

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Wildlife Roadstrike in Victoria

Geelong – Wednesday 20 August 2025

MEMBERS

Georgie Purcell – Chair	Bev McArthur
Richard Welch – Deputy Chair	Tom McIntosh
John Berger	Evan Mulholland
Katherine Copsey	Sonja Terpstra
Moira Deeming	

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Georgie Crozier	Renee Heath
David Davis	Sarah Mansfield
David Ettershank	Rachel Payne

WITNESSES

Lisa Palma, Chief Executive Officer, and

Sarsha Collett, Head, Veterinary Operations, Wildlife Victoria.

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

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

To kick off, we will just have committee members introduce themselves, starting with Mr McIntosh on the screen.

Tom McINTOSH: Tom McIntosh, Member for Eastern Victoria.

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

The CHAIR: Georgie Purcell, Member for Northern Victoria.

Katherine COPSEY: Katherine Copsey, Member for Southern Metropolitan.

The CHAIR: 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, could you both please state your full names and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Lisa PALMA: Lisa Palma, Wildlife Victoria.

Sarsha COLLETT: Sarsha Collett, Wildlife Victoria.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you both so much. We now welcome your opening comments but ask they are kept to around 15 minutes max to ensure plenty of time for discussion and questions.

Lisa PALMA: Great. Chair and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and to present Wildlife Victoria's perspective on the urgent issue of wildlife road strike. Wildlife Victoria has operated since 1989 as a statewide wildlife emergency rescue service. We respond 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, with a central emergency call centre, an in-field travelling veterinary service and a network of more than 1200 trained wildlife volunteers. In 2024 alone we answered over 160,000 calls for help from the public for sick, injured and orphaned wildlife and assisted more than 97,000 native animals across 450 different species. Calls for help are increasing year on year, more than double what they were five years ago, largely as a function of human impacts on our native species.

Our submission and evidence focus on Wildlife Victoria's decades-long experience and dataset, which is comprehensive in highlighting the scale of the issue of wildlife road strike and the systemic issues prevalent in the current approach to it. We have also encouraged volunteers to make submissions to the inquiry so you can hear from them about their personal experiences. The current approach to wildlife road strike is unsustainable,

and urgent change is needed. We implore the committee to recommend the implementation of strategic, tangible and impactful outcomes and actions to drive that change.

Across our decades of experience Wildlife Victoria has experienced an escalating scale in the numbers of wildlife impacted as our human population grows and we increasingly expand into and impact wildlife habitat. One of the most distressing and growing causes of wildlife injury is wildlife road strike. Wildlife Victoria road strike cases have increased by 281 per cent in the last decade, with clear evidence of a continuing upward trend. Last calendar year, 2024, we dealt with 17,227 wildlife road strike cases, an average of 47 cases a day. Those cases were attended to by 625 individual and different volunteers. An average of four cases a day were handled by Victoria Police, and we paid over \$360,000 to volunteers who are darters, like Vets for Compassion, as you heard earlier, for their response. This calendar year the numbers are already higher. Already in 2025 we have handled 14,231 wildlife road strike cases across 155 different species, up to an average of 62 cases a day. We know this is only the tip of the iceberg, with substantive numbers of animals not called in for help at all, some handled by small locally based wildlife rescue groups and non-marsupial deceased wildlife, such as birds or reptiles, rarely called in at all. Kangaroos alone represent more than half of the victims.

In some municipalities Wildlife Victoria now attends to multiple cases every single day, with wildlife road strike most prevalent across the outer fringe of Melbourne, particularly where new housing developments and other infrastructure are expanding into wildlife habitat, and in regional locations with high visitation and high road traffic. Ten local government areas in Victoria account for 44 per cent of the total Wildlife Victoria wildlife road strike cases for the entire state. This is not only an animal welfare crisis. The sheer scale of this trauma is putting substantive operating pressure on response, and the current model is unsustainable. It is also a community and road safety issue. Motorists involved in collisions experience trauma, volunteers are left managing highly distressing scenes and the cost burden is largely carried by charities, volunteer rescuers, volunteer carers and veterinarians, all of whom receive little or no government funding for their work, despite the substantive public service they provide.

I want to stress the toll on people, and particularly volunteer wildlife rescuers and carers. Volunteers regularly respond to dozens of incidents a week, many involving horrific injuries. They describe burnout, compassion fatigue and trauma, and responding to wildlife road strike is a significant mental health trigger for volunteer carers and rescuers. Members of the public also suffer, whether they are the driver involved or a passer-by who calls our service after finding an animal in distress. Wildlife Victoria's own frontline staff, our emergency response operators and our veterinary staff are also exposed to and experience substantive trauma. As a long-term volunteer wildlife rescuer and carer myself, which I have been for well over a decade, for the rest of my days I will never forget the imploring eyes of suffering wildlife impacted by road strike that I personally have responded to. Wildlife Victoria spends \$2.7 million per annum on volunteer services, safety and support, including a 24/7 mental health and wellbeing service.

The current framework for wildlife road strike and its response is fragmented and inadequate. There is no legislated, coordinated approach for day-to-day wildlife rescue, veterinary treatment or rehabilitation in Victoria. The current system is characterised by a lack of structure, chronic underfunding and fragmentation and accordingly does not encourage collaboration, with all the participants in the response competing for scarce resources. Reporting of collisions with wildlife is not mandatory, and public awareness campaigns are ad hoc and unfunded.

Wildlife Victoria strongly urges the government to do seven key things: (1) establish a legislated, centralised framework for wildlife rescue, veterinary treatment and rehabilitation, ensuring consistency, accountability and clarity; (2) introduce sustainable funding to support the operational costs of rescue, veterinary treatment and rehabilitation; (3) mandate wildlife considerations in planning from the outset of new road and urban development projects; (4) invest in proven technologies and infrastructure such as wildlife crossings, fencing, AI detection and dynamic signage in high-risk areas; (5) implement nationally consistent driver obligations requiring motorists to report wildlife collisions just as they must with livestock or pets; (6) strengthen data collection by mandating standardised reporting across all rescue groups and leverage existing infrastructure in place, such as Wildlife Victoria's system and database; and (7) support education and awareness campaigns so that Victorians understand how to prevent collisions and what to do if one occurs. Globally, jurisdictions such as the United States, the Netherlands and Mexico are embedding wildlife considerations into road planning and mandating mitigation measures. Australia lags behind, scoring only a D on the World Animal Protection index. We have the opportunity to change that, and Victoria could lead the way.

The scale, frequency and severity of wildlife road strike in Victoria has reached a crisis point. Without decisive government action, the burden will continue to fall on volunteers, charities and veterinarians and native wildlife will continue to suffer needlessly. Wildlife rescue is a public service. It should be recognised, coordinated and funded as such. With your support we can reduce wildlife road strike, improve wildlife welfare outcomes, protect motorists and uphold our responsibility to safeguard Australia's unique wildlife for generations to come.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for that, Lisa. We will kick off questions, and we will start with Mr McIntosh.

Tom McINTOSH: Thanks for being here. I was just hoping you could talk a bit about the emerging technologies, in your view, particularly around our next presentation around trials going on down at Anglesea. I am just interested in your views on how they are working, some of those new measures put in place, particularly virtual technology. How do you think it is working, from what you have seen?

Lisa PALMA: Wildlife Victoria have not directly funded or been involved in the trials ourselves, but the first point I would make is data is incredibly important. So any trial, whether it is virtual fencing or other mitigation measures, would require preimplementation measurement and then post-implementation measurement as well to understand how it has performed. What I would say is it is probably a combination of things that would have the most impact and not one thing alone, and it would be entirely contingent, I would suggest, on the species in question, the road in question and things like that. But certainly that would probably be a question for the researchers or an ecologist to answer.

Tom McINTOSH: Okay. Thank you. Just on the species in question, you said about 50 per cent are roos, making up the majority of the animals. What else are you getting with your call-outs?

Lisa PALMA: It spans every single species you can possibly imagine, so emus, wallabies, wombats, echidnas, possums, brushtail possums, ringtail possums, turtles, blue-tongue lizards. Hundreds of species, in our experience, are impacted by wildlife road strike.

Tom McINTOSH: And as far as the numbers go of those that need to be euthanised or are dead by the time you guys arrive versus those that are able to be cared for, have you got a feel for those numbers?

Lisa PALMA: I do not have that data in front of me, but what I will say is the most common outcome is onsite euthanasia.

Tom McINTOSH: The only other question I had you touched on during your comments. You talked about the 10-year increase. I was going to ask whether that is year on year. I think you said that in your contribution, so I just want to confirm that or whether there are years that outlie or –

Lisa PALMA: The last five years have been particularly bad, and in our submission on page 10 we supply a 10-year time series of the wildlife road strike incidents we have responded to. The numbers last calendar year, at over 17,000, compare 10 years ago to only just over 6000 – so a very, very marked increase – and it is absolutely increasing year on year. Certainly from what we have seen for 2025 to date we are going to have unfortunately another record year for wildlife road strike that we are responding to.

Tom McINTOSH: Okay. Thank you both. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you so much, Mr McIntosh. We will go to Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you. Thank you very much for coming today. It is valuable to have your contribution to this inquiry. I am just interested with that huge increase in numbers that Tom just mentioned then and you brought out, what do you put that down to?

Lisa PALMA: There are three key factors that we find are triggers for response to wildlife. One is climate change. We are definitely seeing an increase in species impacted as a result of a range of climatic factors. This year, for example, we have had extended drought in large parts of regional Victoria. The second is urbanisation, and in fact that is where the bulk of the issue is. We are, as our human population grows, expanding into wildlife habitat and causing that conflict between wildlife and humans as we expand. And the third is habitat loss, and habitat loss specifically around habitat fragmentation. So as, again, we are expanding into wildlife

habitat, their habitat is getting fragmented, and we are seeing species in effect corralled into much smaller tracts of bush to live in.

Gaelle BROAD: I am interested – the previous vets that were with us were talking about deer and the increase and even in Balwyn there being deer. That is an introduced species, and we are seeing that spread across the state. What do you see contributing to that? Are you seeing a dramatic spread of deer across the suburbs?

Lisa PALMA: Deer are not something we can comment on, Ms Broad, because we do not respond to deer because they are a non-native species. So we do rely on other services to do that. But we nevertheless often get members of the public calling deer into Wildlife Victoria, albeit that we are not the primary responders. So I cannot really answer that one.

Gaelle BROAD: Okay. So does that mean any of the data you have excludes deer?

Lisa PALMA: Yes, it does. That is correct.

Gaelle BROAD: Right. Okay. So the numbers, obviously, would be much higher?

Lisa PALMA: Yes, absolutely.

Gaelle BROAD: Okay. You mention in your submission, and you mentioned it during your presentation then, the current framework being fragmented and inadequate, and then you talk about the lack of legislative overlay – any member of the public can establish their own wildlife rescue organisation. Just taking all of that into account, we have heard others talk about a code of conduct and the need for a code of conduct to outline who is responsible and what are the standards for response. Is Wildlife Victoria supportive of that type of approach?

Lisa PALMA: So we already do that for our own volunteers, and I will talk a little bit about that. Despite the fact that we have both a paid workforce and an unpaid workforce, we have very specific legislative and other obligations across our volunteer workforce, and that includes safety and training and other workplace practices like being free from bullying or harassment and things like that. We necessarily, given the sheer numbers we are responding to, have processes, protocols, procedures and all of those things. So despite the fact we have a large volunteer base, we as a large volunteer-led organisation must have all of those things in place. Where we are talking about systemic change is less at the organisational level but at the macro level.

There has been a lot of change in my 10-plus years experience as a wildlife rescue volunteer and a wildlife carer, and in those years I have seen the number of animals that we are responding to at a scale that makes it necessary to have a more coordinated and structured approach. We have got SES, for example, which are a volunteer-led organisation; we have CFA, which is a volunteer-led organisation. Both of those operate under a statutory framework, and they have accordingly a formal mandate from government for the work they do and the appropriate support around that. As a result they are able to organise and manage their volunteer workforce in a much more structured and well funded way.

Gaelle BROAD: How many different wildlife groups are there that you are aware of in Victoria?

Lisa PALMA: I do not know. We have been at this since 1989 and been the largest org in the state for many, many years. I think what does happen locally is groups of volunteers will get together as local community members, and it is very challenging for them to manage without funding or systems or technology or dispatch methodology or mental health frameworks et cetera like we have. I point out as well our annual operating costs this year will be over \$7 million, and we will again be posting a \$3.5 million deficit. So the model is, frankly, completely unsustainable. It is at the point that the sheer size and scale of response needs change.

Gaelle BROAD: We have heard other groups talk about different phone numbers for different regions – there is not a consistent number to call. I am very interested in the deer issue too: what happens if someone does hit one? Who do they call if it is not via your organisation to assist? If you could just talk to the phone issue, and then if you could also address the deer question.

Lisa PALMA: What we are dealing with here in its simplest terms is an injury and a response, and we want that response timeframe to be as short as possible. In the case of humans there is 000 – so if there is a human accident there is 000, and it is 000 wherever you are in Australia. There should be something similar, we believe, for wildlife incidents where there is effectively a 000 for wildlife so no matter where the incident occurs, anywhere in the state, there is a prompt, efficient response and dispatch to minimise suffering and deal with that animal in the most humane way possible and, for any that are suitable for rehabilitation, get them into care and get them the veterinary attention they need. It is not ideal if you are on a dark country road at 2:30 am and you have hit a wombat, it is still alive and you are trolling through your phone desperately looking for who to call, and you might not have coverage. That is an example of structural reform that I think would be quite useful in wildlife response, again just because of the sheer numbers that we are dealing with now.

Gaelle BROAD: Just with the deer response – I am interested because I have heard reports of people coming across deer on the road, and as far as education goes, hopefully this inquiry will assist with some of that – who do people go to if they do hit a deer?

Lisa PALMA: Again, there should be one accountable body to manage that. It is not something that we train our volunteers in, and again, we have to be quite focused from a resource perspective. But again, I would strongly suggest that there should be a centralised method to get help for those non-native species as well.

Gaelle BROAD: I am just interested, because your submission talked about requiring drivers to report and also render assistance, and that could be calling a service, for example. But we have heard other people talk about how dangerous it is in that situation – animals can end up in different places; they could end up on the road. In asking for that to be legislation, requiring drivers, can you perhaps explain a little bit more about that? And are you concerned about the risks to drivers if they do try? Because animals can be very dangerous, certainly if they are injured.

Lisa PALMA: We certainly do not encourage drivers to take action themselves but instead call for help. But that call to report a wildlife road strike to a rescue organisation is multilayered: (1) from a pure compassion and welfare perspective, getting help for the animal as soon as possible; (2) ensuring the member of the public does not try to take matters into their own hands – it is dangerous – and ensuring that there is a trained responder there to manage that; (3) ensuring that there is no road hazard and that it is appropriately managed. But certainly from our perspective our primary focus is wildlife welfare, and we do not consider it at all appropriate for an animal to be hit and left alive to suffer and die over sometimes many hours.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Great. Thanks, Ms Broad. I will pick it up here. Could you tell us a little bit about the challenges you face as an organisation?

Lisa PALMA: I think they will not be dissimilar to what you have heard from a lot involved in wildlife rescue, but for Wildlife Victoria it is sustainability. People think we are a government organisation; we are absolutely not, and yet there is the public expectation that we will respond. The sheer increasing size and scale of wildlife response that we are dealing with means that what keeps us up at night is how we can keep going, how we can continue doing what we are doing and how we can do it with only 7 per cent of our operating costs in the form of a state government grant. It is just not sustainable to continue providing a public service of this size and scale without fundamental change.

The CHAIR: It has been a consistent theme throughout this inquiry, just the lack of support and funding and I think, frankly, just no community awareness. Like you said, people call a number and think that the person they are speaking to on the other end is a paid staff member or the person responding is being at least reimbursed for their time and are horrified to hear that is not the case in many instances. One of the things that has been explored and mentioned in a number of recommendations is looking at putting a voluntary levy on vehicle registration so that people would have the choice, when they pay their car registration, if they would like to contribute to wildlife responders on the road. Is this something that Wildlife Victoria is supportive of?

Lisa PALMA: We absolutely are supportive, and in fact we would go as far as to say that it should be mandatory. What we do know is this is challenging work, but the interactions we have with members of public – again, over 160,000 of them each year – are overwhelmingly positive. People absolutely value the public service we are providing. The caller is often highly distressed and cares about the wildlife that they are calling

in about, so we feel that there would probably be quite broad public support for such a model. At Wildlife Victoria we measure customer satisfaction, which is public satisfaction with our service, and it is well over 9.5. So 95 per cent satisfaction – a few tens yesterday, which was great – is indicative of how supportive the public are of the service that wildlife rescue is providing.

The CHAIR: I have actually been in your call centre before and watched the screen of all the different cases popping up around the state, and it was overwhelming just to look at, let alone think about getting volunteers out to all of these animals who clearly needed urgent assistance. You stated in your opening remarks that demand has gone up – road strike has increased by almost 300 per cent. Could you tell us what you think is driving this change? And if you have any view on this: obviously Wildlife Victoria has a strong focus on responding to the crisis right now, but what can we do to stop it happening in the first place?

Lisa PALMA: As the CEO of Wildlife Victoria, I will categorically say on the record I wish we did not exist. What we are doing is the very reactive end of response, and that is why it sometimes feels like looking into the abyss when we know that there is an absolute lack of proactive planning up-front to prevent road strike occurring in the first place. So if there is anything we would absolutely wish for, it would be for government to take decisive action at the proactive end and ensure that wildlife have appropriate habitat and corridors to inhabit, to ensure that any infrastructure, any roads, any housing developments, incorporate some of the emerging technologies and infrastructure solutions – overpasses, underpasses, whatever it may be. But it is certainly possible for humans and wildlife to coexist and to coexist well. And we do need to remember the important role that our wildlife play in the ecosystem and accordingly on our own human health. Certainly all of our native species have evolved here on this continent over millions of years, and it is us that have actually changed their landscape; they have not changed. So if we could see a future where there was substantive, proactive action taken at the front and it significantly reduced demand for wildlife rescue – I would love to see a future like that which existed 14, 15 years ago, when I started in wildlife rescue, when it just felt nice and it was a small, community-type operation, but those days have gone.

The CHAIR: Yes. We have heard a little bit from other volunteers and volunteer-based organisations just about the impact this is having on people, and you have touched on that as well. And of course I might speak a bit more freely about it than Wildlife Victoria would, but I just get so frustrated when I look at the government throwing money at things that harm wildlife – you know, \$12 million to continue duck shooting in Victoria while wildlife rescuers and carers are thrown scraps and are just struggling to get by and self-funding their work. What is the cost of having to fund your own work and then the mental health impacts and then feeling unsupported by decision-makers? What is it doing to the sector?

Lisa PALMA: Despair. Absolute despair. One of the things that I have been most proud of in my five years as CEO of Wildlife Victoria – and there has been a lot of change, necessary change, over that period, just given the sheer scale of what we are dealing with. But I have over 50 emergency response operators, who in their majority are young people, our future, that are emerging from degrees in wildlife conservation, ecology, environmental science, zoology. And the absolute despair – you know, I am an older person and I have seen a lot, but it breaks my heart.

The CHAIR: Yes. And on that note, there does seem to be a bit of a generational divide in the sector to me, just anecdotally. Obviously young people now more than ever are probably struggling to make their own ends meet and to engage in things that they care about, such as wildlife rescue and care. Are there concerns about the longevity of the workforce being able to respond to this?

Lisa PALMA: Yes. That is an excellent question, Ms Purcell, and something that I contemplated five years ago and that we have been trying to shift. The reality is we have an ageing volunteer workforce. Now, why is that? The sheer scale, for example, for a wildlife carer, the sheer scale of wildlife needing care, the sheer scale of wildlife that are injured, means that substantive time is required to manage that as a volunteer. So typically what we see is older Australians that may have a bit more time or might be working part time or retired that are doing the bulk of the work. And I worry about that. I worry about the workload the state's busiest wildlife carers, who are aged, are dealing with. They deserve to retire, and they deserve to retire knowing that there is a younger generation coming through to take the load.

The CHAIR: Yes. And then just finally from me, obviously Wildlife Victoria has the most sophisticated ability to collect data. Am I correct in presuming that that data would probably not be as high because people are not calling in already deceased animals? It is just animals that require response?

Lisa PALMA: That is right.

The CHAIR: So it is probably not even reflective of the true scale. Is there a space for this data to be utilised by local, state and federal governments to consider in planning and infrastructure decision-making processes?

Lisa PALMA: Absolutely, yes. Our data integrity is incredibly important to us. We invest thousands and thousands and thousands of dollars in collecting that data, storing that data and analysing that data, and it not only informs a range of our business decision making, like our dynamic workforce planning and location of our vet hubs, but also strategic decision making and advocacy goals. We are working with local government on provision of data to deal with local hotspots, but we would anticipate and expect that the data that we have collected would be utilised by government to inform decision-making around policy and wildlife issues.

The CHAIR: Certainly where I live, Macedon Ranges, the council has found Wildlife Victoria's data really useful and has allowed them to take this on as an area that they are advocating on now. It would be great to see others pick up and do the same thing.

Lisa PALMA: It is a little alarming.

The CHAIR: I think that is all of my time, so I will hand to Ms Copsey.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you very much for appearing today and for your very substantial submission, which is really, really detailed and has some excellent, well-informed evidence-based recommendations in here. I want to hear a little bit more, if I could, about your road toll reduction program. What stage is that at, what does it consist of and how do you see it could be scaled?

Lisa PALMA: We have identified the top LGAs in the state, as I articulated earlier, that have the highest incidence of wildlife road strike in the state, and we are also aware that we have the majority of the data to inform what is happening over multiple years. We have developed a wildlife road toll reduction program that we are rolling out with local councils, and it is a fee-for-service offering of course. What that does is run through a few stages. The first is data provision and analysis of that data, and it has enabled local government to get a really good understanding of what is going on right down to the GPS location. Our data is very multilayered. We are also working with council on various mitigation strategies with our advice and input; community education – the main factors. What we have also started discussing with some councils – and I mentioned data earlier – is doing a pilot deployment like we did on Phillip Island in 2023, where for a seven-day period over their busiest period of wildlife road strike we sent the Wildlife Victoria veterinary team and some operational staff there. We lived on the island for seven days, and we conducted patrols at dawn and dusk and late at night. The local volunteers got a bit of a rest, and we did that in conjunction with Phillip Island Nature Parks and community and council. What we uncovered as a result of that exercise, because we reported on it, we measured the data and we had GPS dropping of all the incidents, was nearly 70 per cent of the wildlife we responded to had not been reported by the member of the public that had hit the animal, and it also gave us data on what wildlife taxa had been impacted at what time of day and at what location. That is the sort of thing that we are starting to explore as well: if mitigation strategies are put in, a controlled response to that actually showing what has happened and informing future planning.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. We heard from Vets for Compassion around the unmet need. I am wondering if you could speak a little to what Wildlife Vic observes and feels in that space. I am already conscious that you have described that you are not getting the resources to sustainably continue current operations, but what about unmet need as well?

Lisa PALMA: If we talk about unmet need, the veterinary sector is probably a good place to start. We launched the Wildlife Victoria veterinary service as a result of a chronic shortage of veterinary support for wildlife. What our vets do is both respond to incidents in field but also provide a substantive and comprehensive veterinary service to wildlife carers for wildlife patients that they have in care – and that is extensive, so not just the vet's time, but paying for meds, pathology, all sorts of things. Now, we only have two of those units, and we know that there is massive demand. We know exactly where we would place them if we

had the funding, and we want to be able to support all wildlife carers in the state with that sort of service. The veterinary profession is under significant pressure. We have a shortage of vets in the state and nationally, and GP vets just do not have the training that is quite specific to wildlife, which was mentioned in the previous session. That is just one example of an unmet need that is quite easy to solve, and it would be a regional model with a regional wildlife vet clinic with expert vet staff that are helping carers.

In terms of volunteer recruitment, we actually are overwhelmed with people wanting to undertake wildlife rescue. However, the reality is quite different to the perception, so what we have had to start doing is screening incoming volunteers and having them attend an information session so people know exactly what they are going to be experiencing ahead of doing it, and it is pretty tough work. There is a very high rate of euthanasia. There is high burnout. We have got an ageing volunteer workforce. It can take several years to build up competency to respond to complex species and situations. So ideally, again, I would love to see wildlife rescue organised where local communities have a sense of ownership of their local service and we have regional offices where volunteers can get together and have networking events, local training and proper human resources-staffed support and operational support for the work they are doing locally. So we know what the future could look like, but it seems a pipedream at the moment.

Katherine COPSEY: I think you have covered this earlier in your presentation and submission and in questions, but if you could just reiterate the portion of your operations and resourcing that is currently funded by government versus what is needed and what the organisation has to fundraise for at the moment?

Lisa PALMA: We receive a \$500,000 annual grant from the state government, and our annual operating costs are just over \$7 million.

Katherine COPSEY: Just going, as you said, further up the chain of interventions, what are the consequences you are seeing of the government's current approach to planning, approval of developments and so on? Can you give us some real-world examples or case studies of impacts on wildlife where they have been trapped, effectively?

Lisa PALMA: Yes, look, many, many, many, many of them. In our submission we did a snapshot of cases that we have dealt with in Epping over a period of time. In Epping there is urban development, of course, taking place, and what we have seen as a result is that once construction started on that housing development, we had kangaroos that had been living probably for centuries on that land dispersing into nearby roads. In our submission we have put a map of the location of the development and the pin-drop of all of the macropod cases. The numbers are alarming, and most of them of course had very poor welfare outcomes and required in-field euthanasia. We have also had victims of the North East Link come into care, right through from nesting birds to other species, and the list goes on and on and on.

Katherine COPSEY: Just in relation to some of the challenges that your volunteers face, what would you say the government could do to instil some hope for the people who are turning up for wildlife every day? Would it assist in continuing with the task and continuing to turn up to feel more supported by government?

Lisa PALMA: Yes. What is very interesting is we recruit probably each year 300 to 500 new volunteers into the organisation, and we find that the shorter tenured volunteers are highly engaged and absolutely loving what they are doing. The volunteers that are really bearing the brunt of this have had decades of, for want of a better word, despair. It also pains me to think some of these newer volunteer rescuers that we are bringing on could be facing a future like that.

I think volunteers would absolutely want public and government recognition of the work they do. The work is highly skilled. It is dangerous. It is incredibly rewarding. It is much valued by the public, and acknowledgement from the government of the service provided would mean a huge amount. I think, like most first responders – again, whether it is SES, CFA or others that are volunteer-led – we probably understand paying full-time wages for everyone in wildlife rescue is unsustainable, but at least reimbursement for costs incurred. Let people be volunteers in the true sense but not be out of pocket for doing so, and ensure that there are good supports and a volunteer community around so that people are not responding as individuals but as part of a team. Wildlife rescue is incredibly unique in that often the response is by an individual. I too have been out on my own in the dark at 2 am attending to a kangaroo on my own. So the strength and the sense of teamwork and the shared

experiences for first responders working in teams are much more beneficial than how the model currently works.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Copsey. That is all we have time for. Thank you very much for taking the time to not only submit but appear before us today and come in person to Geelong. We really appreciate it.

That concludes the public hearing.

Witnesses withdrew.