

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2024–25 Financial and Performance Outcomes**

Melbourne – Wednesday 26 November 2025

### **MEMBERS**

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Roma Britnell – Deputy Chair

Jade Benham

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak

Richard Welch



**WITNESSES**

Kate Houghton, Secretary,

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

Kelly Crosthwaite, Deputy Secretary, Bushfire and Forest Services,

Kate Gavens, Chief Conservation Regulator,

Chris Hardman, Chief Fire Officer,

Sally Fensling, Deputy Secretary, Corporate Services,

Etienne Gouws, Chief Finance Officer,

Elizabeth Molyneux, Deputy Secretary, Energy,

Carolyn Jackson, Deputy Secretary, Regions, Environment, Climate Action and First Peoples,

Matt Vincent, Chief Executive Officer, Resources Victoria,

Stan Krpan, Chief Executive Officer, Solar Victoria,

Alistair Parker, Chief Executive Officer, VicGrid,

Dr Kirsten Shelly, Deputy Secretary, Water and Catchments,

Tony Circelli, Head, Recycling Victoria, and

Anh Mai, Executive Director, Offshore Wind Energy Victoria, Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action;

Chris Miller, Chief Executive Officer, and

Elisha Civil, Chief Financial Officer, State Electricity Commission;

Lee Miezis, Chief Executive Officer, Parks Victoria; and

Joss Crawford, Interim Chief Executive Officer, Environment Protection Authority Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee and ask that mobile telephones please be turned silent. On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2024–25 Financial and Performance Outcomes. Its aim is to gauge what the government, the courts and Parliament achieved in 2024–25 compared to what they planned to achieve.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

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

As Chair, I am going to remind committee members to be respectful towards our witnesses today, the Victorian community and other committee members.

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

I welcome the Secretary of the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action Ms Houghton – you are very much welcome here – as well as other officials here with us today. I am going to invite you, Secretary,

to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 10 minutes, and after this time committee members will ask you some questions. Your time starts now.

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Thank you, Chair. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today, and pay my respects to elders, past and present and any Aboriginal people in the room and also watching online.

### **Visual presentation.**

**Kate HOUGHTON:** The Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, DEECA, brings together Victoria's climate action, energy and resources, environment, water and agriculture portfolios to maximise connections between the economy, society and the environment. DEECA's 2024–25 annual report highlights the significant work of almost 6000 staff, who work tirelessly every day in every corner of the state to deliver strong outcomes for Victoria.

DEECA's total expenditure reached \$3.2 billion in 2024–25, reflecting the scale and significance of the department's work across the state. The largest area of expenditure was land management, followed by bushfire and emergency management.

DEECA plays a critical role in driving and enabling economic activity in Victoria. We are working to enable \$35 billion of investment in renewable energy by 2035. Actions to achieve this include supporting installation of more than 76,000 solar PV, hot water and battery systems during 2024–25 through the Solar Homes program. In August 2024 DEECA released its *Cheaper, Cleaner, Renewable: Our Plan for Victoria's Electricity Future*, highlighting investment opportunities for the private sector to partner with the state in renewable energy transition. Through VicGrid, planning and development of Victoria's renewable energy zones and transmission infrastructure progressed, supported by \$480 million of investment in 12 projects to strengthen the grid.

The department fostered growth in emerging and strategic industries. This work included a new critical minerals road map in December 2024 to help deliver Victoria's critical minerals industry worth in excess of \$200 billion. The container deposit scheme is on track to reduce Victoria's litter by up to half and turn used drink containers into new recycled products. As of 30 June 2025 Victoria had returned more than 1.9 billion eligible containers across 640 refund collection sites. That brings \$190 million back into the pockets of Victorians. The water security plan, released in September 2025, explores and outlines options to invest in water efficiency, integrated water management and desalination to maximise the use of alternative water sources to drive sustainable economic growth.

My department has actively engaged in supporting and growing Victoria's agriculture industry and economic contribution. The Victorian agriculture industry continues to provide significant contribution to the state's economy, with gross value of agricultural production reaching over \$20 billion. The ability of Victorian producers to service the global demand for our safe and high-quality food and fibre also resulted in record export performance, with Victorian food and fibre exports in 2023–24 reaching 172 countries and worth a record \$20.1 billion, representing 27 per cent of the nation's total. To support and grow Victoria's agriculture, food and fibre sectors the department has delivered high-impact research and innovation aimed at improving productivity and farm profitability.

Throughout 2024–25 DEECA staff continued to fulfil a critical role in responding to emergencies, protecting public land during bushfires and leading the response to major biosecurity incidents and other emergency events. In 2024–25 the bushfire season was significant, with major bushfires in the Grampians National Park, Little Desert National Park and Budj Bim National Park. More than 1300 fires were suppressed across Victoria, impacting more than 250,000 hectares of public land. Effective fire suppression tactics from FFM Vic enabled 92 per cent of bushfires to be contained at first attack, or at least within an initial 5 hectares in size.

At the same time DEECA responded to a number of significant biosecurity emergencies across Victoria, including the detection of the tomato brown rugose fruit virus in 2025 and two separate detections of H7 avian influenza across 2024–25, impacting 12 poultry farms. The 2024 H7 response to Australia's largest avian influenza outbreak resulted in the humane destruction of 1.3 million birds and 9.87 million eggs. More than 1000 department staff were involved in the 2024 response and more than 600 in the 2025 response, enabling eradication.

DEECA continued to strengthen cultural capability and cultural safety, supporting our Aboriginal workforce and advancing the commitment to self-determination. During 2024-25 the department implemented several agreements with traditional owners. In the same year DEECA engaged 41 Aboriginal businesses to provide a range of services. Work also commenced on the First Peoples workforce strategy for the department to ensure DEECA has a department-wide evidence-based approach to strengthening Aboriginal employment.

During 2024-25 DEECA delivered nature-positive programs and biodiversity initiatives, protecting Victoria's environment and supporting the visitor economy. Victoria's biodiversity was protected through undertaking 320 patrols to support the survival of the hooded plover fledglings and launching Taskforce Ironbark in July 2024 to disrupt the illegal commercial firewood trade.

DEECA continued to roll out Victoria's standardised four-stream household waste and recycling system. As at June 2025, 59 of 79 councils offer food organics and garden waste services, 41 have glass services and 28 have all four streams.

DEECA continued to deliver the best available climate science, including publishing Victoria's second climate science report in November 2024. The department continued to ensure effective governance and management on Victoria's public land. Teams in DEECA regions completed four local parks, playgrounds and dog parks in 2024-25, with 52 further projects still underway as at June 2025.

We supported community groups and volunteers working to protect and enhance Victoria's 2000 kilometres of coastline, with more than 8000 participants involved in Coastcare activities during the reporting period. Seed management and forest rehabilitation services were delivered to restore native forests.

We continued to advance transition to a clean, renewable and affordable energy sector through targeted initiatives. In 2024-25, 42 per cent of Victoria's electricity was sourced from renewables, exceeding the 40 per cent target set for the year. It is also a 4 per cent increase on 2023-24. New electrification standards and efficiency standards were announced. Discounted energy efficiency products and services were delivered through the Victorian energy upgrades program.

The department worked with land and fire managers and with the community to reduce the impact of major bushfires and other emergencies on people, property and the environment. Significant planned burning was undertaken, covering an area almost 110,000 hectares, including 270 burns across more than 92,000 hectares. DEECA continued to progress initiatives to improve water security and water efficiency, enhancing the health of our waterways.

And the last slide: DEECA supported Victoria's agriculture, food and fibre sectors to boost productivity, expand access to international markets, reduce emissions and adapt to climate change. Through the farm drought support programs more than 1850 grants were committed, with most of these used for on-farm water infrastructure improvements. Farm businesses were supported in areas of climate adaptation, seasonal risk management and emissions calculations. Drought support was provided. To 30 June 2025, the department had oversight of \$69 million in drought support. As of November 2025, total funding of \$144 million has been provided to support Victoria's farmers to manage the impact of drought.

DEECA supported the sustainable and responsible extraction of Victoria's earth resources and development of Victoria's estimated \$200 billion worth of critical minerals. DEECA approved Victoria's first new sand quarry near Melbourne. The statewide reserve inventory was launched in December 2024, enabling more accurate forecasting of material availability, better investment decisions for industry and more targeted case management for quarry approvals. We approved two key mineral sand project milestones, progressing development of the critical minerals industry in Victoria. The minerals contained in the two sites are important for a range of products, including renewable energy, medical implants and mobile phones. We are pleased to answer your questions today, and I thank you for your time.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Secretary. The first 21 minutes are going to the Deputy Chair.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Thank you very much, Secretary, for that, and thank you, officials, for being here today. The offshore wind program is in tatters, way behind timeframes, with no assembly point after the catastrophe at Hastings, where the federal environment minister rejected the state's application under the EPBC Act. In these circumstances there was a Treasurer's advance, with the reasons listed as:

Funding was required to ensure milestone delivery of Victoria's offshore wind program, which includes the auction and support package design, coordinating enabling infrastructure and creating an offshore wind regulatory framework.

My simple question is: where did the money go? Did it just get flitted into the wind? Pun intended – not.

**Kate HOUGHTON:** No pun intended. Thank you for your question. I will get the Deputy Secretary Elizabeth Molyneux to go into detail, but offshore wind is a key component to our energy transition. There are a number of milestones that we have made and plans for future milestones over the –

**Roma BRITNELL:** But my question today is about the Treasurer's advance of \$15.7 million and what that got spent on and why it was needed.

**Kate HOUGHTON:** I will ask the Deputy Secretary to go into that detail. Thank you.

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** Thank you very much for that question. The expenditures from that TA went to the offshore wind staffing component and also some expert advice, technical, commercial, legal and regulatory. The offshore wind program has a number of legs to it. Obviously it has the infrastructure component, which you referred to, being the port, as well as transmission and how the offshore wind proponents would interact with those two infrastructure schemes. There is intense auction design, which is an active work stream, to make sure that the auction that we design in Victoria is as attractive as possible to proponents and in line with competitive processes overseas –

**Roma BRITNELL:** Given the project is at risk because people are walking away, are we going to see that energy blackouts are going to occur because you are not going to meet those targets?

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** Offshore wind is not due into the system until 2032. That is the current timeframe for the targets. And offshore wind is an important mix – it is a renewable energy; it is a variable renewable energy – so it does create comfort with energy security at that point in time. The forecasts: we are not anticipating any blackouts in 2032 or beyond. The Victorian government's role is a little bit different to AEMO, the market operator's role, and it is their role to assess energy security.

**Roma BRITNELL:** But if you are not going to meet your targets – and the wind has a considerable role to play in meeting the energy requirements for the state – being behind, will that mean you will have to ride roughshod over communities to get some environmental processes in place? Will you be putting the whales at Port Fairy at risk and the nursery at Warrnambool at risk just to do similar things to what you did at Hastings? To get the outcome, you need to meet your targets. We do not want to see these whale migratory pathways compromised or whale nurseries being affected. But what confidence can the community have that they will not be ridden roughshod over, like has happened around the Hastings area, where the federal government had to interfere to get some semblance of reasonable behaviour back?

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** The EES processes that are being undertaken for all of the various different legs of the offshore wind program – we will be following the environmental processes and maintaining those. We will be looking at those timeframes to see if we can do things in parallel as opposed to sequentially. We are doing a whole-of-government review of this, particularly in conjunction with the Department of Transport and Planning, over where we can take back time. However, that is from a project management point of view. In terms of the integrity of the environmental processes, they will be maintained.

**Roma BRITNELL:** The minister for energy said:

Our offshore wind targets will be critical in leading Victoria through the renewable energy transition as we build the significant capacity urgently needed to replace the closing coal-fired power stations.

Given the government has had to delay its offshore wind auction, does this mean we do not have the urgently needed capacity to replace our closing coal-fired power plants?

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** The energy transition is over a fairly long time period. As I said, we are looking at how much time we can recover for this offshore wind –

**Roma BRITNELL:** Yet Yallourn is scheduled to close in 2028 – that is not far away – and on any realistic timeline that now does look impossible.

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** Yallourn will be closing prior to any announced offshore wind targets. Offshore wind was coming into the system well after Yallourn was scheduled to close, and it is scheduled to close in 2028. AEMO, the Australian Energy Market Operator, who are tasked with assessing energy security, have consistently come out and assessed the system as secure post the Yallourn closure.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Okay. That \$15.7 million that was spent to – well, I am not really sure. Can you give me a breakdown of what that was spent on, please?

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** I can give you a breakdown of the legs of that program that it was spent on. It was spent on the procurement approach, which is the auction design. It was spent on the –

**Roma BRITNELL:** In figures. Will you be able to provide the figures for me?

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** I might have to take that on notice. I am sorry.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Okay.

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** But just so you know, it is infrastructure, ports and transmission –

**Roma BRITNELL:** If you are going to take it on notice, that would be fantastic. I will get to move on that way.

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** procurement and legislation and regulations.

**Roma BRITNELL:** That is great. Thank you. In addition to offshore wind, there are other projects that the government has funded or otherwise supported to meet its renewable energy targets that have been delayed. What are the reasons for some of those delays?

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** Could you give me an example of –

**Roma BRITNELL:** Yes. Examples are the delayed Derby solar farm, Kiamal, stage 2, Frasers solar farm and the Horsham solar farm. Can you explain why each of these has been delayed and by how long?

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** I will not be able to give specifics on those specific farms that you have mentioned.

**Roma BRITNELL:** I am happy for you to take that on notice if you wish.

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** I –

**Roma BRITNELL:** I think it is important for Victorians to understand whether we are going to meet these timelines. I am happy for you to provide that on notice if you would prefer.

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** No, no. What I am unable to do is go into the specifics of each individual wind or solar farm's timeframes and the commercial decisions that they may or may not have met in coming to financial close. What I can certainly talk about is what is needed for renewable energy to enter the system, which are clear investment incentives, which are being currently supplied under the Commonwealth capacity investment scheme and will be supported by the NEM review, which is also on foot at the moment. Planning approvals have been a big one for renewable energy projects, and there has been significant movement in –

**Roma BRITNELL:** I am actually quite interested in these specific projects. You asked me, for example, so I did provide some. I would really be interested in what those delays are. I am sure you are able to explain this – probably the auctions.

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** If I can just grab those names again. It was Kiamal?

**Roma BRITNELL:** Yes.

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** And Derby.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Yes. And Frasers solar farm and any others that have been delayed.

**Kate HOUGHTON:** We can provide that detail if it is not commercial in confidence. We can provide an overview of key areas of delay. That is fine.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Will we see higher energy costs as a result of these delays? I am sure the government are worried that they will not be meeting the targets that they have set themselves for the renewable energy targets.

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** The government has met every renewable energy target to date, and –

**Roma BRITNELL:** So the renewable energy will be provided by offshore wind by 2032. You will meet those targets?

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** I cannot predict whether we will meet the targets in 2032.

**Roma BRITNELL:** So that is my question: will there be increased costs as a result of the delays to be able to rush through the processes that you will need to get in place to have it meet the timelines?

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** The market provides an incentive for investment. The market will be seeing opportunities for investment in other renewable projects if offshore wind is delayed, and that is what we are seeing with the number of projects that are coming through the planning pipeline. We have a very large renewable planning project pipeline, so we anticipate that renewable energy will be entering into the system at a rate that should allow for the energy transition to happen in an orderly way.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Can the community, given the debacle – or catastrophe – at Hastings, have any confidence that the environment will not be compromised in the decisions made as a way of reaching those targets in areas, like particularly around Warrnambool, where they have very sensitive whale migration pathways and whale nurseries?

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** Absolutely. It goes back to the integrity of the environment effects process –

**Roma BRITNELL:** Hastings.

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** that is applied.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Didn't we see –

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** Hastings is currently undergoing its EES process at the moment. The federal government initially put in an application under the EPBC Act and then revised that to impact a much lesser area, and those processes are being –

**Roma BRITNELL:** And the minister has said that she will do whatever it takes to make sure Hastings works, yet the EPBC, a process at a federal level, had to intervene to say that was not appropriate. Will we see more of that? Will that delay it further? Will the environment be compromised?

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** The environment will not be compromised. We will be following every environmental process that we have here in Victoria, as is appropriate.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Okay. I will move on to page 21 of the departmental questionnaire on the Victorian energy upgrades program, which is being reviewed. What is the outcome of the departmental review undertaken during the 2024–25 year? If that is completed, what are the findings? And if not, when do you expect the review to be released?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Thank you. I will invite Stan Krpan to the witness table. Stan is the CEO of Solar Victoria, which covers that particular program that you are asking about. Thanks, Stan.

**Stan KRSPAN:** Thank you, Secretary. Good afternoon, committee members. The strategic review was commissioned last year and funded out of that last year's budget. It has been going throughout this year. We have had very extensive stakeholder consultations, and about 59 submissions were made to the review. The government is currently considering the outcomes of the review. But simultaneously while undertaking both the consultations and the work with government around policy options for the future of the program, the program



has been reformed through legislation passed by the Parliament earlier this year which extended the program to 2045 through the development of new activities that are very much oriented towards the same outcomes as the strategic review, which is to ensure that the program is fit for purpose for that future – for 2045 and the government's net zero commitment to 2045. That includes ensuring that the program is supporting businesses and households to electrify at scale. One example of that, for instance, is the commercial and industrial solar activity, which was introduced just a few weeks ago.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Okay. So the program is to see insulation upgrades as well. There was a \$700,000 Treasurer's advance in the financial year 2024–25, with the funding said to be required to support the development of the VEU insulation program and for the safety and quality assurance framework. I have seen in my office many, many complaints about some of the dodgy parts of this program. So is this, in effect, Victoria's version of the infamous federal pink batts program?

**Stan KRPAN:** We take a very holistic approach to all of the programs under our responsibility. For Solar Homes, for instance, which we have been running since 2018, it has been without incident. By far the most popular part of the program when we hear from our stakeholders has been the safety and the quality work that has been done.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Okay.

**Stan KRPAN:** We have the safest record of solar installations anywhere in the country. When we started the program, about 3 per cent of all installations were considered completely unsafe and needed to be disconnected immediately. That is now less than 0.2 per cent, so less than 1 per cent, and that is best in class. We have a really comprehensive, effectively, compliance and enforcement program, if you like, as if we were a regulator. We control entry into the program through retailers and installers. There are about 1200 retailers, from recollection, and about a thousand installers, and some of them are of course both. They sign up to a set of very stringent terms and conditions. We also issue a notice to market every year that continuously raises the bar around safety and quality standards, and we intend to apply a very similar approach to the insulation program. It was the subject of a Treasurer's advance, as you said, for \$700,000. That was really to set up the team. The commitment was made of course during the 2024–25 financial year, so it was not in the budget, and that was the reason for the Treasurer's advance. Obviously there is further funding –

**Roma BRITNELL:** Well, given we see lots of fridges turn up at businesses or lights that have been pushed on old people that do not want people in their home, with some of these programs – the hot water services that are leaving people without showers for weeks on end – there are a number of concerns. But can you just give me a total cost –

**Stan KRPAN:** We do not actually have the incentives for refrigerated cabinets. We discontinued that more than two years ago.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Yes, because it was a pretty dodgy program. But what was the total cost of the Victorian energy upgrades scheme of 2024–25?

**Stan KRPAN:** In terms of the funding commitment for staff and the program administration, from recollection, \$5.9 million was allocated in the 2024–25 budget, but that supports a program that is effectively over \$600 million worth of direct incentives to the pockets of households and businesses right across the state.

**Roma BRITNELL:** So what was the average impact on electricity bills then?

**Stan KRPAN:** The total amount saved is a combination of savings that have been made both to individuals that participate in the scheme – households, for instance, are able to save hundreds of dollars on their bills. Average households that undertake energy efficiency upgrades under the program save between \$120 and \$1100, and a participating business could save –

**Roma BRITNELL:** Per annum?

**Stan KRPAN:** Yes. Participating businesses can save between \$500 and \$74,000 if they can undertake –

**Roma BRITNELL:** Would you be able to provide a breakdown of the various components where those savings are made and how they are passed through to the bills? Because we are certainly not seeing cheaper energy anywhere on anyone's bill lately, I would not have thought.

**Stan KRPAN:** In fact between 2023–24 and 2024–25 the retail bills were set by the Essential Services Commission. The Essential –

**Roma BRITNELL:** And you cannot provide me a breakdown?

**Stan KRPAN:** I am going to. The Essential Services Commission discloses it consults very widely on the Victorian default offer, as it did for this financial year, and the environmental costs that were disclosed in the VDO for 2024–25 were in fact less than the year before.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Okay. I might note that the fridges are still on the website –

**Stan KRPAN:** We do not keep energy bills for customers because they are actually serviced through a market-based program. So of the hundreds of thousands of customers that benefited from the program in the financial year, that is all delivered through retailers and installers that are not directly contracted by the department, so we do not get access to those bills.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Also, what was the average impact on electricity bills of the cost of these Victorian energy efficiency certificates? What was the average impact? You said \$122,000.

**Stan KRPAN:** A household bill or a business bill or across the lot? I can tell you that across the whole of the scheme energy usage has come down by 7 per cent as a result of the scheme just in the one financial year.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Just the cost of the certificates.

**Stan KRPAN:** I think I have already answered the question: about \$700 million.

**Roma BRITNELL:** So on average for the impact on electricity bills, for household bills – what was the average?

**Jade BENHAM:** Sorry. I am interested in the cost of the Victorian energy efficiency certificates – \$700 million?

**Stan KRPAN:** The cost of the energy certificates is a market-based program. It fluctuates from time to time. Today it is about \$80, from recollection. It has been as high as \$115.

**Jade BENHAM:** But what did it cost the Victorian taxpayer? You just said \$700 million.

**Stan KRPAN:** The whole of the scheme is \$700 million worth of incentives that are passed through to businesses and households.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you. Okay. I actually have some questions now for Agriculture Victoria, if that is okay, and then I will have some in the next bit for public land management and forest fire management. But with the time we have got left, which is about 3 minutes, page 71 of the DEECA annual report 2024–25 confirms that only three of five animal pest, disease and residue control programs were fully maintained last year. Which two programs were then downgraded? And on what dates were those reductions authorised?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Thank you for your question. I will refer that to Deputy Secretary Jones. It is really important to understand the workload of what biosecurity efforts were done in 2024–25 –

**Jade BENHAM:** I would love to understand.

**Kate HOUGHTON:** which would necessitate any reprioritisation of effort, given the H7 avian influenza spread. So I will hand to you, Beth. Thank you.

**Beth JONES:** Thank you very much for the question. Yes, those two programs that were not achieved in that year reflected a diversion of resources to the avian influenza virus and the tomato brown rugose fruit virus that we were working with. As we do with any biosecurity emergencies, we have to reprioritise and triage the

use of our staff to whatever the highest priority order is. In this case we maintained the programs that had any high risk or had international market exposure and we reduced the two –

**Jade BENHAM:** Yes, but which were the two that missed out?

**Beth JONES:** so elements of the livestock traceability and product integrity programs were unable to be completed. We made sure, though, that the market access or anything that required the free movement of trade was still completed in triaging that.

**Jade BENHAM:** That livestock, does that include bees?

**Beth JONES:** Bees are livestock under the Act, yes. That is correct.

**Jade BENHAM:** Yes, so that includes that. So there was that livestock program. What was the other one?

**Beth JONES:** It was the livestock traceability and the product integrity programs.

**Jade BENHAM:** Product integrity – so who signed off on those reductions or the reallocation, reprioritisation, of the programs?

**Beth JONES:** The reallocation of those programs is based on a range of factors. It is a decision made usually by the chief vet or our executive director of biosecurity, driven by a whole range of factors, including national commitments – discussions nationally about what is being triaged.

**Jade BENHAM:** But internally within the department?

**Beth JONES:** Yes. Correct.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you. Was the minister formally briefed before the downgrade occurred?

**Beth JONES:** The minister was briefed in relation to our progress on BP3 targets, and we routinely briefed the minister in terms of the resourcing needs and implications of different emergencies but not specifically on –

**Jade BENHAM:** So was she briefed in this case?

**Beth JONES:** I would need to check exactly how she was briefed in relation to that, in terms of the specifics of that particular measure.

**Jade BENHAM:** Yes. Great. So you will get back to us on that?

**Beth JONES:** I would need to get back to you on that.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you very much. So can you please also table the internal – oh, bugger.

**The CHAIR:** Do not worry, Ms Benham, we will be coming back to you. Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Secretary and officials. Thanks for joining us. I am actually of a partially similar mind to the Deputy Chair, because I am quite curious to know more about the Victorian energy upgrades program as well. It is terrific to hear about some of the cost savings that have been reported. I know the department does not keep track of individuals' power bills, because that is not how we operate in a democratic society, I do not think. But what you have done is provided that service through Victorian Energy Compare for households to check their power bills. There was not a power saving bonus during this period that we are looking at, but that service of comparison was still there. In terms of the VEU program, we have got some really good evidence about how much households are saving. But with reference to that questionnaire, I can see more than 348,000 discounted energy-efficient upgrades were applied to Victorians. Can you talk to me about how that is being rolled out, any trends that you have seen and any changes to the program undertaken in the 2024–25 financial year?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Yes. Thank you for the question. Stan Krpan can respond to the VEU program and its progress.

**Stan KRPAN:** Thank you, Secretary. The program remains a really key pillar of emissions reduction for the state, delivering on that net zero commitment that I mentioned. Over 2.5 million Victorians have participated in the program, and that is made up of 2.4 million households who have participated since 2009. They have saved collectively about \$2 billion. Over 183,000 businesses have now participated since businesses were introduced into the program – that happened in 2012 – and they have saved about \$750 million as a result. What is really important about the program is obviously it puts money in pockets to make the energy transition cheaper and for people to be able to be more energy efficient. So for things like hot-water heat pumps, for instance, we offer discounts of up to \$2030 for locally made hot-water heat pumps, but those customers save \$330 per year every year from then on on their water heating bills, and that is the second biggest part of their bill.

In 2024–25, 348,000 discounted energy efficiency upgrades were delivered. We have also, as I mentioned earlier, been reforming the program effectively from within since 2023 to align with the government's commitments to electrification. The two biggest parts of the program are now energy-efficient heating and cooling and hot water heating, and they are the two biggest parts of a household energy bill. Because the program operates obviously at an individual household and business level, it causes them to be energy efficient and save money, but collectively it reduces energy usage as a whole. That effectively offsets the need for very expensive infrastructure upgrades for the whole of the energy system, and those accrue, when you accumulate them, to \$3.8 billion. So in terms of the cost, you need to take into account that some of that is passed through as direct discounts to the participating households, but all households and all businesses benefit from that \$3.8 billion net infrastructure – it is not quite a windfall, but it is an offset, because that infrastructure does not have to be upgraded because of the reduced energy usage. So it is obviously optimising the system as a whole.

**Michael GALEA:** That is a remarkable saved cost, then – \$3.8 billion in infrastructure that would otherwise have to be spent without these upgrades. So it is quite good value for money then in that context too, you would say, for taxpayers as well as for the hundreds of thousands of Victorians who are getting the discounts on their power bills as a result. You did go through heating and cooling and hot water and obviously seeing the trends towards that, which is also good to see because they are the largest components of household power bills. In terms of the broader benefit, though, I am curious to know about the jobs that this program has been able to support in the sector. Is there any data that you can refer to from the previous financial year or broader trends about how the VEU program, as well as the Solar Homes program, has supported job creation?

**Stan KRPAN:** Yes. Thanks for the question. Yes, obviously we are responsible for delivering the Solar Homes program. We have been doing that since 2019 and VEU for the last year, but the program was going for 15 years before that. We do take a really holistic approach. It is not just about rebates and discounts. We take into account the safety and the quality aspects, but also making sure that the programs have a really lasting impact on the industries that are effectively created and supported through the programs. If you think individual electricians, plumbing and air-conditioning mechanics, for instance, all of those people benefit. There are about 2000 direct jobs in the Victorian energy upgrades program for people that are very familiar with the scheme and operate at different parts of that supply chain, but there are thousands and thousands of plumbers and mechanics and electricians who benefit from the discounts being passed on through others.

Through the Solar Homes program, again, part of that holistic approach has been to ensure that we have got the people and the skills needed to deliver. This is a really important part of the renewable energy programs and commitments of the government. The Solar Homes program in 2024–25 alone supported 7000 jobs, and that exceeded the government's original estimation that it would create 5500 jobs. So we exceeded that, and that was over the life of the program. We did that in 2024–25. Through Solar Victoria now – and again across all of the various programs, so solar hot water, heat pumps, air conditioning – the government has invested \$12 million in a broad range of training and workforce development initiatives. That part of the program, the \$12 million, concluded in June 2025, but the government committed a further \$5 million, and that is really for me a reflection of the success that that training and workforce development aspect has had. But also it is important to make sure that these programs are enabled and being delivered. With the initial \$12 million committed we have delivered mandatory safety training for workers, which are mostly electricians and apprentices. More than 4800 people have attended a TAFE with funding from the government as a result of that. It is now part of the government's free TAFE program, and so we no longer have to fund that. It is funded through free TAFE. We also have delivered training for electricians to upgrade their skills and their qualifications, from being a class A electrician to being a solar-accredited electrician. About 1200 people have participated in that.

Also, as of 30 June 2025, 1300 qualified plumbers and fourth-year apprentices have been through a plumbing apprenticeship targeted program which is just for hot-water heat pumps. That is really to familiarise people who might have been trained on gas hot-water units to be familiar with the technology that is really going gangbusters in Victoria, which is hot-water heat pumps. They are electric and super efficient.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. It was great to hear as well about the mandatory training. Obviously with such a large program, you want to maximise that benefit but you want to make sure it is done in an appropriate way, so it was very good to hear about those protocols as well. Indeed I think with the free TAFE element, we might have something to talk to on that with DJSIR when they appear before us.

Indeed we had DGS yesterday talking to us extensively about rental reforms. I know a lot of renters in my electorate have spoken to me from time to time, saying they struggle with not being able to get all the same benefits through programs such as this. Can you talk to me about what specifically is being done to support renters to access cheaper electricity, whether it is through the VEU or through other programs?

**Stan KR PAN:** Sure. Most of the upgrades that are available and the discounts that are available up-front from the VEU are available irrespective of whether it is a rented property or owner-occupied, and we find that it is popular with both. If you think about air conditioning or hot-water heat pumps, as I said, the discounts there are up to \$630, and they can be available and obviously save the tenant money. Part of the original Solar Homes commitment in 2018 was to include up to 50,000 solar PV rebates for rented properties, and we are well on our way to that. It is a challenging part of the sector, there is no doubt about that, in the sense that it is essentially the landlord or the rental provider that needs to invest the difference between our rebate, which is up to \$2,800, and an interest-free loan which is available to them. They are generally making up \$1000 to \$2000, and although that is tax-deductible for the rental provider, it can still be a challenge. But with that, it benefits the renter, if it is just solar, by about \$500; if it is a freestanding home and they are optimising the solar for their own energy usage, they are saving about \$1000.

We announced just a couple of years ago a jointly funded initiative with the Commonwealth government – \$16 million of state government funding, \$16 million of federal government funding for a Solar for Apartments program. Although it sounds unrelated, about 60 per cent of apartments in Victoria are rented, and that is more than 10 per cent of the building stock. In other words, there are a few hundred thousand people in Victoria that are living in a rented apartment. We have been really leading the country in making rebates available for apartment dwellers, whether they are owner-occupiers or renters. More than 3000 applications have been received by under the Solar for Apartments program. More than 2000 of those have already been installed. That is more than a hundred apartment buildings in middle-ring suburbs and inner suburbs that have been fitted now with solar, and those renters – from recollection, about 40 per cent of that cohort are rented – are now benefiting from bills that are cheaper by about \$500 a year.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you very much, Mr Krpan. That is really good to know. Secretary, if I can ask about – I was going to say one of the key objectives, but in fact it is the first key objective in the budget – the net zero emissions climate-ready economy, how are Victoria's greenhouse gas emissions tracking over the past year, and how do they compare to 2005 levels?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Thank you for the question. Deputy Secretary Jackson can answer that question; it is in the remit of her portfolio.

**Carolyn JACKSON:** Thank you very much for the question. In 2023, which is the most recent data that we have in relation to emissions reductions, Victoria's emissions had reduced by 31.4 per cent since 2005 levels. If I can just add to that, there has been significant progress made across the economy. To provide a few examples for you, with the transition to renewable energy, that has obviously had a significant impact in terms of the decarbonisation of the electricity sector, and emissions in that sector have decreased by 38.8 per cent since 2005. Fuel combustion emissions, which includes emissions from fossil gas, had decreased by 22.4 per cent since 2005 as households and industry have decreased their use. And again in my patch, Victorian forests are sequestering more carbon with the cessation of native timber harvesting. That is the land use, land use change and forestry sector – LULUCF. These harvested areas are regenerating and storing carbon as trees grow. And so this, along with the growth in plantation forestry and reduced land clearing, means that Victoria's lands and forests are absorbing 139 per cent more carbon in 2023 than in 2005.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. Such a dramatic reduction in those greenhouse gas emissions. But in the context of 20 years of very strong economic growth, nonetheless, that is a pretty significant statistic. Thank you. What specific actions is the government currently taking or has taken in the past financial year in order to drive that deceleration of greenhouse gases?

**Carolyn JACKSON:** Certainly happy to talk to that. Just on your point around the economic growth, if I can, there has been significant economic growth while those emissions have been reducing. Between 2005 and 2023 Victoria's economy grew by 57.5 per cent, employment has grown by 48 per cent, while emissions have reduced by 31.4 per cent. So there has been significant economic growth during those reductions in emissions.

In terms of the actions that we have taken, there have been a significant range of actions taken to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. There are a number within the department that I can talk to; they are obviously across portfolios, across areas, not just mine, as well as across other departments, which I can also talk about. So within the department in 2024–25 there were a range of actions in the renewable energy sector: as the Secretary mentioned, there was the installation of over 76,000 solar PV hot water and battery systems through the Solar Homes program that you have talked about, and there have been over 348,000 households and businesses that have received upgrades through the VEU program that Stan has spoken about. We have set new building regulations that require all new commercial and residential buildings to be built as all electric from 2027, and there have also been some targets that have been set again in VEU, which means that the VEU program continues to be the largest energy efficient program in Australia. There has been a lot of investment done in terms of taking carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere through that land and forestry sector, and that includes the \$77 million BushBank program, and there has been significant progress happening in that space. We have also, again in the department, been supporting farmers to reduce emissions across the agricultural sector. So there have been a range of actions that have been taken in 2024–25 to contribute to those reductions in greenhouse gas emissions.

**Michael GALEA:** Very interesting. Thank you. It is also interesting to know that the VEU is actually the largest such program in Australia. Again, good to see that we are beating our cousins up north. In terms of those interstate comparisons then as well, how does Victoria's strength in this area compare to other states?

**Carolyn JACKSON:** Yes. Thank you. We are very well progressed in terms of the emissions reduction, and we are doing quite well compared to other jurisdictions. If I give you some comparisons, as I mentioned, Victoria has reduced its emissions by 31.4 per cent compared to 2005. As an average across the country, across Australia, that emissions reduction is 25.9 per cent, so still a significant effort, but not as significant as Victoria's. New South Wales has achieved emissions reductions of 24.6 per cent since 2005; the ACT, 4.8 per cent; and then there are a couple of jurisdictions, WA and the Northern Territory, that have not achieved emissions reductions since 2005.

**Michael GALEA:** Very interesting. Thank you. From my count, I think you went through all of them there. So that is the highest reduction.

**Carolyn JACKSON:** There are other jurisdictions that I have not talked about that are higher, so we are fourth in terms of other jurisdictions.

**Michael GALEA:** Excellent. Thank you. In terms of Victorian government operations – you did touch on this as well – you said within DEECA; if I can ask you to go a bit more deeply into that just within the department itself as to what actions have been taken within DEECA to reduce those emissions?

**Carolyn JACKSON:** Yes. I certainly can. Again, there are actions that the department can take, but then we lead a lot of actions across government, and I can talk about it. The SEC, for example, is obviously doing great things in terms of government operations as well. In terms of government operations, we have achieved a significant reduction over time. Total emissions from Victorian government operations are projected to be 2.5 million tonnes, or 67 per cent lower, in 2025–26 than in 2018–19. That would be a reduction from 3.7 megatons to 1.2. By 2030 net emissions from government operations are expected to be 78 per cent lower than 2018–19. In terms of those specific actions that you have asked about, the government has delivered a range of actions under the whole-of-government emissions reduction pledge, and that was announced as part of *Victoria's Climate Change Strategy 2021–25*. This includes all eligible Victorian government sites being powered by the SEC, with 100 per cent renewable energy from 1 July this year, and Victorian government

entities are required to report annually on their energy consumption and emissions under financial reporting directions.

The government also has a greener government buildings program, which is strengthening energy performance and environmentally sustainable design requirements for government buildings and facilities. And as part of *Victoria's Gas Substitution Roadmap*, the government announced in July 2023 that all new government buildings that had not reached design stage will be built as all-electric, and all-electric government buildings powered by renewable energy will obviously bring down emissions and reduce reliance on gas while realising the benefits of all-electric technology.

There is also work that is underway in terms of accelerating the adoption of ZEVs in the government fleet to ensure a timely transition of 100 per cent of passenger vehicles and vans to net zero emissions by 2035. The government released an updated standard motor vehicle policy in February of this year, which includes a requirement to purchase a ZEV where a fit-for-purpose option is available. From 2025 new transport buses will be purchased as zero-emission buses in accordance with the zero-emission buses transition plan, and the 2023–24 budget provided \$36.4 million over four years for delivering *Victoria's Bus Plan*, which does include funding to commence the rollout of zero-emission buses as part of recontracting the metropolitan bus service contracts that expire this year. Obviously, introducing ZEVs into public transport and vehicle fleets will help more Victorians to experience the benefit of zero-emission technologies while also improving public service delivery and reducing air and noise pollution on our roads. They are just a few of the steps that government has taken.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. Beyond the work to reduce our input into the climate and our impact on the climate as well, what work has been done in order to make Victorian communities and indeed government operations more resilient to the consequences of climate change?

**Carolyn JACKSON:** Thank you for the question. We do have some things called adaptation action plans for seven systems, they are called, that are vulnerable to climate change or are vital to building our state's climate resilience. They cover things like Victoria's built and natural environments, the education and training system, health and human services and the primary production, transport and water cycle systems. There were adaptation action plans that were released a few years ago now, covering 2022 to 2026, and we are in the process now of updating or developing new adaptation action plans that are due for release next year – October or so next year. In terms of those adaptation action plans, if I can give you an example, there was the *Water Cycle Climate Change Adaptation Action Plan*, which was released back in February 2022. The 2024–25 state budget provided \$11.6 million over four years from the sixth tranche of the environmental contribution to maintain efforts to reduce the vulnerability of the water system to climate-related risks. In terms of –

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Ms Jackson. We are going to Ms Benham.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you. While we are on the subject of renewable energy, I want to talk about large-scale renewable energy, mining and transmission projects across the regions. Does the department track the net change in agricultural land available for production in Victoria?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Thank you for the question. Given DEECA is across a lot of the land use change in Victoria at the moment, the board is exceptionally attuned to the question that you have asked. In terms of Agriculture Victoria and the change in productive land, particularly from ag, noting that there is productive land from critical minerals as well, and transmission, do you want to just talk through your processes of –

**Jade BENHAM:** Just the net change in agricultural land.

**Beth JONES:** Thanks for the question, Ms Benham. The agricultural land and how much is used, where it is and what it is used as an input across –

**Jade BENHAM:** So you do track it?

**Beth JONES:** Yes, we do. We have got a Victorian land use information system that does over time look at land use, so it is tracking in a certain way, I suppose.

**Jade BENHAM:** Do you know what impact the current renewable energy projects have had on the total amount of land available for food and fibre production?

**Beth JONES:** What I would say to that, Ms Benham, is that organisations like VicGrid and others have obviously made estimates as a part of their modelling and rollout in terms of the impact of the renewables rollout on agricultural land. That is modelling that has been done by them. That has used the VLUIS as an input to some of that data.

**Jade BENHAM:** So you would have the trends over the past few years about how it has changed?

**Beth JONES:** Next time the data is updated in the VLUIS, we will pick up changes in land use. It tracks it over time. We do that generally as a part of our tracking of the sector and making sure we understand what is going on in the sector.

**Jade BENHAM:** Is that publicly available?

**Beth JONES:** The VLUIS? Yes.

**Jade BENHAM:** It is – great. Thank you. I want to move on now to spend a little bit of time on control of wildlife permits and rabbit control programs. Has the department briefed the minister on the issuing of authority to control wildlife permits in north-west Victoria?

**Beth JONES:** Ms Benham, those permits are issued through the environment department.

**Jade BENHAM:** Great. It is a big department. Everyone is here.

**Kate HOUGHTON:** It is. We are all integrated, and we all know what each other are doing, so it is all good.

**Jade BENHAM:** Exactly. Terrific.

**Carolyn JACKSON:** It is through the conservation regulator, which is Kate Gavens, and she is just coming up to the table now.

**Jade BENHAM:** Terrific.

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Thank you. Thanks, Kate.

**Kate GAVENS:** Thank you very much. Yes, we do brief the minister on authority to control wildlife permits. We also publish a summary of permits that are issued, on an annual basis, on our website.

**Jade BENHAM:** Great. Those briefings to the minister – are they available on the website?

**Kate GAVENS:** No. We provide written and verbal briefings to the minister as a matter of course on a monthly basis.

**Jade BENHAM:** Could you provide them to the committee, please?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** We cannot provide briefings from the department to the minister; they are briefings for the minister, as you would appreciate.

**Jade BENHAM:** I appreciate that. Is there any reason why authority to control wildlife cannot be issued to control dingoes and wild dogs from mauling lambs and sheep through the north-west of the state? Because this has been an issue. People are told to apply for an authority to control wildlife, and no-one has been able to get one.

**Kate GAVENS:** The issue of dingoes in the north-west of Victoria: as you would be aware, there was a change to the unprotection order in Victoria on the basis of the status of dingoes, there being as few as 40 dingoes left in that north-west area. People can apply for an authority to control wildlife; however, because of the status of the dingo, being a threatened species, we have to really carefully consider under what conditions we would issue those permits and, as we have published on our website, really take into account the status of



that species. We have said that we would need to really look at where there are quite extenuating circumstances for where we would issue those permits.

**Jade BENHAM:** What level of dingo DNA is needed in those wild dogs for there to be an authority to control wildlife for farmers who are having lambs mauled?

**Kate GAVENS:** In terms of the genetics of dingoes, I would refer that question to my colleague Ms Jackson, who could talk more about the scientific studies that have been done in relation to those animals.

**Jade BENHAM:** Great. I just want to get an idea on the practical ramifications, because it is having a huge impact on farmers, as you can appreciate.

**Carolyn JACKSON:** Thank you. There has been quite a bit of research that has been undertaken in the last few years. There was research that was undertaken on Victorian animals, and that included assessment by a researcher in relation to extracts or samples that had been taken from animals that had been killed in Victoria by the program.

**Jade BENHAM:** Was that the scalp program?

**Carolyn JACKSON:** That was the vertebrate species management program, so the former wild dog management program. There is also research that was done in New South Wales which has shown that the genetics are telling us that there are no wild dogs and that the animals are dingoes. In terms of the question about the percentage and the genetic diversity for ATCWs, the Conservation Regulator looks at it from a predation and attack perspective, so they would not have the genetics of a particular animal.

**Jade BENHAM:** Are you aware that those dingoes – wild dogs – are stalking campers in national parks out there?

**Carolyn JACKSON:** I know that there have certainly been a number of reports that have been made, and we do encourage reports, whether that be from farmers or other people, in terms of obviously predation or incidents. If there are any potential or real public safety issues, we certainly encourage those to be reported through to the team.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. Just rabbits, very quickly: how many rabbit control programs were undertaken by the department in the last financial year?

**Carolyn JACKSON:** I would need to take that question on notice. I do not have that information to hand.

**Jade BENHAM:** That is fine. Thank you. I want to talk now about public land management. This is the transition and contractor utilisation programs or the external plant panel operators and the forest contractor program. This is referring to the PAEC questionnaire, page 57, and also the DEECA Resource Management Framework 2024, section 4.5 on page 90. This is throughout the transition out of the native timber industry; DEECA secured the services of haulage and harvest contractors, and they were the forest contractor program. But in doing so, the environment minister said that ‘similar volumes of forest and fire management works as previous years’ were available to the existing external plant panel, or civil contractors, if you like. There is a concern that this is not the case and panel contractors are being denied work. So could you tell me what the level of funding that was provided to those external plant panel contractors was in 2024–25 as compared to the year before and the year previous?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Thank you for the question. I will refer it to Deputy Secretary Crosthwaite, who is responsible for that area.

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** Thanks for the question. The forest contractor program is a program funded by the government. We have engaged former VicForests contractors through that program and can engage the external plant panel that you are referring to through that program as well. We are just into the second year of the forest contractor program. In the first year of the program there was an interruption to the flow of the work to the external plant panel.

**Jade BENHAM:** There was?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** There was.

**Jade BENHAM:** What was the reason for that?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** The focus taken to establish the forest contractor part of the program was the priority in that year.

**Jade BENHAM:** Sorry to interrupt, but I have correspondence here from some of those former plant panel or civil workers saying that he had pleaded with the department for some work but was told, 'Why would we employ you when we can get this work done through transition work?' Is that what the interruption was?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** No. So it is worth pointing out –

**Jade BENHAM:** Is that true, though?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** No, that is not true. Well, whether it was said or not I do not know, but the implication is not accurate.

**Jade BENHAM:** So can we just have the comparative figures for what the level of funding was to the external plant panel contractors in 2024–25 and 2023–24 and the year previous?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** Yes. I have to take those figures and take that on notice. But what I can say is that that panel has over 150 providers on it. There is no guarantee of work through that panel. We have a large panel available to us when needed.

**Jade BENHAM:** But the minister says – and this is in a letter from Minister Dimopoulos's office:

In line with the assurance made to the Australian Forest Contractors Association by the previous Minister for Environment ... DEECA ensures that similar volumes of forest and fire management works as previous years is available to the Panel.

Those contractors – as is illustrated in the correspondence that I have – rely on this work and so do the forests. They feel at the moment that they are being shunted for the transition workers.

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** That may be the perspective of the individual that you are referring to. At the global level, the work has increased to the panel over 2024–25.

**Jade BENHAM:** It has increased to the panel?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** Yes. I will get those figures for you, but it has increased.

**Jade BENHAM:** Great. Thank you. Can you also provide actual work volumes and hours delivered in 2023–24 and 2024–25? By 'actual work volumes' I mean from the FCP contractors and the external plant panel contractors, so we can have a look at the volumes.

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** 2024–25 was the first year of the forest contractor program, so we cannot compare it to the year before, 2023–24.

**Jade BENHAM:** That is okay. We just want to have a look at the volumes of work that were being supplied before the program and now in the reporting period. That would be great.

**Kate HOUGHTON:** If we have that level of detail, we will provide it; absolutely. But if we do not, we just do not.

**Jade BENHAM:** Well, you know how much work is being done.

**Kate HOUGHTON:** But did you say hourly?

**Jade BENHAM:** No, no.

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Sorry.

**Jade BENHAM:** Just the work volumes. Hours delivered if you can, but just the work volumes.

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Work volumes – I just wanted to clarify that.

**Jade BENHAM:** You will take that on notice?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Yes. Absolutely.

**Jade BENHAM:** Great. Thank you. What steps did DEECA take to ensure the continuity of work for the panel contractors during the transition – because if their perception is that they are now without work that they have heavily relied on for over 24 years now and they are going without it, what steps did the department take to make sure that those contractors would be looked after?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** The forest contractor program was new money funded by government from 2025 for five years.

**Jade BENHAM:** Yes. That is the transition out of the timber industry?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** That is, yes. The external plant panel has existed for a long time prior to that and is available to do work with our people in terms of things like roading, other vegetation management, bushfire preparation –

**Jade BENHAM:** Fire reduction, yes. Exactly.

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** Yes, and so that work has continued.

**Jade BENHAM:** It has continued in full?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** Yes, that work has continued.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. Thank you. In the interests of time, I want to move on to the forest fire fleet now, if we can. What was the fleet number last year during the bushfire period of the G-Wagons and the Unimogs during the reporting period?

**Chris HARDMAN:** The number of heavy tankers, the Unimogs and the –

**Jade BENHAM:** Do you have those numbers separately?

**Chris HARDMAN:** ultralight tankers – so 290 of the G-Wagons –

**Jade BENHAM:** 290 G-Wagons, yes.

**Chris HARDMAN:** And 59 of the Unimogs.

**Jade BENHAM:** 59 Unimogs.

**Chris HARDMAN:** Yes, and the Landcruiser fleet I think was 206 Landcruisers, which are water-carrying vehicles, and then we have 35 heavy red tankers.

**Jade BENHAM:** And they were all on line during the bushfire period?

**Chris HARDMAN:** Yes, certainly most of those vehicles would have been available; however, obviously normal maintenance regimes and all of that sort of stuff –

**Jade BENHAM:** So for this bushfire period, how many are operational – year to date?

**Chris HARDMAN:** What I might do there is provide a bit of an overview for assurance and then ask the Deputy Secretary, Bushfire and Forest Services, who looks after fleet issues, to provide more detail. But right now, as we speak, as the chief fire officer one of my primary goals is to make sure that I have got enough resources to be able to respond –

**Jade BENHAM:** Have you got enough resources?

**Chris HARDMAN:** to the bushfire risk as it stands at the moment. We are evaluating the risk on a monthly basis and looking and comparing that directly with the number of vehicles and crews.

**Jade BENHAM:** So how many G-Wagons are on line right now?

**Chris HARDMAN:** I will just assure the committee members that as we stand at the moment with the current bushfire risk and the resources I have available, I have got a really strong first attack response capability. I also have more than a thousand bits of heavy plant and equipment.

**Jade BENHAM:** How many of those are borrowed from interstate?

**Chris HARDMAN:** The numbers of interstate are a small number at the moment –

**Jade BENHAM:** How many?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** I can speak to that.

**Chris HARDMAN:** Yes, I will pass over.

**Jade BENHAM:** I am just after figures.

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** So we do have a cracking issue in the G-Wagons.

**Jade BENHAM:** A cracking issue?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** A cracking in the chassis, and we have an expedited repair program.

**Jade BENHAM:** So are all the G-Wagons off line?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** Out of an abundance of caution, when we identified this cracking issue we brought them off line.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Ms Crosthwaite. Ms Benham, there is a point of order. I think I know what it is going to be.

**Jade BENHAM:** So do I.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I am not sure if I need the point of order, then, to point out that this is the 2024–25 financial year.

**Jade BENHAM:** Sure. As of 30 June, how many G-Wagons were on line?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** 290.

**Jade BENHAM:** Sorry?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** 290.

**Jade BENHAM:** 290 were on line as of 30 June this year, so the cracking issue magically appeared after June?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** We have a routine seasonal checking process every year, and the cracking issue was identified through that process. It was initially identified in a small number, and then further checks –

**Jade BENHAM:** When was it identified?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** It was progressive, so the number of cracks was identified through the period July to September as an evolving issue.

**Jade BENHAM:** From July to September. Did the cracking issue – was that not first identified in 2017 in the G-Wagons?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** The G-Wagons came on line in 2017. There have been issues with the G-Wagons over time, mechanical and structural, as there are with all arduous vehicles.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. So it was not magically discovered in July so that I cannot get some answers on this today?

*Members interjecting.*

**Jade BENHAM:** I am asking a simple question.

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** There have been cracking issues in the past. But this current issue and the extent of the cracking was discovered through our seasonal preparedness activities in this current financial year.

**Jade BENHAM:** So there are none on line right now is what you are saying?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** There are –

**Michael GALEA:** On a point of order –

**Jade BENHAM:** This is to do with the safety of Victorians, and the government is trying to dance around this.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Ms Benham. I think I know what this point of order is going to be. Mr Galea, you have raised a point of order.

**Michael GALEA:** On a point of order, Chair, witnesses have been very forthright with their answers, but Ms Benham knows that she is now asking questions beyond the scope of this inquiry.

**The CHAIR:** I think you do know, Ms Benham. I appreciate how you feel about the situation. Please tie it back to the terms of reference the inquiry is looking at.

**Jade BENHAM:** Surely the terms of reference also reference the presentations that are given in the beginning of each session, do they not? Forest Fire Management and their capability is part of that presentation, and it was raised. So this line of questioning is within the terms of reference –

**The CHAIR:** I am going to rule –

**Jade BENHAM:** and the safety of Victorians is at risk, and the government does not seem to care.

*Members interjecting.*

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me. Unless anyone wants to speak on the point of order, I am going to rule on it. Please tie back your questions to the terms of reference that the committee is extracting evidence for, and a very detailed report will be tabled in Parliament.

**Jade BENHAM:** How much funding was allocated to Forest Fire Management in 2024–25?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** Like all emergency management agencies, Forest Fire Management Victoria receives our base funding and supplementation through the year –

**Jade BENHAM:** What was the base funding?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** for activities. For 2024–25 the base funding was \$441 million, with supplementation of about \$186 million.

**Jade BENHAM:** So the supplementation was \$186 million. Okay. I am just going to, quickly in the last few minutes that I have left, talk about outdoor rec and the governance of climbing in public land. Can the department provide a full, itemised breakdown of the \$100,000 in public funds that was given to Barengi Gadjin Land Council Aboriginal Corporation pre June 2025 for further assessments, how that will be spent and explain what specific outcomes taxpayers can expect in return?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Can you just clarify ‘further assessments’? What are you meaning there?

**Jade BENHAM:** Well, there was \$100,000 in public funds received by Barengi Gadjin Land Council for ‘further assessments’. That is what we are asking about, because they are the only words associated with that.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** You could assist the committee by pointing to the budget paper.

**Jade BENHAM:** Yes. ‘Service Delivery’, DEECA ‘Management of public land and forests’, page 109.

**Kate HOUGHTON:** We will check the specifics and take it on notice.

**Jade BENHAM:** Yes. And if we can have an itemised breakdown of that, that would be very handy.

**Kate HOUGHTON:** If we have that, we can provide that.

**Jade BENHAM:** Great. Thank you very much. What was the source of the \$100,000 allocation? And what was the program, if it was a contingency appropriation, and which authority?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Sure. We can provide that.

**Jade BENHAM:** Great. Thank you very much. Just quickly, while I have got time, I have got some fishing questions from the VFA annual report.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** You have had a lot of questions. You have had the line out for a while, I reckon.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Order!

**Jade BENHAM:** This is from the Victorian Fisheries Authority annual report. How many Victorian Fisheries Authority vessels were sold during the 2024–25 financial year? And what total revenue was generated from those sales?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** We are not responsible for fishing, so that might be a question for DJSIR.

**Jade BENHAM:** It is DJSIR. That is fine. I have some Greater Western Water questions, if I can ask those. This is with regard to the issues around the billing debacle. How many complaints has Greater Western Water received regarding the billing fiasco?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** I do not have that detail in terms of how many complaints they have. I know that Greater Western Water has got a program to ensure that they have strong engagement with their customers and to help their customers. But in terms of complaint numbers, I do not have that.

**Jade BENHAM:** Is it available?

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Benham. We are going to go to Ms Kathage.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you so much, Chair, Secretary and officials. I want to go back to energy and ask about energy affordability. Page 99 of BP3 has information there about the Victorian default offer. This is something that I find a little bit difficult to always translate or explain to the average punter. Can you put some words around how the VDO is helping with energy affordability but also then contributing to being climate ready and having a climate-ready community?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Yes. Thank you. It is a critical part of the energy transition. I will hand to Ms Molyneux. Thank you.

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** Thank you for your question. I will start with the VDO question, and if you would like me to expand on the broader affordability, let me know. The VDO is the Victorian default offer, and what it is is literally a default offer for all Victorian consumers. It is a fair price set by the Essential Services Commission, which is the economic regulator of Victoria. It is for those customers that are either unwilling or unable to really participate in the electricity market to find their retail market offer. It is also a price that all

other market offers must refer to. In the electricity market as a consumer you can shop around and choose your best market offer, but if you do not want to do that or are unable to do that, you have the VDO as your default offer. Having that transparency in the market and making it a reference offer really does put downward pressure on market offers because retailers use that as their benchmark, and so they always want to make sure that they are not out of step with the VDO. A VDO will have components of network prices; of environmental prices, as Mr Krpan referred to earlier; and wholesale prices; as well as a retail management fee on top. Those prices are set annually by the Essential Services Commission. What else can I tell you about it?

**Lauren KATHAGE:** When we are talking about the VDO, if we are thinking about Victorians that are on the VDO here, how does that compare or how does that flow through to their bills compared to, say, other jurisdictions who might be on the default market offer there?

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** The VDO is the Victorian-specific offer, and the Australian Energy Regulator is the regulator that regulates similar but slightly different offers in other jurisdictions, such as Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania. The VDO is a very favourable offer in comparison to the way the DMO is set – the default market offer, being the national framework – so much so that the recent DMO has been reviewed by the federal government to make it more in line with the VDO to give benefit to customers. In June this year the Australian government announced that it was reviewing that DMO process.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** So the default offer that was available to Victorians has been cheaper than the default version available in other states, and now our lower price is pulling down the default price nationally?

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** It goes to the methodology that we have employed in Victoria, and the federal government is looking at our methodology and considering applying that to its default market offer because it is so beneficial to consumers.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Okay. Great. If we are thinking about private providers of energy, obviously they have an incentive to make a profit, but what is the department doing to protect especially more vulnerable energy users from price gouging or from unfair practices?

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** Yes, certainly. We have a number of things to policy in this space to protect consumers. We protect consumers from practices, and we have got a very extensive consumer protections framework, which is Victorian specific as opposed to the national framework. That includes basic things like bill frequency and content but also ensuring that each bill has on it what their best offer for that customer would be so there is a really easy way for the customer to see what they could be paying compared to what they are paying. We have talked before about the Victorian Energy Compare website, which is a really active website that we run. Retailers are required to put all their market offers on that website, and customers can go on that website, put in their usage data and get a list of preferable deals that they would like to switch to. We have a number of protections for vulnerable customers and/or people that are not able to pay their bills to make sure that they are not disconnected in an uncontrolled manner.

We have our energy assistance program, which is really targeted at people that struggle to interact with the energy market and switch providers. That is a program that is targeted at the vulnerable and low-income segment of the market, and those people are helped through the process to change retailers and to assess what the best deal would be for them. They might be people where English is not their first language. It might be older people who cannot engage with the website. We do a lot of work with the towers and community housing residents on that one.

I have just lost my train of thought. Then there is the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth does step in to assist with the vulnerable and consumer prices. It runs the energy bill relief program, which Victoria administered to parts of our customer base for them this financial year.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you. I just want to go on to resources, if I could.

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Thank you. While we are waiting for your question, I will ask Matt Vincent, the CEO of Resources Victoria, to come up to the table.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you. I do not think we have ever spoken so much about critical minerals in a financial year as we did in 2024–25. I think everyone around the world seemed to be talking about critical

minerals. I guess we have got a modernising economy and the role they play in that. So in terms of placing Victoria in that worldwide economy, what is the department doing to make sure we are in the best spot to capitalise on that?

**Matt VINCENT:** Thank you so much for the question. Of course Victoria has a very, very long history in mining since gold was actually discovered in Clunes back in 1851. Victoria is absolutely blessed when it comes to world-class deposits of critical minerals. We have got some of the largest global reserves of ilmenite and rutile, which are key titanium-bearing minerals, and around 25 per cent of the world's reserves of zircon, which occur alongside rare earth elements and mineral sand deposits in both the north-west of Victoria and down in Gippsland as well. We also have the fifth-largest supply of antimony and Australia's only operating antimony mine, located in central Victoria at Costerfield, and this is historically Victoria's second most precious metal in terms of mining. We are also showing great potential for other critical minerals, including tin, tungsten, lithium and high-purity quartz. So there are enormous opportunities here, and demand for these minerals is expected to grow sixfold by 2040.

Obviously, the reason Resources Victoria is within DEECA and sits within the portfolio is to support the renewable energy transition, because these are the critical minerals that you need to make solar panels, wind turbines, electric vehicle batteries and aerospace and advanced medical equipment. They are also really important for defence applications.

To facilitate the development of the state's critical mineral resources, the Secretary mentioned earlier that the government released a critical minerals road map in December 2024, and that has really got four key pillars to it that enable the development of the critical minerals sector. It is about mapping those opportunities so we know where they are and where miners can find them and ultimately actually using that mapping to avoid some land use conflicts that came up earlier in the discussion – and I will drop in there, as part of that, that mining will never take up really more than 1 per cent of available land – improving the regulatory environment to help lower costs for industry and business and provide greater certainty around how we will deal with mining in the state, including the decision-making; exploring downstream processing so that the minerals are not just bagged up and sent offshore – we need to look at how we can utilise them here if that is possible and feasible; and then developing models to share those benefits and ensure that both the community and traditional owners are part of these activities and benefit from them. The road map establishes that pathway for the department to work on that and really get up and running in Victoria a reliable, ethical source of minerals that enables renewable energy transmission. To achieve that we have set up a critical minerals coordination office within the department, which is really important to helping facilitate approvals and just coordinating activity in general. You were talking before about the global context of this and the conversations going on; there are lots of conversations going on with other jurisdictions like the US, Japan and Korea et cetera, who are taking an active interest in looking at what we are doing here in Victoria.

The Secretary mentioned earlier that we have granted approvals in the north-west to VHM and Donald Mineral Sands. Donald Mineral Sands has achieved major project status by the Commonwealth, which is really important for the state. You might have seen that VHM announced that there was an offer from the Export–Import Bank of the United States for \$304 million in loans, which again demonstrates the importance of Victoria. We are on the map in that global context.

We have also set up an advisory group, which is made up of academics, processing experts and the mining sector itself, and of course within Resources Victoria sits the Geological Survey of Victoria, which is a very well respected scientific organisation that has been operating in Victoria since 1852 and brings to bear great science. In fact they have put out around seven what we call data packages, or scientific studies, if you like, on critical minerals in Victoria in the last couple of years from the great work that they are doing. So that is a bit of an overview.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Okay. I am from a fossicking family, so I will have to ask them for some maps for where we can go on the weekend.

**Matt VINCENT:** Well, may I add: in the last 12 months, on fossicking, we have had over 13,000 people get a fossicking licence in this state, taking us to over 100,000 fossickers in the state, which is fantastic.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Yes. We should stop giving out fishing rods; we should give out picks.



**Matt VINCENT:** I am not going to comment on that, sitting amongst my colleagues here.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** With the work that you are talking about, it sounds like you are preparing for a wave to come, to ride that wave. Is there a boom coming? What does this mean for our economy and for jobs in Victoria? I think you touched on earlier the distribution of those benefits. How are we going to make sure that everybody benefits from this, not just a select few?

**Matt VINCENT:** Thank you so much. I think the Secretary mentioned in the opening that we believe there is around \$200 billion worth of minerals in terms of in-ground value in the state, and just in the north-west alone that has the potential to generate around 7000 jobs and put lots of money into the economy. I can probably even just give some examples here. For example, with Donald Mineral Sands, they are talking 530 jobs from getting that mine up and operational and \$2.2 billion in contribution to gross state product over the life of the mine.

First and foremost, we really want to make sure that that is done ethically and responsibly and that we have got good operators in the state generating that activity. To your point, Federation University is doing some work for us with the local communities up in the north-west to look at what it would look like for them to share benefits from mining activity, and the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owners Corporations are also working with us and directly with traditional owners to look at what it would look like to have a benefit-sharing regime as well. It is public knowledge that one of those agreements already exists, and that is with the Fosterville Gold Mine. There is an agreement there between the Fosterville Gold Mine and the Dja Dja Wurrung people. Of course it is a commercial, confidential agreement, but both parties seem to be getting enormous benefit out of that, from all of the discussions that we have had on that front.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** And the road map that you talked about in terms of that preparation, does that lay the groundwork for attracting international investment as well?

**Matt VINCENT:** Yes, absolutely. When you talk to international investors, one of the key things that they need to see is surety and stability in the way in which approvals are undertaken. So it is important that investors know how we are going to consider approvals, how long they are estimated to take et cetera, because time is money and holding costs money. We are obviously doing a lot of work there, and in fact within Resources Victoria our overall end-to-end approval times have been a big focus for us, and we have reduced them by around 40 per cent. I mentioned earlier that we are also having conversations obviously with the private sector, other jurisdictions and the Commonwealth as well to ensure that Victoria is seen as an attractive opportunity for investors to put money in. And I mentioned the \$304 million with VHM, which is a good example of people believing in Victoria and that investment.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** So how will we make sure that communities' quality of life is not impacted? For example, I think there is a pocket in my electorate that is being looked at at the moment, and that is surrounded by farmland, state forest, as well as local communities. And in the local communities there are a lot of tradies there, a lot of practical-minded people who would benefit from jobs with that particular operator, but at the same time we have just had an inquiry about maintaining farmland in Victoria for food supply. So how are you making sure that the critical minerals pipeline does not disrupt the agriculture pipeline or disturb communities too much?

**Matt VINCENT:** Thanks so much for the question. Mines are regulated by us, by WorkSafe and by the EPA, and they go through very, very rigorous processes as part of the approvals. They go through an environment effects statement as one of the first key steps, and then there are approvals from us as Resources Victoria in terms of issuing the licence. There are work plans that in a great, enormous level of detail outline how they will operate these mines. And in that context, the first and foremost thing in front of everyone's minds is minimising harms. How do you ensure that there is a minimum of dust coming off the site, minimum noise, minimum disruption et cetera. I mentioned earlier that the mapping work that we are currently undertaking is also looking at how to avoid any potential land use conflict. I have already said we believe that mining will take up less than 1 per cent, but nonetheless it is possible to look at maps and look at the agriculture data, look at cultural heritage data, look at biodiversity data and try and work out where are the places that you can do mining that have the least impact. I should say I am a big believer that these things can coexist. If you look at critical minerals in particular, this is the kind of mining that happens progressively. So you do some digging,

you take out the minerals, you rehabilitate the land, you do some more digging, you take out more minerals and you rehabilitate the land. So it is progressive over time, and –

**Lauren KATHAGE:** What is the nature of the extraction?

**Matt VINCENT:** Sorry?

**Lauren KATHAGE:** What is the mode of extraction?

**Matt VINCENT:** Literally it is scraping the surface back, taking off the top layers and storing them carefully, separately – as in the topsoil versus clay or whatever it may be underneath – extracting the sand component, because these are heavy mineral sands that have been laid down by ancient oceans, where it has been washed up, and then relayering that back to rehabilitate it back to productive agricultural land. In some respects that will depend on who the landowner is and what their intention for the long-term use is, but in a lot of cases the objective will be to restore it to productive farmland.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** These are all good things that we want, and we know that it is also contributing towards our targets, towards net zero, because of the use in, as I think we heard earlier, different solar panels and whatnot that require this sort of technology. So how are you making sure that we are efficiently approving these outfits to get going and get those resources out of the ground?

**Matt VINCENT:** Yes, thank you. I think it must have been around December 2024 the government implemented the investment coordinator-general position in Victoria, which supports all parts of government working together in a joined-up way to ensure that approvals are done as efficiently as possible. In our case, we have set up a critical minerals office that helps facilitate the approvals. What that means in practice is doing a lot of work with industry in advance of an approval coming in so they are very clear about what is expected, what information will be needed – is that our time?

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Ms Kathage.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you. It is very exciting.

**The CHAIR:** The committee is going to take a short break before resuming the hearing at 3:15 pm.

The committee will now resume its consideration of DEECA. We are going to Mr Welch.

**Richard WELCH:** Good afternoon. I would like to talk about Alpine Resorts Victoria. There was a \$20.3 million Treasurer's advance required to support ARV. What were the unexpected costs?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Thank you for the question. I will refer to Ms Jackson. Thank you.

**Carolyn JACKSON:** Thank you for the question. I will begin by saying that alpine resorts have required budget supplementation for a number of years – from my recollection, 15 or so years. It has been an ongoing challenge for alpine resorts, particularly the southern resorts, so those are the lower ones, being Lake Mountain and Mount Baw Baw. They have required funding supplementation in years when snow is not as great as it has been historically. That funding is provided by way of a Treasurer's advance. That is on the basis of each year and an analysis of –

**Richard WELCH:** Some portion of that was for the Great Ocean Road as well?

**Carolyn JACKSON:** There was funding for alpine resorts, and that is a separate Treasurer's advance. That was in relation to those southern alpine resorts and the snow conditions that were experienced by those resorts, and that is a historical problem. In terms of the Great Ocean Road, there was as well funding supplementation provided to GORCAPA, the Great Ocean Road Coast and Parks Authority. That was for them to continue some of their operations and also the works that they have been doing in relation to assets and things like that along the Great Ocean Road.

**Richard WELCH:** How much went to each organisation?

**Carolyn JACKSON:** I will need to take that on notice for you.

**Richard WELCH:** Okay. That is fine. Thank you. Can you tell me, Secretary or Deputy, if the cost of running ARV is greater than the sum costs of running the standalone resorts?

**Carolyn JACKSON:** If I understand your question, it is whether the operation of ARV –

**Richard WELCH:** If the establishment of ARV has saved money.

**Carolyn JACKSON:** The creation and the reform of the alpine resorts and the creation of ARV were to generate efficiencies. Previously the resorts were run separately or independently, so you had, for example, separate corporate services and things like that. There have certainly been efficiencies that have been generated by ARV.

**Richard WELCH:** Is the total quantum now less?

**Carolyn JACKSON:** It would depend. I cannot give you a definitive answer because there will be a number of factors. For example, the snow season in a particular year may mean that the funding supplementation might be higher.

**Richard WELCH:** Yes. Controlling for that – have we –

**Carolyn JACKSON:** My understanding is that there have certainly been efficiencies that have been generated through the creation of Alpine Resorts Victoria, ARV, and there is a lot of really great work going on in relation to strategic planning, for example, by ARV.

**Richard WELCH:** Would we be able to get some document or some summary of costs before – separate costs – now combined, to break out the seasonal aspects?

**Carolyn JACKSON:** We could possibly. I am not sure we will be able to break out the seasonal aspects of it. We can see what we can provide. We can certainly review annual reports historically and do a comparison of total expenditure, total costs as separate entities versus now, and we can look to overlay the Treasurer's advance for those snow conditions that I have mentioned. We can certainly try and do that.

**Richard WELCH:** Thank you. Now I would like to ask about the container deposit scheme. Are you investigating or have you investigated an increase in the refund from 10 cents to 20 cents for each container?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** I will refer that to Ms Jackson, but again, as you know, any sort of advice to minister from department is something that we cannot advise about the details of. But I take your question, and I will refer it to Carolyn.

**Carolyn JACKSON:** Thank you. In terms of the container deposit scheme, it was touched on by the Secretary. It has obviously been incredibly successful since it commenced. There is a range of conversations that are happening across environment ministers, for example, and you can see the communiqués of those meetings where they are looking at some aspects, and that includes looking at potential changes to the container deposit scheme.

**Richard WELCH:** Have you done modelling as to if you increase the return, what that would do on the numbers of containers returned?

**Carolyn JACKSON:** I will need to take that on notice about what we have done and what we are able to provide.

**Richard WELCH:** Because I think it would be interesting to see what the correlation is – as you increase price, does it have an equal or different correlation to numbers?

**Carolyn JACKSON:** Yes. What I can say, though, just in terms of the current scheme, and I was talking about how successful it had been, is we have done a litter audit. That was conducted this year, and we were looking at the baseline data that was conducted in 2022, and those results did show that since the scheme commenced eligible CDS container litter has reduced by 71 per cent. So there has obviously been a significant outcome from the introduction of CDS.

**Richard WELCH:** Back to you.

**Jade BENHAM:** Oh, okay. Back to me. Terrific. These questions might be best directed to Mr Hardman, actually. The 2024–25 budget included estimated output performance for the fire and emergency management output group for 2025–26. It is page 102, then 2024–25 in budget paper 3. That includes assumptions about the operational viability of FFMV's G-Wagons and the Unimogs. To assess the accuracy of those 2025–26 estimates published in the 2024–25 budget, can you advise how many of those vehicles are offline?

**Michael GALEA:** On a point of order, Chair, much as I appreciate the creative attempt to get around the terms of reference of this inquiry, the terms of reference are financial and performance outcomes in the 2024–25 financial year.

**Jade BENHAM:** And these directly relate to the estimated output performance.

**Michael GALEA:** But not for 2024–25.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Ms Benham. I am assuming you want me to rule on the point of order so you can move forward with this line of questioning. Mr Galea has consistently pointed out we need to bring it back to the terms of reference. If you could just rephrase your question so it fits within the terms of reference, we can move forward. Thank you.

**Jade BENHAM:** What has the cost been through 2024–25 to maintain the operation of those Unimogs and G-Wagons?

**Chris HARDMAN:** I do not actually have the total costs for those specific bits of plant and equipment at this stage, so we would have to take that on notice and come back to you, if that is okay.

**Jade BENHAM:** If you could provide a full briefing to the committee about the cost to maintain the operational fleet. The Premier herself has said that we are in for what is expected to be a significant and elevated fire season, so you can see the interest in the fleet costs, maintenance and how many are online and offline.

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Ms Benham, I think just to take that point, the Chief Fire Officer in his earlier answer did say that we are prepared for the bushfire season. It is a month-by-month assessment, and he is satisfied that we are prepared. That is a really important point for this Parliament and also for the community, and I just wanted to make sure that that was repeated because it sort of got lost in the conversation prior.

**Jade BENHAM:** I am going to move on from that question because without being able to establish how many of those vehicles are currently online and how many are being borrowed from interstate – they are the figures that are actually important, and I keep getting ruled out of order.

I will move on to Greater Western Water again, because we did not get to the end of that. Secretary, you said that you did not have the number of complaints received during the billing fiasco. Are you aware of how many privacy complaints were received?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** No, I am not, offhand. If we have that information, we can provide it. We did try to get the complaint number in the interim, and we do not have that, so no, but we can take it on notice. If we have that, we can provide it.

**Jade BENHAM:** Great. This may be something to add to that. Do you know how many were submitted directly to the energy and water ombudsman? Is the department aware of those ones?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** We would not be a bypass through from a consumer to the ombudsman. It would go straight to the ombudsman.

**Jade BENHAM:** So the department is not across those numbers. That is fine. When will customers begin receiving accurate and on-time billing?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Thank you. I will hand to Kirsten Shelly, who is the deputy secretary. The minister has asked and expects a number of things from Greater Western Water. We can go through that. That goes to your point. Thanks, Kirsten.

**Kirsten SHELLY:** Thank you, Kate. Greater Western Water do have a return-to-service plan on their website, and four out of five customers are receiving their bills. We are working with Greater Western Water to ensure that they are staying on track with their return-to-service plan, and it is looking like mid next year that they will be back on track.

**Jade BENHAM:** Mid next year?

**Kirsten SHELLY:** Yes, that is correct.

**Jade BENHAM:** So four out of five customers. How many customers does Greater Western Water have?

**Kirsten SHELLY:** 630,000.

**Jade BENHAM:** 630,000.

**Kirsten SHELLY:** Do not ask me to do the maths for four out of five.

**Jade BENHAM:** No, that is that is totally fine; we can do that. I do not think I have any more questions on GWW. Actually, with the lack of an annual report being available for Greater Western Water, what is the total of their dividend, and when will that be published?

**Kirsten SHELLY:** There has been no interim dividend taken. The annual report, as you know, is being worked through. But that will be a matter for the Treasurer. December is around the time that decisions on final dividends are usually made, so we will not know for any of the water retailers, the metropolitan retailers, what their total dividend number is until then.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. When will the annual report be published?

**Kirsten SHELLY:** I am expecting it soon.

**Jade BENHAM:** Mid December – around that same time? You do not know? Okay. I want to go back to the land use issue for renewables and mining projects. You have said you are going to supply the land use changes on notice; we have already worked through that. Has there been any economic analysis or modelling on how mining, renewable energy projects and transmission infrastructure will affect agricultural land in regional Victoria, including any impacts on food production and supply long term?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** There was one point – I might ask Matt to come back up to the table and also VicGrid if they can add to this – in terms of the total agricultural land that will be used for critical minerals. I will not repeat the statistic, so I do not get it wrong, in terms of what that looks like for the future.

**Jade BENHAM:** And power infrastructure as well.

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Yes, VicGrid can do that. Matt, can you just talk to the percentage of land that you are expecting from mining or critical minerals?

**Matt VINCENT:** Yes. Thank you. It is a very small percentage. It will be under 1 per cent of farmland in the state. There was a second part to your question as well.

**Jade BENHAM:** It was just about power infrastructure.

**Matt VINCENT:** Yes, okay.

**Jade BENHAM:** With that 1 per cent, what would the impacts be? Has there been any modelling on what the impact will be?

**Matt VINCENT:** Sorry, it was the economic piece. Thank you for reminding me. Every single mine that applies for a licence needs to do an economic assessment, and that needs to be provided as a part of the

approval process. So it is absolutely a part of the process that they need to demonstrate that the economics of the mine outweigh any potential, I guess, profits from the farms. Also, as you would be aware, mining cannot be undertaken on a farm without the landowner's consent. Ultimately there needs to be an agreement in place, and often they are commercial agreements that work through the compensation et cetera in relation to that. I can always provide more detail outside of this forum, but there is an extensive process around the economics of it.

**Jade BENHAM:** Great. Thank you. If we could have Mr Parker to answer the same question for powerline infrastructure.

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Thank you. Alastair Parker is the CEO of VicGrid. Thanks, Alastair.

**Alistair PARKER:** Thanks, Secretary. Thank you for the question. We have done a few bits of work on the interaction of agricultural land with power infrastructure – transmission lines, renewable generators and so on. When we published the Victorian transmission plan earlier this year, we laid out the interaction of renewable infrastructure with the agricultural sector in particular.

**Jade BENHAM:** What percentage of farmland is going to be taken out of production?

**Alistair PARKER:** I will sort of step through the hierarchy. We are establishing renewable energy zones across Victoria. We expect those renewable energy zones to take up about 7.8 per cent –

**Jade BENHAM:** 7.8?

**Alistair PARKER:** per cent of the landmass, but those will not be fully filled with infrastructure. Within those renewable energy zones I think about 11 per cent of the parcels would have some sort of infrastructure. And of course within those parcels the actual infrastructure – the roads et cetera, et cetera – does not take up that full space. And so when we –

**Jade BENHAM:** No, but depending on what kind of farmland it is, you are not going to be able to farm on those parts anyway.

**Alistair PARKER:** With careful planning you can maximise the area that can still be farmed. But when we looked at the state level, about 0.04 per cent of the state would be given over to that physical infrastructure, so the roads and the other things.

**Jade BENHAM:** The state or farmland in productive –

**Alistair PARKER:** That was at the state level. I think it was a higher number, which I will give you on notice.

**Jade BENHAM:** Well, renewable energy zones will take up 7.8 per cent, so 0.4 per cent – I would love some numbers on how much farmland is going to be taken out, particularly for those transmission line projects and the renewable projects –

**Alistair PARKER:** Yes. We can provide that on notice.

**Jade BENHAM:** on agricultural land, yes.

**Alistair PARKER:** Just in terms of transmission lines, though, it is important to emphasise that we did publish a report on this and got some feedback on it. The more complicated, or to put this sort of in the negative, the more complex the farming process, for example, irrigated areas or dairy are less suitable for coexisting with transmission.

**Jade BENHAM:** Exactly, hence the interest in my question.

**Alistair PARKER:** But there are plenty of agricultural processes that can coexist happily. We have got 6400 kilometres of transmission lines across the state already, farms that are working happily around them. There is an impact at the base of the transmission line, but they can harvest underneath.

**Jade BENHAM:** Are you able to supply that modelling?

**Alistair PARKER:** Yes. It is publicly available.

**Jade BENHAM:** Great. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Welch.

**Richard WELCH:** Thank you. I would like to ask a question on the EPA. Melbourne's population obviously is growing rapidly: 143,000 between 2023–24 and continuing to grow. Have you done modelling on what the additional waste associated with this population growth will be?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Tony is from Recycling Victoria, so the value of waste is in his remit. Tony, come to the table. But Carolyn, do you have any opening comments about any modelling that we have done?

**Carolyn JACKSON:** I will let Tony talk to it because it is his team that has done all of the work. But there has been a lot of work done, including the release of VRIP, which is sort of a 30-year plan looking at what is going to happen over that horizon, what might be needed et cetera. I will let Tony talk to it.

**Tony CIRCELLI:** Thank you. Thank you for the question. Recycling Victoria completed a 30-year planning exercise for Victoria, for the state, which considered the expected population growth as well as the expected waste generation over that period, but also taking into account what we have planned in terms of recovering material and recovering waste to have a look at that residual amount. But at the moment, as of this year or the last reported year, which was 2023–24, there is an estimated 4.5 million tonnes of waste that is disposed of in landfill here in Victoria. And on current trends, as reported in the Victorian recycling infrastructure plan in 2024, we forecast that to grow to nearly 9 million tonnes by 2053.

**Richard WELCH:** So VAGO in April reported that you were not near your interim targets, so 72 per cent of waste from landfill by 2025 and 80 per cent of waste from landfill by 2030. What will you be doing to get back on track?

**Tony CIRCELLI:** Well, that is really a question for the broader portfolio, but just on the target itself, the target was for 2025, and it was for 72 per cent, as you mentioned. We have looked at the target for 2024–25, and it is at 70 per cent, so we are 2 per cent short. We are currently out for a survey. We are analysing the current survey data at the moment, which will give us the result for the 2025–26 year. I mean, that might edge towards 72 per cent as well. So I think it is a very good outcome in terms of over the last four to five, even if you look over the past decade, looking at the increased recovery but also taking that into context with the fact that we have had quite significant population increase over that time. Taking that into account, it has actually been still a pretty good outcome.

**Richard WELCH:** Thank you. Just for interest, I have got another couple of questions I want to sneak in. I need to go back to the container scheme. A very quick question: are you contemplating including wine bottles and spirit bottles into the scheme?

**Carolyn JACKSON:** Thank you for the question. That is like the refund amount in that there are conversations happening at the national level, and environment ministers do meet on a regular basis. A circular economy is definitely part of that. I think, though, what I will say is the CDS was predominantly designed from a litter perspective, and the CDS that we have in Victoria does pick up those items that were most commonly littered. So the bigger items – wine bottles, for example, and spirit bottles – are generally consumed in the home, and they are not things that we have been seeing as litter. But we are very aware of other jurisdictions and that there are some jurisdictions who have signalled an intent. So that is something that we are looking at, but there are definitely conversations happening at that national level.

**Richard WELCH:** Thank you, Ms Jackson. And just a final question on EPA air quality: why has the number of days exceeding air quality standards doubled compared to the previous year?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** The EPA will answer that. Jocelyn is the CEO. She is coming up.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We are going to go to Mr Tak.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Chair, Secretary and officials. I also have a few questions on the container deposit scheme. But first, Secretary, to the electricity system and VicGrid. I refer to budget paper 3 on pages 30

and 99. Could you take us through why modernising and growing Victoria's electricity transmission infrastructure is critical to the department objective of net zero emissions, a climate-ready economy and community?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Thank you for the question, and I will hand to the CEO of VicGrid Alister Parker. Thanks, Alastair.

**Alistair PARKER:** Thank you, Secretary, and thank you very much for the question. For a very long time Victoria's power supply has largely come from the Latrobe Valley, from the coal power stations there. They are reaching end of life. We expect them to close down over the next decade or so, and so it is necessary to repopulate the power system with new power sources. The current cheapest way of doing that is with wind, solar batteries and interconnection with other states, enjoying the benefits of Snowy Hydro deep storage and Tasmanian deep storage. We have to really redevelop the entire power system to make sure those sources can provide their power across the state for all Victorians, and particularly when the modern economy is increasingly electrified for decarbonisation purposes. Among other things, it is really important that we get that work to happen and have sufficient transmission. I should say there are terrific opportunities, and we heard from Stan, from household batteries, household solar and so on, and we make some very big assumptions about how much of that is going to come forward. But for the modern electricity system, we really do need these large transmission projects. We do do a lot of work to make sure, the way I put it is, that we build as little transmission as possible. It is the activity you should do last, when you have looked at household batteries, commercial batteries, household solar et cetera. What we do first is we look if we can upgrade existing transmission facilities, and then we look where we need new transmission lines.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you. Can you take us through how important the continued implementation of the Victorian transmission investment framework is to ensuring the efficient build of Victoria's modern electricity transmission infrastructure?

**Alistair PARKER:** Yes, and this might be a long-winded answer, I am afraid, but I am famous for it. As I was talking about, the Victorian transmission investment framework was intended to do a few things. One, given the central importance of transmission to the energy transition, it was intended to improve the speed with which transmission could be developed. Looking in the rear-view mirror, we had seen a number of projects caught in economic regulatory processes, but it was also designed to, as this massive investment takes place, ensure that the regional communities that will host this infrastructure would share fairly in the benefits that flowed from it. A particular failing in the previous transmission investment regime was that it did not properly take into account the land use conflicts that we talked about earlier. So, as we have developed the Victorian transmission plan, and I believe for the first time in the world, we have really tried to factor in the existing land uses and avoid the areas where a particular type of agriculture, for example, is particularly unsuitable for it and, when we have developed our views on renewable energy zones, to take into account the various environmental and existing land use, cultural heritage and so on, at a strategic level. It is really important I think that we continue with that way of looking at the world. There is obviously more to do, but we do get a huge amount of feedback from the Victorian community about the places that they value the most. I think above all it is that setting within the framework that really requires us, as VicGrid, and me in particular as the CEO, to consult with the community and to listen seriously to what they are telling us.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Mr Parker. Can you tell us what the benefit of establishing VicGrid has been compared to the historical approach to transmission planning through AEMO?

**Alistair PARKER:** I really want to be careful; I do not want to criticise a single person who worked at AEMO. My comments are going to be now about the framework and the structure. What you had was a national regulatory framework that was established – I will put it crudely – to protect electricity consumers from undue cost increases, and that was the entire focus of the framework. The regulatory framework failed to keep up with the need to develop the transmission network in the way I have outlined, but it also failed the communities that were going to host it. Because you had a framework that was really primarily concerned with consumer cost, it did not put any obligations on AEMO to consult meaningfully in the communities that would be affected by it. In fact that was seen as something that was not valid. Now, the national framework has caught up a little bit; there have been changes there that now do put obligations on the transmission planners around consultation, but it is baked in to the Victorian transmission investment framework. So we are set up as an organisation very much to have a focus on consultation with the community, to engage with traditional owners



and to balance the interests. It means we have some hard decisions to make, but it is to balance the interests of community that are hosting the infrastructure, the industry that is trying to connect to the transmission network, the traditional owners whose lands it will be on and also the investors – we need to give investors in renewable energy confidence that there will be a transmission network there that can meet their needs. VicGrid and the Victorian transmission investment framework have been set up really explicitly to balance those needs. We cannot meet everybody's precise needs. We are not going to make everybody in Victoria happy, if you see what I mean, but we do seriously weigh up all the different perspectives that we get.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you. If we focus on the reliability, specifically, Mr Parker, how does the work VicGrid is doing to continue the modernisation of Victoria's transmission systems support the department's objective of reliable, sustainable and affordable energy services?

**Alistair PARKER:** Thank you. The reliability of the transmission system is really my one true master, as it were. We are absolutely focused on making sure there is sufficient transmission to support the adequate supply of power for Victoria. Obviously as coal comes to end of life, it becomes increasingly unreliable, and so we are very focused on making sure we have enough power systems to keep the lights on. I will not bore you with the various technical aspects of operating a transmission system. I would love to spend all afternoon talking about that, but I will resist the urge. But it is really important as we shift to renewables that we maintain that security of supply. My team, from 1 November, have brought in the experts from the Australian Energy Market Operator and we have got our own experts, and they are really focused on making sure that the transmission plans we develop will provide reliable power to the entire state at the transmission level. I think it is really important to labour that point. We have seen over the past years a number of proposals where people were suggesting alternatives to some of our plans, and despite what some of our critics would say, we looked at those plans really, really carefully. We do not have a monopoly on good ideas, but when we examined them from the perspective of reliability and their impact on security of supply, it turned out they were not suitable. They were good ideas, but they did not meet the reliability standards that we try to meet.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you. Any questions?

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I am not aware of some of those plans. Are you able to maybe discuss those in a little bit of detail, some of those suggestions that have been floating around?

**Alistair PARKER:** There were people who were not enthusiastic about VNI West. There have been a couple of proposals that have come along. One was called plan B and one was called the Syncline proposal, and actually in the 2024–25 year we ended up spending some money just to look at those. They came from serious people, but what we found was, while they were individually good concepts, they did not stack up in the context of the holistic plan. I do make the point that we now have for the first time a transmission plan to 2040 that really lays out what needs to happen in Victoria to make this transition. People may not like individual elements of it, but it works cohesively as a plan and is really important to security of supply.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Mr Parker. Secretary, moving on to the environment, I refer to budget paper 3, page 34. Could you please explain how funding toward preventing waste crime has supported the EPA to protect the health and safety of Victorians and support a healthy environment?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Thank you for the question. I will invite Joss Crawford, who is the CEO of the EPA, to go through the importance of funding the EPA. I think it was the Act in 1970 that started it, Joss, the importance of waste crime. Thank you.

**Joss CRAWFORD:** Thank you. Thank you, Member, for the question. Illegal waste dumping is not only a state issue, it is a national issue, and heads of EPA have this on the agenda to talk about a lot of the time in how we can work together to manage waste across borders. We have a waste tracking system that looks to disrupt illegal waste dumping, and we have had an increase of operators using that waste tracking system so we can track the waste. EPA needs to take a risk-based approach to illegal waste dumping. We focus on the higher waste categories. So for 2024–25 we looked at asbestos and also waste tyres. One of our regulatory priorities was looking into the disposal and illegal waste dumping of tyres, and we were very successful in prosecuting and taking a lot of those cases to court to get action on those matters but also, more importantly, looking at the

distributors and educating them as to knowing where the tyres are going and making sure that that is managed correctly.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you. How will the recent announcement of the Illegal Dumping Taskforce help tackle these highly visible issues?

**Joss CRAWFORD:** Yes, that is a wonderful initiative by the government where the EPA will do more detection, looking for criminals flouting our laws. We will boost our compliance and enforcement activities and also increase the number of our authorised officers. We will be reviewing the fines and also the cost-recovery mechanisms for illegal dumping, and we will also be doing a very targeted program on those high-risk industries to prevent the illegal disposal. We will also be doing a lot more naming and shaming to get the messages out there and hopefully change some of those behaviours. Most importantly, we will be working closely with local governments to actually understand the issues within their LGAs and how we can work together to prevent illegal waste dumping.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you. Can you give an example of a situation where the EPA has protected the Victorian community against harmful business practices in the past 12 months?

**Joss CRAWFORD:** How have we protected the community?

**Meng Heang TAK:** Yes.

**Joss CRAWFORD:** EPA is a risk-based, science-led regulator, and obviously the community is at the core of everything that we do. We protect the community by educating industry on how to comply with our policy. We also grant permissions to industry to make sure that they operate safely. We ensure, through our compliance and enforcement programs, compliance with those permissions but also with our duties framework. We take a lot of matters to court and prosecute to get behaviour change. We respond to incidents and emergencies really quickly to look at protecting the community and making sure that those clean-up processes happen quickly. We also work with our co-regulators, including local government, on direct community-related initiatives. Importantly, being a science-led regulator, our resources enable us to keep up to date with the state of knowledge required to administer our policy.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you. You talked about naming and shaming and prosecution. Are there any specific examples that you can give to the committee?

**Joss CRAWFORD:** Yes, we have had a number of successes through the court process. In the landfill sector, we had a landfill that was ordered to pay \$200,000 into a restorative fund to do a project specifically for the community. We have recently had another landfill, through mediation before going into court, agree that they breached their licence. They breached our general environmental duty. We secured \$1 million, which has been our largest amount, to go into our restorative justice fund to do initiatives for community. We have had multiple fines across multiple sectors. One of the largest fines out of the court process was to a dairy company, which was fined \$650,000 for three industrial spills that threatened a creek and wetlands. They are some of the higher order outcomes we have had recently through the courts.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Secretary. Moving on to Landcare, I refer to the DPS on page 14. One of the department goals is supporting a healthy, resilient and biodiverse environment. Could you please explain how funding for Landcare is supporting this project?

**Joss CRAWFORD:** Yes, we are happy to. Ms Jackson will talk to that. Just a shout-out to Landcare and Coastcare volunteers, who are exceptionally important to our objectives in this part of our department.

**Carolyn JACKSON:** Thank you. If I can, I might just start by reference to a couple of BP3 performance measures that do talk about environmental volunteering hours and also Coastcare participants. With the environmental volunteering hours that relate to Landcare, we have an annual target of 440,000 hours from our environmental volunteers, and our actual in 2024–25 was 443,000 hours, which was an increase of over 60,000 hours from 2023–24. So just at the outset, I want to acknowledge all of our wonderful Landcare volunteers. They do an incredible job. With Coastcare participants, similarly, we had a target in 2024–25 of 7500 hours and an actual outcome of 8116 hours in relation to our performance measure on Coastcare

participants – so, again, I just acknowledge that incredible effort. In those two areas, Landcare and Coastcare, volunteers make an incredible contribution to Victoria.

In 2024–25 the department did deliver a range of programs that totalled \$18 million to support environmental volunteers, and that is to provide opportunities for people to improve Victoria's landscapes. That funding delivered the Victorian Landcare facilitator program. That program employs 80 part-time Landcare facilitators. They are based in community groups and networks, and they build capacity, undertake on-ground activities and bring the community together. That funding also delivered the Victorian Landcare grants, which supported Landcare and environmental volunteering groups to deliver on-ground projects. It also supported the Victorian Junior Landcare and biodiversity grants, which obviously are engaging the next generation of Victorians in hands-on projects and environmental learning activities – that is really important. That funding also supported Landcare for Country, which supports traditional owners with their aspirations for caring for country and connections with Landcare to work together. There is a lot that it delivers. It employed regional Landcare coordination, which builds the capacity of groups, networks and Landcare facilitators. It provided resources and training to support environmental volunteers and Landcare facilitators to build capability, and it also supported key deliverables and stakeholders such as Landcare Victoria.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thanks, Ms Jackson.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Mr Tak. We are going to Mr Puglielli.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Just to start us off, on flood mitigation, has the department accessed mitigation funding through the federal National Emergency Management Agency's Disaster Ready Fund specifically for mitigating flooding of the Maribyrnong River?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** I will refer to Kirsten Shelly in that regard. I do just want to note that the flood recovery is an EMV portfolio responsibility. If we can answer part of it, we will, but DRFA and the connection to the Commonwealth is in the department of justice, which is EMV.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Thank you.

**Kirsten SHELLEY:** Melbourne Water are looking at mitigation options for Maribyrnong. They are not yet finished. Obviously, seeking funding from the Commonwealth is something that will be looked at when a mitigation option is settled on.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. But at this stage those funds have not been accessed?

**Kirsten SHELLEY:** Not for Maribyrnong.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay.

**Kate HOUGHTON:** But I just want to caveat that I do not know what the DRFA component of that is if we have asked the Commonwealth through that mechanism, which is through EMV. So it is just a question that you might want to add.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Rather than through this department?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Yes. Correct.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. I raise it, as you would be aware, because over 900 homes last year in Kensington Banks were suddenly reclassified as flood prone. As has been highlighted, Melbourne Water has since appointed a private consultant for mitigation studies. Can I ask: in respect to this department, have any early conversations taken place with the consultant since that appointment?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Kirsten?

**Kirsten SHELLEY:** We would have to check with Melbourne Water on what conversations, but from my perspective I have not had a direct conversation.

**Kate HOUGHTON:** The water group, which Kirsten leads, has not had that conversation with Melbourne Water, which I think is your question.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. From this department's perspective what assurance can you provide to this committee that once those studies are complete the best flood mitigation options that are put forward by this consultant will ultimately be funded?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** As public servants we cannot guarantee government decisions and funding decisions, but Kirsten – we obviously have a stakeholder oversight function of Melbourne Water corporation and what they report to the Minister for Water – do you want to just talk to our role with Melbourne Water?

**Kirsten SHELLY:** Our role is around the Victorian flood strategy, and that does define which entities have what role. Melbourne Water is that flood plain management entity for this area, so Maribyrnong. Obviously they are independent in terms of any solutions that they come up with. They have been asked to work with the community and be really clear with the community around what those mitigation options could look like, and they will be working through business cases and that kind of thing in terms of any robust outcomes. I am sure we will be informed as and when is necessary.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. I might move on to another matter. In February volunteer beach cleaners started finding bits of plastic pipes on Logans Beach. Woodside later admitted to spilling 200 kilograms of plastic into the ocean as part of decommissioning operations but told the *Age* that those operations only started in March. When did this department first become aware of Woodside's spill, and did Resources Victoria play any role in that response?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Matt Vincent will come up and talk to our involvement and, if we do know, when we knew.

**Matt VINCENT:** I could not be specific about the date, but my understanding is that it was community that first found them and alerted us to it. The regulation of that comes under NOPSEMA, the Commonwealth government. NOPSEMA has suspended activity that was due to take place there, and it will not be allowed to recommence until such time as they have satisfied NOPSEMA that they can do it safely. My understanding is that NOPSEMA is investigating this incident, as is the Victorian EPA, and Resources Victoria is assisting EPA in terms of that investigation. Because it is an ongoing investigation, of course neither of us will be able to make comment on it. My understanding is that it is likely that that activity will not resume until next year and will be done safely.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. With respect to a specific date, are you able to come back to the committee with something specific?

**Matt VINCENT:** Absolutely, no problem.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Awesome. Thank you. We know the spill happened in Commonwealth waters. But evidently the trash flowed through state waters and into Victoria, so can I just clarify: what role does Resources Victoria play in regulating something like this?

**Matt VINCENT:** Because it is a pollution incident – and I am probably drifting into EPA's territory here – as in bits of pollution have been found, it will fall under the EPA's jurisdiction to investigate that.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** None of the regulation sits with Resources Victoria?

**Matt VINCENT:** Not in the sense of it, no, because the activity itself is happening beyond 3 nautical miles off the coast, which belongs under their jurisdiction.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** If it were on the other side of the border, in state jurisdiction, it would sit with Resources Victoria?

**Matt VINCENT:** I would have to check, but there may be a shared regulatory agreement for some activities. But either way, what is worth saying is that we work incredibly closely together as regulatory agencies to make sure that the activity is done safely and that the operator is held to account.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** If you can come back to the committee with a bit more clarity there, that would be much appreciated. I might move on to another matter. Since 2022 has the government initiated or undertaken marine spatial planning anywhere in Victoria?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** I will hand that to Carolyn – if you are aware, Carolyn?

**Carolyn JACKSON:** Thank you. I might have to take the substantive question on notice. There is definitely work that is happening in relation to marine and spatial planning. We have done lots of work particularly recently in relation to renewable energy and biodiversity, and that was looking at mapping and things like that, so there is a lot of work happening in the marine and spatial arena, but in terms of whether there has been a particular area, I will need to take that on notice.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you; that is much appreciated. I will move on. As part of the transition from native forest logging, the government committed \$115.7 million, I believe it is, over four years for the Future Forests program. When I look at budget paper 3, page 31, and look at some of those dot points there, my first question is: the code of practice for forest management – where is that up to?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** I will hand to the deputies – code of practice?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** Sorry, what was the question?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Where is the code of practice for forest management up to?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** The code of practice for forest management is still in place, but it does not apply to native timber harvesting anymore because that activity does not occur on public land since it was closed down. It just applies now to private plantations.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Looking through other dot points on that same page, funding was provided to transfer employees from VicForests into DEECA. Should this committee assume that is for expanded bushfire management works?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** No. Some functions VicForests undertook were related to forest management, not just logging. There are important skills and expertise within VicForests and functions that transferred to DEECA when VicForests ended. That includes things like regeneration, seeding – collecting seeds, storing them and managing them so they are ready for reforestation, particularly after bushfires – and other functions like that. Those staff have a lot of technical forest management skills, particularly around planning – land management planning.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you – not bushfire management, though?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** That work does integrate with our bushfire management activities because we are a land manager, so we do forest and fire together. As it happens, those staff also have bushfire roles that they can be deployed into, but the functions and the work that transferred to us were around forest health, not bushfire.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. You mentioned seeds. Can I go to that one? Regarding collection and storage of tree seeds to restore forests, to what degree is that still active? I understand some contractors have complained of funding drying up.

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** That program is established now as a DEECA program. The facilities have transferred from VicForests to us. There are physical seeding facilities, as well as the program, and we have set up a panel of providers that we are actively using now to do seed collection. Last year was a quiet year seasonally. It is a seasonal activity; it is affected by climatic conditions. But that panel exists now, and former providers are on that panel, and the work is occurring when seeds are there to collect.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. How many providers are on that panel?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** I would have to take that on notice.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** That is all right. Thank you. The same budget page also lists targeted on-ground biodiversity actions to support healthy forests, including controlling weeds and predators. What activities are being funded there?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** We would move to Carolyn Jackson in terms of biodiversity management. Carolyn.

**Carolyn JACKSON:** Thank you. In 2024–25 over \$65.3 million was expended on on-ground biodiversity initiatives and programs, and that does include programs that target invasive species management; environmental volunteering, which we have talked about; threatened species action and other things.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Could I just clarify we are talking about the right thing, though. This is under the Future Forests program at that dot point. Are you talking about the right thing?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** I am just trying to find – is the question around the dollars?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Say that again, sorry?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** What is the question around that program?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** It is under the dot points for the Future Forests program. I think it is page 32 of budget paper 3 where it says ‘targeted on-ground biodiversity actions’ – that dot point there. What activities is that referring to?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** There was \$4.8 million within that budget dedicated to pest and predator control, and there are activities around weeds in state forests and protection of reforestation from predators such as deer.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** In terms of pests other than deer, were there any others included?

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** I will have to check, but that is the primary activity funded through this part of the program. We integrate with the broader pest programs that Carolyn was referring to.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** If you can come back to me with some more specifics there, that would be great.

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** Yes.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. I might move on to another matter. Can I ask: of the nine Victorian Murray flood plain restoration projects, so Murray flood plain restoration, how many of those projects are operable?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** I will refer to Kirsten Shelly as part of the Murray–Darling Basin flood plain management program.

**Kirsten SHELLEY:** Thank you, Secretary. Of the nine, there is one that is not going forward. Three are moving to construction. We have got another four that will go through regulatory work early next year and then a remaining one that we will put on hold for now.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** You mentioned the one. Putting that first one to the side, those three that you mentioned, when would we expect those to be operable?

**Kirsten SHELLEY:** By December 2026.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Perfect. For the others that you mentioned, can timeframes be provided to the committee about when they would be operable?

**Kirsten SHELLEY:** We are working through those, so we do not have the timeframes now, but we can work through those.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Can I ask: did the federal government provide any additional and ongoing funding for those projects?

**Kirsten SHELLEY:** There is funding for those projects, for the three that are going forward. For the four that have the regulatory process to undergo next year, there is funding for those as well.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Can you provide the committee with a breakdown of where that funding is coming from federally?

**Kirsten SHELLY:** I can take that on notice and provide that.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. That is much appreciated. I might actually move on. Another matter: apartment owners often raise with MPs that there are barriers they are facing, including financial costs, to update the switchboards of their buildings, ensuring that there is enough power supplied to their homes as they get off gas. Can I ask: who is responsible for the cost of those switchboard upgrades? Is it solely the owners corporations?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** I do not think we can answer that question in its specifics. It is something that is probably for the Department of Government Services as well as ourselves. I am more than happy to take that on notice so I do not waste your time.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Sure. Thank you. That is much appreciated. It would be good to get some clarity – potentially this will also be on notice – on if there are any existing grant or funding streams within this budget period that would support those upgrades.

**Kate HOUGHTON:** For the switches, yes, can do.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Switchboards, I should just be clearer.

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Sorry, switchboards.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. On another matter, according to the most recent Earth Resources Regulator annual statistical report, coal production in Victoria was just over 39 million tonnes for the period, being 2023–24. That is just 3 per cent lower than it was the four years prior, despite our state's share of renewables going up nearly 20 per cent over the same period. In that sense, can I clarify: why has coal consumption barely changed given that our share of renewables also went up over that same time?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** That is probably a question for Matt and Liz, to work through the comparison of usage to then the share of the energy mix. Matt, can you provide any assistance?

**Matt VINCENT:** I would need to take that on notice unless Liz can answer it.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. That is appreciated. I will move on to the SEC. The initial \$1 billion that was committed to the SEC, how much of that has been spent?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** We have Chris Miller here, the CEO of the SEC. Thanks, Chris. It is a question around how much of the \$1 billion investment in your reforms has been spent. Thank you.

**Chris MILLER:** Thanks for the question. Good afternoon, committee. Good to be with you. I might just talk to the SEC's commitments, particularly in respect of large-scale investments. The SEC has made two large-scale investments: firstly, in the construction of the Melbourne renewable energy hub, which is a big battery on the outskirts of Melbourne near Plumpton. The size of the SEC's investment in that is \$245 million. I am happy to report to the committee that that project is running to budget and has actually achieved full commissioning. The other large-scale investment we have made is to the Horsham renewable energy park, which is a combined solar and hybrid facility in Horsham. The size of the investment in relation to that project is \$370 million. They are both fully committed projects. The balance of the \$1 billion remains with SEC. Of course we have expended money on operating costs, but at this point in time we have sufficient reserves to continue progressing and delivering our plans.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. That is good to know. How much is left of the 1 billion?

**Chris MILLER:** What I can probably report to the committee is the information that is outlined in the annual report, and what that outlines is that the allocations to SEC from government are in the order of \$680 million over the two first full financial years we were operating, so 2023–24 and 2024–25. A large chunk of that is committed essentially to those two projects. The balance for the \$1 billion will be allocated to the SEC through this financial year, which is obviously outside the scope of the reporting for this committee.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Right. Thank you. I might move on to another matter. Right now Victorians are seeing all sorts of disinformation, often greenwashing, from the gas lobby about gas being cheaper than electric options or even cleaner than a renewable grid. Does the department perceive these disinformation campaigns as a threat to the state's renewable transition?

**Elizabeth MOLYNEUX:** Thank you for that question. The transition from gas is an important component of our renewable electricity plan, and getting people off gas at a household level is a really important part of decarbonising Victoria. I understand the ACCC has actually looked at some of the misinformation that has been provided by companies, or alleged to be provided by companies, so I probably cannot really make other comment on that. But I will agree that consumer confidence is really important when telling people to electrify, and we have got lots of data and modelling that does demonstrate, as by our published fact sheets, that you can save money on an all-electric house. So we are encouraging people to switch, and it does provide cost-of-living relief as well as emissions benefits.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Aside from the fact sheets that you have mentioned, does the department do anything else specifically to combat that disinformation?

**Carolyn JACKSON:** If I may.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Please, yes.

**Carolyn JACKSON:** There is something which is called the cheaper home electric energy program, and that has been rolled out this calendar year with funding that has been available. There is funding that is available to ensure householders understand how switching from gas to efficient electric appliances can improve household budgets, increase household comfort and reduce greenhouse gas emissions from their home. That is a current program that is available at the moment.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Thank you. On another matter, is the committee able to be provided with a list of all the proposed oil and gas projects off our coastline?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** I will ask Matt, knowing that we have only got a short amount of time, in terms of level of commercial in confidence or what can be publicly disclosed in that matter. Thank you.

**Matt VINCENT:** I will try and be quick. In the Otway you have got Amplitude Energy about to drill the Annie gas field production well, at \$500 million; Beach Energy increasing production from existing wells; GB Energy spending \$900 million on production followed by storage; Woodside decommissioning the Minerva pipeline, and we have just spoken about that; ConocoPhillips, \$100 million in exploration, and they made a discovery only last week of 300 petajoules; onshore Lochard Energy has just been drilling; down in the Gippsland Basin –

**The CHAIR:** I am going to pause you there. I am going to keep to time again. We will go to Mr Hilakari.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you so much, Secretary and officials. I am going to take us back to the Murray–Darling Basin. We discussed a few of the projects that are going ahead at the moment; we have outlined where they are up to. I am just wondering: what are we actually trying to achieve with them and what do they achieve over time?

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Yes. Thank you. I will pass over to Kirsten Shelly, even though I do really want to talk about the Murray–Darling Basin. Kirsten, do you want to talk about it?

**Kirsten SHELLY:** Thank you, I will. Thank you for the question. The Victorian Murray flood plain restoration projects, or VMFRP, they are very exciting projects and they are looking at improving the health over 14,000 hectares across eight different sites that I mentioned earlier. And really it is about returning water to flood plains that have ceased to receive water, as the Murray has had more and more infrastructure put into the river. It is pretty important for the flood plains to get this water. We have got climate change and that increasing lack of water to the flood plains, so making sure that the flood plain or the wetlands get that water at the right time, for the right duration and over the right extent is really important for vegetation and flora and fauna to make sure the vegetation grows, you have got the fish spawning that happens at certain times and in certain water depths. So it is pretty exciting.



We have submitted detailed business cases, so we are in the final negotiations with the Commonwealth on those. They are the ones that I mentioned earlier that will be completed by December 2026, and those sites are Nyah, Vinifera and Hattah Lakes. We are looking at pathways to secure the remaining five of those, as I mentioned earlier, so it is exciting times to get those off the ground.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** And at a practical level, are they weirs and lochs, or what are we actually doing?

**Kirsten SHELLY:** It is generally pumps. There are quite big banks that you have got to get over in the Murray, and you want to be able to pump that water across. In the Murray every drop of water counts, so you need to make sure you are getting it to where you need it in a really simple way.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** And the Murray–Darling Basin plan itself over the 2024–25 period, what progress has Victoria been making under the plan?

**Kirsten SHELLY:** It is pretty exciting to say that we have secured 809.7 gigalitres towards our bridging the gap total of 1075 gigalitres, and we are seeing that benefit. We are seeing improvement in vegetation, native fish populations and waterbird breeding. To be specific, we have seen Murray cod populations in the Campaspe River going strong, we have seen strong growth of the native moira grass in the Barmah forest, we have seen environmental water benefiting 30,000 individual birds at Lake Cullen, and that also includes threatened species. So we are seeing that water in action and we are getting the environmental outcomes, which is fabulous. We are also seeing the benefits: the pumps that I talked about are able to get the water over those earthen banks, so we are seeing 6000 hectares of the Hattah Lakes and 5000 hectares of Gunbower forest watered, which would not have happened without that infrastructure.

We are working really strongly with our community. The *Planning our Basin Future Together* prospectus was built with the community over 2024–25, and that looks at infrastructure projects that bring water back to the environment but work with the community to make sure that irrigation footprint is one that can be, I guess, worked through with the community. So it is strategic, and the intent is there to make sure that those communities can prosper at the same time. And it was the prospectus that identified the Broken reconfiguration project. That is one of our preferred pathways for water recovery, and in May of this year \$132 million was secured from the Commonwealth for that. So again, a pretty exciting project that works with community that will bring water back to the basin while making sure that those socio-economic impacts are minimised in that community.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Great. One of the really important parts of our community are traditional owners. I note in the annual report on page 56 the performance measure there, which was the number of traditional owner groups funded to undertake self-determined water projects. That was met and was higher than the previous financial year. I am just hoping you can talk about what the department is doing with traditional owners, how they are getting that fair and just access to water, which has been denied historically, and what some of the projects are that they are putting forward and funding.

**Kirsten SHELLY:** Absolutely. I think it is exciting that we have got the Aboriginal water unit. That was established back in 2016, and it is now in the third phase of the four-year funding. In 2024–25 we saw \$40.97 million funding over those four years. That funds Aboriginal water officers, and they look at self-determined projects. We have also funded learning by doing pilot projects and covered fees and charges associated with return of water to traditional owners. We have got 24 active funding agreements in place at the moment, and that is allowing them to write their own nation-specific statements. That really looks at how they want to assess the wetlands and waterways for cultural health and what they want to do with those areas. They have collated longitudinal data which tracks the health of country, and it shows how country responds to drought or flood and watering events. That information has then gone into them developing their own seasonal watering plans. There are two that have been submitted to the Victorian Environmental Water Holder, and they are being upheld at the moment. So we are seeing I guess a change in the way that we do watering, which does start to incorporate that cultural knowledge.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Are there any specific examples that you can give about some of our learnings and the department's learnings around cultural knowledge?

**Kirsten SHELLY:** Yes. I think it is on a different timeframe. We always have these very hard deadlines to meet and often you have to have something in by a certain time, and I think we have had to learn to work with traditional owners on where they want to get to and by when. So it is on their terms.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Could you just talk a little bit through the Water Is Life road map – it is mentioned on page 11 of the annual report – and how it is supporting traditional owners as well?

**Kirsten SHELLY:** The road map starts to talk about the policy pathways that can increase the decision-making of traditional owners and the role that they can have in the water sector. It is a culmination of many years of partnering with traditional owners and decades of work before that. It really looks at the participation of water policy management and decision-making but also providing volumes of water or water entitlements back to traditional owners for their self-determined purposes. We have seen a lot of work go into how traditional owners will look at their involvement, and the oversight forum that was held in March 2025 this year, with 57 traditional owner organisations coming together, was a real testament to their interest in participating in the water sector.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I think that is really fantastic. Do we have an amount of water that we have returned to traditional owners? Have we calculated that? I am not expecting it in Olympic swimming pools or Sydney Harbours worth, but do we have a number?

**Kirsten SHELLY:** We are certainly a long way off that, but we have provided 7160 megalitres of water entitlements through government policies, and that is a significant portion of the 9778 megalitres of water entitlements that are held by traditional owner groups today.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you. I might move on from water now and go on to agriculture and biosecurity. I am looking at budget paper 3, page 28, ‘Safeguarding the future of Victoria’s agricultural sector and supporting animal welfare’. Secretary, I am hoping that you can go through how we are helping to fund primary producers in protecting livestock and crops from disease.

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Thank you for the question. This is a very significant part of Agriculture Victoria’s work, and I will give it to Beth to talk through the scale and the importance of the work.

**Beth JONES:** Thank you. And thanks for the question. I think the Secretary touched in her opening remarks on just the size of the sector. It is such a big, growing, diverse and exciting sector, with a very heavy trade exposure, as we know.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** It was great to see us get to \$20 billion in the financial year before, which we are looking at. I think I see here that was six years ahead of schedule, so well done to the department and all our primary producers out there.

**Beth JONES:** A massive shout-out to our primary producers out there. They are the engine room of that economic growth, and they do an incredible job; they are incredibly innovative and resilient. But we need to protect that sector, as the Secretary said. And it does punch above its weight – 24 per cent of food and fibre produced nationally come from Victoria and 27 per cent of exports produced nationally come from Victoria. That is absolutely something that is critical to protect. So this funding is really essential to those outcomes, not only protecting those sectors and livelihoods but also the 155,000-odd jobs that flow directly and indirectly from investment in the sector.

What we also know is that our biosecurity threats, unfortunately, are growing and expanding. Our risk profile is changing all the time in relation to the changing operating environment, whether it is climate change or changing land use or people travelling and moving around and different practices. It is a changing risk profile. That is not something that is particular of course to Victoria; that is something we face as our national biosecurity system, and indeed internationally that is something that we face as humanity. In terms of making sure that we are responding to that, biosecurity investment is critical. We need to be looking; we need to be acting quickly. We need to be acting on information – sharing it – and vigilance is really important. This investment builds on investment that has been made over many, many years, particularly since about 2022, when we saw some changing risk profile in terms of foot-and-mouth disease and lumpy skin and things happening to our north, and there has been just an exceptional amount of work done preparing for biosecurity threats in that time. This investment really does build on that through a few key program areas. One is really

maintaining our surveillance systems and our technical capability and our diagnostic capability to be able to know what we are looking at and act quickly. This investment has also supported our responses to avian influenza and the two outbreaks that we have had that were referenced earlier. It has also supported other biosecurity emergencies in terms of plants and varroa mite. It has also supported our regional fruit fly governance groups.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** We often discuss bees in this committee and other forms in this committee. I am not going to take you there immediately, though.

**Beth JONES:** Yes. It also supports our regional fruit fly governance groups that are in the Sunraysia, the Goulburn Murray Valley and the Yarra Valley in terms of the work that they do with community for preparedness and action. And finally, our investment is also supporting investment in the RSPCA for the work that they do to undertake animal welfare commitments in partnership with government.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I was actually going to take you to avian influenza. The presentation indicated two significant outbreaks, and we heard of some of the real challenges that resulted from them. What lessons has the department learned from those outbreaks that can be put into the future and our preparedness on an ongoing basis?

**Beth JONES:** Thanks, Mr Hilakari, for this important question. Yes, unfortunately the lessons have been many but so important. You cannot go through the biggest biosecurity incident that we have faced in Victoria, through some of those avian influenzas, without learning, and that is really important. If there has to be a silver lining in the terrible circumstances of going through those events and the impacts that they had, it is that unfortunately it does help us to prepare for our next one. Thinking about the lessons that we learned through that process is critical, and we have very formal and informal ways of collecting that in terms of end-of-action reviews but also as we go along. What I would really touch upon there is that the first point I would make is the importance of on-farm biosecurity practices full stop, and that being the default and the standard for what we need to think about in terms of our production systems and sector in Victoria, because we do know that where we had good biosecurity in place on properties involved in these responses, it made it much easier and it was quicker to respond and we got things back up and running much, much more quickly. So just the importance of that ongoing messaging, working with industry and being vigilant around biosecurity is critical. The other one is the capability that we need to retain and maintain across government in the event of emergencies. As the Secretary referred to, the vast number of resources that we needed to call upon to manage those events – a thousand resources in 2025 and 600 in 2024 – required a really massive surge across the department, across government and across other emergency management agencies.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Was that a thousand personnel that you had?

**Beth JONES:** A thousand personnel were involved in the 2024 event.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Amazing. Where did those personnel come from?

**Beth JONES:** A whole range of places. Obviously Agriculture Victoria was huge. Our Forest Fire Management Victoria staff in DEECA were a significant contributor to that response, as were all of our emergency management partners across government, whether that is the CFA or the SES. We had industry. We have interstate department colleagues. We have also got contractors and private veterinarians and industry that were a part of that thousand. I think what we learned from having to surge up so quickly with that is just we really matured our processes and systems for working quickly across government and with other providers to make sure that we knew what we needed where and got people deployed in a way that allowed us to respond really quickly to those events.

I think the other thing I would just mention is, you know, the importance of good diagnostics is critical. We have got mobile vans that we use now that allow us to take samples from the field to a mobile bus that really allows us to act quickly in terms of the turnaround of information. I think the other thing that I would just say in terms of learning is just the importance of exercising in readiness. You know, no matter how many plans you have got in place, a plan is a plan. Every time you face the real thing you encounter things where you do not know what you do not know. So it really did teach us the value of that ongoing exercising that has been a real focus for both the department and for government, as we continue to make sure we have got great preparedness for the range of biosecurity events that we might face.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** In three years, Secretary, if we do not have these sorts of responses, what is the cost?

**Beth JONES:** The cost of not having them, as in – sorry, just to clarify, your question is –

**Mathew HILAKARI:** The cost of not being able to uplift –

**Beth JONES:** It being biosecurity, yes.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** and surge and, you know, put these resources into biosecurity.

**Beth JONES:** Certainly. They can be astronomical, and of course stopping spread and acting quickly is key to biosecurity. It is often the movement and spread of pests that makes the incident more expansive and therefore more costly. If we think about things like foot-and-mouth disease, which is often talked about as a pretty significant threat –

**Mathew HILAKARI:** We saw that in the UK some decades ago.

**Beth JONES:** We know that the cost of that over 10 years is something in the order of \$80 billion, and that is for sort of more direct costs let alone all the flow-on impacts and the hard-to-measure aspects in terms of our way of life and community fabric and all of those things. We did some work during the biosecurity strategy and found that we had prevented, we estimate, around \$94 billion in avoided damage across agriculture, water and tourism in the last few decades through different biosecurity measures in place state and nationally. So I guess there are just a couple of examples of how you cannot afford not to have it in place, because they do add up very quickly.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Secretary, I will just take you to the very start of this afternoon's session. There was a mention of breeding wheat varieties with improved heat tolerance as one of the successes. I am just hoping you could talk to that and talk to maybe some of the industry engagement and why that is necessary.

**Kate HOUGHTON:** Yes, absolutely. Ag Vic has had a long history in innovation and research with various different components of primary production. We do have a very proud history in that, and Beth can talk to the detail.

**Beth JONES:** Yes. As the Secretary said, a really proud history, and it is really important work that we do that provides a significant cost benefit in terms of for every dollar of research we invest it is about an \$8 return, generally speaking. Of course in the dynamic environment that we have talked about a lot today with climate, the importance of doing more with less is really critical. We work really closely with the sector in developing and delivering research programs and with industry and industry bodies, and some of the things that the sector is now able to do off the back of that and just off industry innovation and digital technologies and all those things are quite incredible. If I think about even an example this year, the north-west of the state has had a really difficult season this year in terms of crop growth, just with drought. But crop production up there, we have seen farmers harvest pretty good crops or average crops in some cases, knowing there is a lot of variability off 115 mls of rain. I think, you know, things like that just really go to the importance of research and honing different varieties of crops and the techniques that are used.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** The crop developments there, are they being led by farmers saying, 'Hey, we're recognising that there's more heat in the environment, less water, more variability'?

**Beth JONES:** Yes.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** So it is really driven by, you know, the people who benefit from it. I mean, all Victorians benefit of course from a strong agricultural sector, but it has been driven by the farmers who are recognising the changing climate.

**Beth JONES:** Absolutely. It is driven by where the priorities of government and industry come together, so how can we work with industry to support the growth of the sector in the right way. It that is driven by that, it is driven by drought and changing climate and it is driven by the significant increase in input costs that farmers face. That is a really challenging issue for the sector, so there is the need to be able to do more with less, given the pressures on resources and land generally. I think there are lots of different drivers for the importance of that work, and it is absolutely done closely with industry.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I wish we could have you all afternoon to talk about agriculture.

**Beth JONES:** I would love to.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Hilakari. Secretary and deputy secretaries, our time together this afternoon has come to an end. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses, Secretary, are required within five working days of the committee's request. You will get an email. I would like to thank all secretaries and officers who have given evidence to the committee today, Hansard, the secretariat and parliamentary attendants. I would also like to thank the hospitality, security and cleaning staff who have looked after all of us today.

The committee will resume its consideration of the 2024–25 financial and performance outcomes on Thursday 27 November at 9:30 am.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Committee adjourned.**