on behalf of wildlife and kangaroos in particular. In my opinion the government's population estimates for kangaroos are way overinflated. They are not in plague proportions. In actual fact what we are seeing on the ground as rescuers is a lot of regional mobs actually being decimated. That can be largely attributed to the commercial killing of kangaroos, which I think is an absolutely horrific industry. Exploiting our native wildlife for commercial gain, to me, is morally reprehensible. Just on the subject of commercial killing, I think the commercial killing is also contributing to not only the decimation of mobs of kangaroos but also fragmentation and further pushing them into areas where we would not normally see them, including into populated areas and closer to populated areas, including roads. That industry is not helping the issue of road strike. There needs to be an attitudinal change underneath all of this if we are serious about reducing road strike impact on wildlife.

As my colleagues mentioned earlier, habitat destruction is probably the most significant contributing factor to road strike. We are seeing more and more kangaroos in particular being displaced and habitat destruction as a result of housing development and construction, and there is no consideration being given, when development proposals are put forward, to the impact on wildlife. As Michelle just mentioned, the Flora Hill example – it was to be the Commonwealth Games athletes village – is a classic example. Development Victoria supposedly engaged an ecologist. My view is that ecologist probably has no understanding of kangaroo behaviour or kangaroo management. There have been numerous accounts of kangaroos being killed on the roads around that site, and the kangaroos were just considered to be collateral damage to a development project That is just not good enough. That attitude has to change. We cannot keep developing housing developments, construction work, with no regard for wildlife impact, and that is what happens. We see it time and time again, and as rescuers we are the ones who are called out to deal with the collateral damage. We have to try and rescue these animals; we have to put them down. It is just not good enough.

And just on the subject of potential systems and infrastructure solutions to reduce wildlife road strike, I would like to put forward the suggestion that when it comes to developments of whatever nature – industrial, commercial, residential – government stands to generate significant revenue in one form or another from taxes from these various developments. I do not see why part of that revenue that government receives – and council, through rates, for example, in the case of housing developments – why a percentage of that revenue cannot be allocated to developing systems and infrastructure solutions to reduce wildlife road strike. I think, as a previous presenter in the previous session said, at the end of the day solutions to this will cost money. There is no question about it, so where is that money going to come from? This is one possible area where it could, and there has to be a willingness on behalf of government, and I mean a genuine willingness – not just to tick the box, just paying lip-service to it. There has to be a genuine willingness to want to do something in this space.

We have all made submissions. We are all sitting in front of an inquiry. I just hope this does not turn into a tick-the-box exercise, quite frankly, because I have been involved in so many of them over the years. The review of the POCTA Act, for example, I think was kicked off in 2016 or somewhere around that time. I made submissions, I made representations and I have not heard a thing about it. Where is that? A review of the *Wildlife Act* I think was five years ago. Again, I have not heard a word. So please do not let this become another one of those examples.

On a final note, I think whatever recommendations this committee decides to put forward, I would strongly urge you to also include a recommendation to establish an independent advisory group to advise government on how whatever recommendations you come up with should be implemented. I do not think you will get all the answers through the submissions or through these hearings. This will be an ongoing issue and it is quite complex and involved, and I would suggest setting up an independent advisory group, which must include experienced wildlife rescuers. We are the ones on the ground. We know where wildlife corridors are in the areas that we work, so we are a valuable source of information. I might just leave it at that, Chair. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Great. Thanks very much, Ian. I short-changed Mr Welch before. So we will begin with you.

Richard WELCH: Thank you. Ian, Michelle, Brenda, Jo, thank you very much for coming in. And thank you for the work you do too. You do amazing, amazing work.

I want to start around the data, because for me all roads lead to Rome on that in terms of how we start approaching things and where resources can get allocated. When we have good data, it is easier to justify. What app do you use, or what is your database? How do you track and monitor road strike in your organisation?

Brenda ARGUS: Well, we have not over the years. I have only just started on 1 February, started taking data, and it is just a spreadsheet –

Richard WELCH: It is better than nothing.

Brenda ARGUS: from phone records that have come in. So from 1 February until now we have had 111 kangaroo road strikes, and that is just the minimum, because unfortunately not all phone operators hand in their phone records, and some records do not state whether it was roadkill or a fence hanger or something. So 111 is just the definite road strike kangaroos that have been recorded.

Richard WELCH: Would that information have been exclusively within your organisation, or is there any risk that Macedon council might have double counted it or anything like that?

Brenda ARGUS: Doubled up?

Richard WELCH: Yes. You record it, and they would also record it?

Brenda ARGUS: No, because it has come through –

Richard WELCH: Yours is yours.

Brenda ARGUS: We have a WRIN emergency phone number. The calls have come into our WRIN phone operators and they have recorded it, and I have taken the data from their recordings. So no-one else has seen those recordings, and no-one else would have reported that kangaroo.

Richard WELCH: Got you. And how many volunteers do you have working in the organisation?

Brenda ARGUS: We have about 30.

Richard WELCH: Thirty. So do you have like a dispatch system of how you alert people and shifts that they are all working and things of that sort?

Brenda ARGUS: Yes. We have a roster for our phone operators, and we have about nine phone operators. The call comes into them, they take all the details and then they will find a rescuer to go and attend.

Richard WELCH: I am very interested – to your point, Ian – in how we actually get through the logistics of implementing changes. If we were to have a universal app, that would probably have to incorporate dispatch with it. Correct me if I am wrong – I am interested in your view – but isn't there a very strong relationship between gathering the data and simultaneously acting on the data in real time, as things happen? Do you see those things like I do, as one and the same, or are they actually distinct operations?

Jo FISCHER-MORRISSEY: I think they could be quite distinct. I think that the information could be entered, so there could be the receiving of the information, I see them as operating quite separately.

Michelle MEAD: The solutions would come later. We are all about collecting the data at that first point so we can help the animal, and then later on that would be put into this universal system to highlight those hotspots together and the solution to those hotspots. So I think that would be separate.

Brenda ARGUS: At this point, the road strikes that I have recorded on our spreadsheet are very widespread. Out of those 111, there is not really one spot that has been popular for kangaroo strikes. It has been very widespread across the City of Greater Bendigo.

Richard WELCH: Thank you.

Ian SLATTERY: Can I just add one quick thing there? I am not speaking on behalf of Wildlife Victoria in making this comment, but I know they have made a submission to the inquiry – I am not too sure if they are presenting or not.

The CHAIR: Not today, but they will be.

Ian SLATTERY: Okay. It is probably a good idea to put that question to them. They are the statewide-based rescue group – with all due respect to WRIN; they are a bit a bit bigger than WRIN. They should have quite comprehensive stats.

Richard WELCH: They do, but they are not the only one doing it – that is the problem. They are the biggest, but there are about at least five if not six – some are based in New South Wales – gathering our data. It is very fragmented as a result.

Ian SLATTERY: Yes, but I would think that Wildlife Victoria would handle the bulk of all state rescue calls.

Richard WELCH: Yes, numerically.

Ian SLATTERY: Yes, they would. My guess would be they would probably have 80 per cent, the majority, of stats about road strike. That would be my guess, but they would know better.

Richard WELCH: I do not know if you communicate with or have relationships with the other carer groups or rescuer groups. I imagine you do, because it is a very friendly community. I know you will not be speaking on behalf of them, but do you think the sentiment would be the same in those other groups, that they would be happy to give up their app and take up a new app or work to a centralised system?

Michelle MEAD: I think they would be happy to share data if it is going to mean good outcomes. No-one wants –

Jo FISCHER-MORRISSEY: I think people are very focused, volunteers are very focused and the volunteer groups are very focused on reducing the overall toll and getting good solutions. We are not volunteers for any reason other than the care of the animal.

Richard WELCH: Okay. So no-one would be territorial in terms of that sort of thing?

Jo FISCHER-MORRISSEY: I do not think so.

Richard WELCH: In regard to standards and standardising, I think that is a really interesting topic. We know in the volunteering world in Victoria, especially post COVID, many organisations have struggled for volunteers. We seem to have sort of lost a bit of that. I do not know if you have experienced that. But I feel a bit torn about this, because I think getting some basic standards in place would be fantastic and is a great idea. Is there any risk in your mind that it becomes onerous and therefore becomes a disincentive? People are doing this out of their love for animals, for our native animals. Is there any risk that if we start raising the bar, we will start pushing volunteers out?

Jo FISCHER-MORRISSEY: I do not think so. I think people go into different roles that suit them, and so the people that would be dealing with what you need would step into those roles. So, I mean, we could feasibly allocate or get somebody to nominate to take on that particular role. So, yes, I do not see it being a problem.

Michelle MEAD: It probably depends on the standard and what you mean by that. I mean, do you need to pay a fee or a cost or that sort of thing.

Richard WELCH: Compulsory training of this kind or that kind, and some of it is sensible because you need to know how to triage something.

Michelle MEAD: Yes. If it was just, 'To become a rescuer you need to do this,' I do not think anyone would object to that. I think they want to go and do the rescues well. But if you said, 'To become a rescuer, you have to pay a fee,' or something like that, then that would definitely put volunteers off, of course, yes.

Richard WELCH: Have I got time for one more?

Ian SLATTERY: Sorry, Richard, I am just trying to clarify your question. Are you concerned about the fact that we are light-on in terms of volunteer rescuers to deal with wildlife road strike?

Richard WELCH: No. I hope you are not. I am just saying it is this pull and push against. It is good to have more rigour around the process. It is predominantly a volunteer-run phenomenon, so it is good to add rigour. Is there any sense that the rigour would become counterproductive to participation because people feel it is a bit too much?

Ian SLATTERY: You mean getting people to sign on as volunteer rescuers and carers?

Richard WELCH: No, because in the presentation it talked about adding some universal standards and putting some things there. I am just responding to that.

Ian SLATTERY: For data collection or for training of rescuers?

Richard WELCH: Well, that is what I was asking.

Ian SLATTERY: Sorry, I am a bit unclear, but that is okay.

Richard WELCH: I was not trying to find a problem. I was trying to actually understand what we meant by universal standards and things like that. Okay, last question – am I done?

The CHAIR: You can have one more.

Richard WELCH: It is to you Ian. In your work, could you briefly describe the costs and the time and the travel you need to do around your work?

Ian SLATTERY: Good question. I am actually a volunteer on one hand, so I do this voluntarily, which means I pay all my own costs of travel and equipment. I am also contracted to Wildlife Victoria as a licensed and accredited darter. For those of you who do not know what that means, if we have sick, injured or orphaned wildlife that are still highly mobile and need to be captured to be properly assessed, and the results of that are either euthanasia or taken into care, then they obviously need to be darted and sedated. That is one of the things that I do. That is a financial agreement I do have with Wildlife Victoria. That is no secret; I think they included that in their submission. The costs of that are significant.

Richard WELCH: Are you reimbursed or are you paid? Because I know it is based on a reimbursement.

Ian SLATTERY: How do you make the distinction? Sorry, you mean cost recovery, or is it a –

Richard WELCH: I know with other rescuers I have spoken to –

Ian SLATTERY: It is not a profit-making concern, put it that way.

Richard WELCH: No. But I know with a lot of other rescuers I have spoken to, they will drive considerable distances, they will pay for their petrol, they have to buy their bullets in some cases. They incur all the costs, and they only get them back if they put a claim in. So it is a reimbursement system as opposed to –

Ian SLATTERY: Okay. The arrangement I have with Wildlife Victoria, and I am pretty sure that they have made this public, is we get paid a fixed fee regardless of how far we travel or whether the rescue takes seven hours. The Flora Hill rescue, for example, recently we had to dart four of the kangaroos on that development site – that was a six-hour rescue and that was a big job. I just get paid the standard fee if I am doing a rescue around the corner or whether it is 80 kilometres away.

Richard WELCH: Is that a sustainable model for you?

Ian SLATTERY: No, it is not.

Richard WELCH: Right. Could you expand on that then?

Ian SLATTERY: I am losing money. I have not put a dollar figure on it, but I am more than happy to provide that to you if you are interested.

Richard WELCH: Yes, I think that is important for us.

Ian SLATTERY: That is in terms of the commercial arrangement I have with Wildlife Victoria as a licensed darter. But then on the other hand, out of all the rescues I do, 60 or 70 per cent of those will be as a volunteer, and there is no reimbursement for that. That includes petrol, all the equipment that I use – that is just out of pocket. So it is a significant expense, and I know for a fact that we have lost a lot of rescuers doing this work because they cannot afford it. It is incredibly onerous not just financially but emotionally.

Richard WELCH: I have run out of my time here. But any detail you can provide the committee on that would be very gratefully received.

The CHAIR: They were great questions. I will go to Ms Broad next. But just to clarify for the committee, Ian, you are referring to your work as a darter, but the regular rescuer out there would not get reimbursed at all, correct?

Ian SLATTERY: Correct.

The CHAIR: Yes. Great. Thank you. Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you very much for appearing today. I just checked and I have three different contacts, because over the many years I have lived in this area I have needed to call you guys. So I just want to really acknowledge the work that you do and that it is a huge volunteer contribution and a personal contribution. Can you just expand a bit about that, because you kind of ran out of time. What hours are required? What time of the day can you get calls? What are some of the demands and the things that you experience?

Michelle MEAD: It depends on your role. Someone like Ian is almost 24 hours a day. He could be called at any time and it would just depend on his availability. Someone like Brenda, who is a carer, she has got joeys to feed, so she is feeding them every 4 hours, she is busy with that all throughout the day, and if she wanted to go away she would need to find someone to take on that role for her, so it is very restrictive. The phone operators have set times, and they will obviously say what times they are available to operate the phone. It varies a lot depending on the person. If you are a rescuer and you cannot do a rescue, you often just do not answer the phone because you are at work, or you answer and say, 'Look, I'm sorry, I can't take this call.' It is not set hours; it is hours that you are working around what you do.

Gaelle BROAD: Yes. That is good.

Brenda ARGUS: They are volunteers, so it is really when they have got the time and if they are available. You need to make many phone calls to get one rescuer to go.

Ian SLATTERY: Wildlife Victoria have an arrangement whereby you can register with them the hours that you are available, and we can also take ourselves off that roster or put ourselves back on. But I can tell you now that when we are on, this year particularly has been horrendous in terms of the number of rescues, the highest I have ever seen in the 15 years I have been doing it. It is not unusual for me to be out from 7 in the morning until 10 at night – not unusual.

Gaelle BROAD: What do you put that down to? Why do you think it is the highest number you have ever seen?

Ian SLATTERY: Several reasons. Kangaroos would be the most significant percentage of rescues that we are called out to, and again I would repeat that is not because they are in plague proportions; it is because they have been largely displaced and they are moving into closer proximity to populated areas because their habitat is being destroyed. That is one reason. There is what we call phalaris grass poisoning at the moment. This was

an introduced grass back in the 1800s which is toxic to kangaroos. It destroys their central nervous system; it is a shocking way to die. This has been by far the worst season ever. We are having to euthanise one kangaroo after another that has this phalaris grass poisoning.

Gaelle BROAD: Can you just explain, because it does impact the kangaroo: how does it impact the kangaroo, the grass? It kind of makes them disorientated as well, doesn't it?

Ian SLATTERY: It is toxic to them. As I said, it destroys their central nervous system. You will witness behaviour that we call the staggers – phalaris staggers or drunken staggers – because that is how they look. Totally uncoordinated, their heads will be down, their ears will be flat. They just look like they are having a fit. It can take weeks and months for them to die from that, and it is a terrible death. Generally speaking, 99 times out of 100 we cannot do anything to save those kangaroos. The kindest thing to do is to put them down, and that is what we have to do as rescuers, and it is not nice.

The CHAIR: Just do one more. Sorry – I gave Richard a bit more time.

Gaelle BROAD: No, that is fine. I have got so many questions. Parks Victoria rangers or police being called on to assist perhaps used to be – you guys seem to be the first point of contact. Can you just explain what happens if someone does hit wildlife? What should their first response be? Has it changed over the years, where these other authorities are not so involved in that initial support?

Brenda ARGUS: What should they do?

Gaelle BROAD: I guess you were talking about education earlier. My son, at 5:30 am in the morning – that is when he has to travel to work – did brake to miss a small one and then actually ended up with a big buck coming on the car, so it was a write-off. Numerous people I have spoken to locally have had cars written off. What should that initial response be? What does someone do if they hit wildlife?

Brenda ARGUS: They need to call a wildlife organisation to get someone out there to go and assess the kangaroo that has been hit. If it is safe to just to pull over to the side, make that call and do a pin drop for the rescuer to make it easier for the rescuer to find the animal, or they can leave a rag or something hanging next to the kangaroo, because the kangaroo can get up and hop away. If you leave something there to make a sign of where the kangaroo was, the rescuer at least knows they are in the right area looking for that kangaroo. I could suggest, if you cannot get hold of a rescuer, to call 000, and the police will attend. If it is safe to and you are confident enough and the kangaroo is on the road – I do say if it is safe to – approach the kangaroo from behind, grab it by the tail and drag it off the road for other cars' safety.

Michelle MEAD: If it is a female, check for a joey as well, so do a pouch check and see if there is a joey there as well. The mother may have been killed, but the joey might be able to survive and be taken into care.

Brenda ARGUS: Another factor with roadkill is the amount of joeys coming in. At the moment we are just inundated with joeys coming in from roadkill.

Ian SLATTERY: Can I just add a couple of quick things to that. I think it is in the inquiry's terms of reference, but I think section 9 of the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act* actually does require you to take some action if you hit wildlife. That is not to say that you have to actually handle the animal, but there is a legislative requirement or obligation on someone who hits an animal to take some action to reduce the suffering – I think that is paraphrasing the section of the Act. As Brenda just said, calling a wildlife organisation is the obvious thing to do. Most importantly, provide accurate location details. I do not know how many months – probably getting into years of my time now – that I have wasted trying to find an animal that has been reported with directions like, 'It's halfway along the Maldon to Bendigo road.' That is about a 20 k stretch – a little tricky to find it. So accurate location details are absolutely critical. As Michelle said, just tying something on a tree, anything like that, is a huge help to rescuers.

The other thing is – we hear this time and time again, and we as rescuers keep telling people this – slow down from dusk till dawn, and when you are driving do not look straight down the road, look at the sides of the road. You do not need to be looking straight down the road. Wildlife will come at you from the verges of the road. If you see one kangaroo crossing, slow down or stop, put your hazards on, because nine times out of 10 there will be others that will follow. Pouch checking is particularly important, but we do not generally encourage people

to handle the animal, because that obviously can put the member of public's safety at risk. We also do not generally encourage calling 000. The police will be the first ones to admit that they are not trained in how to assess wildlife, let alone put them down humanely. With all due respect to my colleagues in the police force, I have seen them do some not very good things when trying to put an animal down. We know how to do it humanely, we are trained and we know how to assess. Just because an animal is on the ground not moving, it does not mean it necessarily has to be shot or euthanised. We know how to assess them.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. We will go to Mr Berger.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair. Thank you all for your attendance today. I too want to echo the comments of my colleagues in relation to your volunteering work – it is fantastic work that you do. I want to take that part about volunteering one step further: what is there for your support when you come across some of these scenes and later on you are reflecting about what has happened? Have you got some support mechanisms that might help you in that regard?

Michelle MEAD: Each other, family. No, there are no formal supports at all.

Ian SLATTERY: I find Glen's a big help – Glenfiddich. Sorry, I thought I would lighten it up a little bit.

John BERGER: Yes. When you talk about attracting volunteers to work that you do, the first scene that they come across might be their last scene. And equally, if there is something that you might come across or some of your colleagues come across, do you think you would benefit from a support mechanism that might help you through that?

Michelle MEAD: That is of a little bit more reference to Brenda.

Brenda ARGUS: There is a number that you can call – I do not have it on me, I have it at home. I think it is called WildTalk.

The CHAIR: Also run by volunteers, though.

Brenda ARGUS: But apart from that, it is just going and visiting a fellow volunteer, sitting down, having a cuppa, having a chat and talking it out.

John BERGER: Because they are unpleasant scenes –

Brenda ARGUS: They are.

John BERGER: and there are consequences for that.

Brenda ARGUS: I have seen some horrible, horrible things.

John BERGER: So I am just inquiring if, within your groupings, you have opportunities to deal with that sort of thing. Another question I have is: what sort of buy-in do you get from local vets in terms of somebody rocking up to a practice and saying, 'I need a bit of help with this'?

Jo FISCHER-MORRISSEY: I have found them to be good – there is one in particular that I go to in Bendigo. I found them to be very good. They do not charge.

John BERGER: Are there other instances where someone might present to a veterinary clinic, and then they give the wildlife to them and they are presented with a bill?

Jo FISCHER-MORRISSEY: I am not aware of any bills.

Brenda ARGUS: Most of our vets will do free consultation and some will do free X-rays, and the only charges are for medications and they will discount the different medications.

John BERGER: So do you have a connection with local vets? You might ring up, Brenda, and say, 'Well, it's Brenda here,' 'Oh, we know it's you,' 'I'm going to come with a particular animal for whatever reason,' and they are quite receptive to assisting.

Brenda ARGUS: Yes, they are.

Ian SLATTERY: I would have to differ slightly from my experience. We are incredibly short on vets across the board in regional Victoria – incredibly short. It is a dire situation in actual fact, and that is just vets in general, let alone vets who are prepared to deal with wildlife or indeed have experience in dealing with wildlife – a lot of vets do not. They do close to very little formal training in wildlife, so that is a problem. From my experience, it is becoming harder, or becoming far more difficult, to get in to see a vet with wildlife. We struggle to get wildlife just a basic X-ray now. Five, six, seven, 10 years ago it was a different matter – vets were far more prepared to assist. I think to be fair on the vets, they are running a commercial operation. Their costs are up; everyone's costs are going through the ceiling at the moment. They are struggling just to run the commercial business, let alone deal with wildlife. So it is very difficult to get veterinary support in my experience.

Michelle MEAD: I think locally – we were discussing it just recently – there are not any local vets except one that will actually euthanise bats. Not many of them are actually bat vaccinated or bat educated. I do not think any of them will assess them, but maybe one would euthanise is my understanding locally, so that is a problem as well. The expertise is what Ian mentioned too – their expertise in wildlife. I think you do build relationships with the vets – I am not a carer, so I know these guys have built relationships – and often they are really good and will help as much as they can, but they have got the time and expertise limitations. And definitely with the bats it is a problem.

John BERGER: Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thanks, Mr Berger. I might pick up quickly from there following John's questions around support in the wildlife rescue community, and obviously road strike is one of the main reasons that animals are coming into care. From my experience engaging with this community a lot of the stress and trauma is compounded by the fact it is a huge financial strain to be a rescuer or a carer in Victoria, and there is basically no government support to do that. One of the proposals that has been raised in a number of submissions to this inquiry is giving the option for road users to pay a voluntary donation when they pay their vehicle registration, for that to then go into a pool of funds to support the people who are addressing road strike across the state and making our public areas safer. If this pool of funds was made and we found a way to create that money to support the community, do you think that would (1) increase retention in this space and (2) support the outcomes and of course the mental health of rescuers and carers? That was very long, sorry.

Michelle MEAD: I think any extra funding, any option to get funding, is always going to be welcome and would definitely make a difference, for sure. As an organisation, we try to support the carers and the rescuers as much as we can. They can put in for a certain percentage of fuel reimbursement and the phone operators can put in some reimbursement for their phone calls, but it is all very limited.

The CHAIR: Coming from your organisation, right?

Michelle MEAD: Coming from our organisation, exactly.

The CHAIR: And you need to find that money somewhere.

Michelle MEAD: Exactly. That is all done by your sausage sizzles and your raffles and all those sorts of things, and membership. So anything that we can get at that sort of government level that is then passed on to wildlife groups would be very welcome.

The CHAIR: Yes, because in my opinion, wildlife rescue is like an emergency service, because it not just about those animals, it is about keeping roads safe and public areas safe. We would never ask the organisations that respond to other emergencies to operate on a similar model, and in my view that is something that I think could really help address the many strains facing the sector.

Jo FISCHER-MORRISSEY: The other thing it could do, Georgie, is to raise people's awareness. If they are given an option like that, it is a discreet way of educating people about the service that is there.

The CHAIR: Absolutely, yes.

Ian SLATTERY: I agree. I think wildlife rescue should be recognised in legislation as a formal emergency service operation and be given appropriate funding and powers, as the CFA and the SES are. I use one of the examples I think in my submission: we are often called out – in particular I am, because it requires darting – to a 70-kilo kangaroo injured by a car on the Calder Freeway, with motorists driving past at 110 kilometres an hour, and I am trying to deal with an immobile pretty upset 75-kilo roo. The animal's welfare is at risk, and my personal safety is very much at risk and that of other motorists. That is a pretty high risk situation, and I think if were operating as a formalised emergency service, particularly in those situations, it would be a great help.

The CHAIR: Just one more question from me: we have had commercial kangaroo shooting come up already today, and we are hearing from a commercial kangaroo shooter later on today. There seems to be this narrative that shooting kangaroos is a solution to addressing wildlife road strike, but if you actually look at the figures for Victoria we have a quota that is not even being met, so that to me says kangaroos actually are not in these population numbers we talk about if we cannot even shoot them to the capacity that the quota says. I would agree with you, I think that commercial kangaroo harvesting is an international embarrassment on Victoria. But could you tell us the impact that that shooting is actually having when it comes to road strikes? Because in my mind it is not a solution, it is actually making the situation worse.

Ian SLATTERY: I think, as I said earlier, Georgie, going out in the middle of the night, blasting away at mobs of kangaroos – put the cruelty and all the other arguments aside – in terms of the relevance to road strike, it is fragmenting those populations of animals. They are highly stressed. They get pushed out of their normal habitat range, they become disoriented, and they end up in populated areas, including on roads. Killing of kangaroos on that sort of scale and with that sort of method is simply increasing the problem of kangaroo displacement and pushing them out of their normal habitats and closer to populated areas.

The CHAIR: From a rescuing perspective, we know that missed shots are a huge problem in commercial shooting. Does that increase the risk when going out on rescue on roads for kangaroos that have been shot and escaped?

Ian SLATTERY: As rescuers we are often called out the morning after a commercial shooting. We have to deal with the fallout. We come across kangaroos with half their faces shot off, limbs blown off, still alive, orphaned joeys standing next to their dead mothers. It is an incredibly distressful scene and incredibly distressful for the members of the members of the public who come across this the morning after and call us to come out and deal with it. As rescuers that is something we have to face.

Michelle MEAD: Can I just make a really general comment – to me, when you talk about shooting as a way of solving the road strike problem, and I am going to refer to your malaria example, it is actually solving the problem by getting rid of the cause. You get rid of kangaroos to solve the problem, which is the type of thinking we are trying to move away from. We want to try and find ways to live together, not to solve the problem by getting rid of the actual animal. It also has the assumption that the only thing causing road strike is kangaroos, but it is not. If we start hitting all the birds, do we then have to go and cull the birds? It is solving the problem the wrong way around, and that is not what we are all about.

The CHAIR: It is a great point. We used to have a commercial koala industry in Victoria, which is hard to think about now. I would agree with those comments. On that note, I will hand over to Mrs Deeming.

Moira DEEMING: Thank you so much. My questions are just related mostly to the recommendations you have given around legislation. On the proposed duty to stop or report after a wildlife collision and the stronger penalties, I am just trying to understand exactly what you are saying. Are you saying that that duty should be equivalent to duties after collisions involving humans? What kind of proportionality? What are you proposing in terms of requirements and any kind of punishment?

Michelle MEAD: Definitely the same as humans, yes, absolutely – any sort of road strike, just the reporting of it, so that we can gather the data to solve the issue. In order to do that you make it a requirement.

Moira DEEMING: But are you saying that it should be the same equivalent punishment as a human hit-and-run if you did not do it?

Michelle MEAD: I am not aware of what the legislation is for that. I think that sort of decision probably needs to be made at a higher level, but at least bringing in some kind of requirement would be a good start.

Ian SLATTERY: I think what we need is something better than what we have. I referred earlier to, I am pretty sure it is section 9 of the POCTA Act. Again paraphrasing; it says something to the effect that if you see wildlife suffering as a result of a road strike, you are obliged to take some sort of action. The wording is pretty vague, and I think that needs to be strengthened. I am not too sure we can put it in the same category as a human hit-and-run – I do not know about that. But we can certainly do better than what we have in terms of strengthening that provision to make it a legislative obligation on people to not just be able to hop back into their car after they check the damage, which is what they usually do as the first response – damage to the car, that is, not to the animal – and then just drive off. I have seen firsthand people doing this in front of me. Driving in front of me, I have seen them hit animals, and they just keep driving. I say to people that if that was their pet dog that someone had hit, they would be absolutely outraged. But we just make this convenient disconnect between wildlife and domesticated animals.

Moira DEEMING: Sure. Obviously there could be other reasons too. Growing up I was always told that with wild animals, you should avoid touching them, for the diseases and whatnot, and perhaps they do not feel equipped – and like you said, there could be education campaigns around that.

I am also interested in how you would balance the rights of these animals with private property destruction in terms of how we are going to manage them. Some of the options that we have been given have included – or at least, it has not been taken off the table – the fact that sometimes you could cull or move herds. I am just trying to work out the level of value that you are interested in putting legally on these animals, I suppose, in terms of versus human life and versus property damage. For example, you could maybe think about it with the farmer example. If a human came along and vandalised their property, he would want some recompense. That would be a crime, obviously.

Jo FISCHER-MORRISSEY: When you are talking about property damage, what kind of damage are you talking about? Are you talking about eating grass or eating crops?

Moira DEEMING: Well, I am using the example given before. Forgive me if I am paraphrasing you incorrectly, I think it was about eating crops. It is just an example. I am just trying to understand, because I think one of the objections that people will have, rightly or wrongly – everyone has their own points of view – is how you would value animals under the law. People do not consider animals as having the same value as human beings, and I think there would be objections to elevating them to the same status under the law, for example, in a hit-and-run or not providing assistance. What are farmers supposed to do about animals that come and eat their crops?

Ian SLATTERY: One of the things that I think was raised either in the terms of reference for the review of the POCTA Act, going back about a decade, or in the terms of reference for the review of the *Wildlife Act* was the issue of considering animals to be sentient. This has been done overseas. I think in France, for example, they changed the legislation from having animals considered property or a commodity to being sentient beings. I think that is the first step we need to take and that we need to recognise, and I think it is part of what I was saying in my opening remarks about an attitudinal change. In answer to your question, animals are more important than property, yes. That is my opinion.

Moira DEEMING: And on par with humans?

The CHAIR: We will just do one final question here if that is okay, and then we are getting close to time.

Ian SLATTERY: Well, that is a complex question. But as I say, I think the first step is to recognise animals as sentient beings. And once you recognise them as sentient beings and not property and a commodity, then you have a paradigm shift in the way we view wildlife protection.

Michelle MEAD: Just quickly, I will add to that. I think that there is definitely a duty of care when it comes to wildlife. If we are destroying their habitat, we have some sort of duty to make sure they have habitat to go to. I do not know whether that means offering farmers incentives to share their space or whether it means protecting the spaces that they commonly use and making sure that we are not consistently taking away more and more habitat from them. We all want to see our wildlife exist well into the future, and the only way to do that is to find ways to actually normalise living with wildlife and find ways to live with them.

Moira DEEMING: Sure. I have got one follow-up question, and you can answer it on notice. It is about making animals legally sentient. I would be interested to know, in writing, just exactly which spheres that crosses over into, because in some countries that have declared them to be sentient, they then – for example, in Germany, I believe was one of them – said that they could consent to sexual relations with humans. So I would just like to know the limits of what you are proposing, but you can give it in writing.

The CHAIR: I do take your point, Mrs Deeming, but I think we are probably slightly edging out of the terms of reference. I know the government is doing some work in this sentience space, but if you are happy to answer that question on notice, the committee staff can supply it to you.

Ian SLATTERY: Okay. Can the committee provide that question to us with clarity around it, please?

The CHAIR: Yes. And on that note, I am so sorry that we have gone slightly over again, but if any other committee members do have questions to the panel, we will supply them to you in writing as well. I just want to say a really big thankyou for coming along today.

Jo FISCHER-MORRISSEY: Georgie, can I just ask one question before we finish? Will we get some feedback once you have completed this?

The CHAIR: Yes, of course. We can run through this after the break, but we develop a final report that gets tabled in Parliament based on the submissions, the hearings and the evidence you have given today. And the government has six months to respond to that. I can chat you through that as well.

I just want to say a big thankyou for coming along today, especially noting that you are all volunteers and taking time out of your day and your wildlife schedule of course.

That concludes the public hearing, and we will have a lunchbreak.

Witnesses withdrew.