

ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land

Melbourne — 10 October 2016

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Dr Brendan Tatham, CEO, PrimeSafe

The CHAIR — Welcome Dr Tatham to the Environment, Natural Resources and Regional Development Committee public hearing in relation to the inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land. Before we start I will just go through some of the formalities. I advise you that the evidence taken today is being recorded, and when the proofs are available you will be sent copies to check for accuracy before they are made public. What you say at this hearing is subject to parliamentary privilege; however, outside the public hearing you may not be protected by that same parliamentary privilege.

Thank you for coming. I understand you have probably discussed with the secretariat that we are looking for a 5 to 10-minute presentation, and then we would like to ask you questions. Thanks for sending through the information. We only got your three-page submission yesterday and this morning. We understand of course that the literature review took some time and that it was done in response to this inquiry, so thank you for doing that. We also have that, but some of us may not have been able to have read it all. Please begin when you are ready.

Dr TATHAM — Thanks, Chair. I am Brendan Tatham, the CEO of PrimeSafe. Thanks very much for the invitation to come and speak with you today. I hope I can help you in any way possible. As you have mentioned, I have prepared a very short submission. That submission, for those that have not been able to read it, goes through the role of PrimeSafe as Victoria's meat, seafood and pet food regulator and gives some information about the regulatory arrangements for game meat, which I think is probably the best interaction with the terms of reference and the things that this committee is interested in. I have also provided some information and some supplementary technical information — probably if there is further work in this area — which was prepared by the chief vet and his team, and I thank them for that. Then there is a little bit of information around the game meat industry in Victoria at the moment.

By way of general comments, PrimeSafe understands that this is a pretty complex area with regard to the interaction of a range of different policy areas. PrimeSafe obviously does not control the access to animal resources, but once the decision has been made to put those animal resources into either the pet food or the human food supply we provide the regulatory frameworks and administer those regulatory frameworks for the purposes of food safety.

Ultimately any changes in the area of either PrimeSafe's legislation or access to animals on public land is a decision for government, and we are happy to work in that area. The summary from my perspective is with regard to the Meat Industry Act. Any animal harvested — that is the terminology used in our legislation — for consumption or pet meat needs to be prescribed as game in the Meat Industry Act, and I have given you that information in my submission today. The other component is that by definition, as soon as you move into this legislation, it is a professional activity. Harvesting is a business. It is a recognised part of an industry. It has associated skills and competencies which are delivered, and from my perspective it is quite different to recreational or contract culling of animals.

If there was to be a change with regard to access animals, from my perspective it is really a new industry and would need to have some planning with regard to how does that occur. I did go and visit Victoria's single game meat processing facility last week just in preparation for meeting with you today, and from their perspective they supply game meat to order. So for example the majority of that is rabbits at the moment. They would take an order for rabbits — you know, 'I need some rabbits' — and they then contact their approved harvesters to then go and fill that order. That is how the game meat industry works, and there would need to be a bit of thinking about how that industry interacts with what would be potentially a new source of animals into the game meat industry into the future.

The CHAIR — Can I just ask: how do you become an approved harvester? Are they paid professional hunters or something?

Dr TATHAM — The way it works at the moment I can explain to you. I will just perhaps finish my final point here and then move into that. The way it works at the moment, it is set up through the Wildlife Act, and that is administered by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, which everyone calls DELWP, and then the food safety components are administered by PrimeSafe.

If there was to be a new source, in my opinion it would require a bit of planning and investigation about how those different bits of legislation fit and work together so that it is successful. While there might be a short-term opportunity there just to make a few quick changes, in order for it to be a long-term, viable policy approach really some thinking and planning about how that is going to work is required. That was probably the main point from what I wanted to talk with you about today.

With regard to how it works at the moment, Victoria's game meat industry is very small. So PrimeSafe licenses a game meat processing facility, and that game meat processing facility pays a small licence fee to PrimeSafe which covers the cost of enforcing and administering the legislation of that single business in Victoria. The game meat processing facility then has approved harvesters which are contracted to that business, and essentially the way that works is the harvester has a firearms licence — a normal Victorian firearms licence issued by Victoria Police — with a hunting permission associated with it. For whatever species they were harvesting, they would need to have appropriate approvals from the agency that manages that. So if we are talking about game on Crown land, it would be DELWP. They need to have a competency — that is a training prerequisite — associated with the harvesting of game, and once they have got that and they are contracted with the processing facility, included in their documentation, that is then approved by PrimeSafe.

That is the way it works at the moment, and it can work like that because it is so small. Basically, we have names and contact details of everybody who is harvesting game. If it was to expand, then I think we would need to have a bit of a look at approval arrangements and how that works into the future.

The CHAIR — With the literature review that has been done — and I know we had a bit of scepticism about some of the Fiskville PFOS literature reviews — I do not know how thoroughly you can go into an issue on the literature reviews and how you work out what pieces of literature are put in or whatever. But putting that aside, it sounds as if there are quite a lot of problems in terms of the diseases that game animals or wild animals can be subject to, and they can contaminate humans, so how big a risk do you think it is if we were looking at harvesting, for example, deer in a commercial way or even for pet food or something like that?

Dr TATHAM — Thanks for the question, and I think it is a good one. It goes right to the point of the risk assessment. I think the best way for the committee to consider that technical information from the chief veterinary officer is that there are a range of risks, and that these things can happen and happen in other countries. We have not really got evidence in Victoria or Australia as to what the disease burden actually is in Victorian exotic animals that are running wild. What I can say though is the fundamental Australian standards and legislation in Victoria actually provide a basic framework for use. So I would not say there is any reason not to allow access to that resource. It is really a decision for government in the environment area, but there are systems and processes that are there at the fundamental level that allow the framework to be then put in place. So in answer to your question directly, there are risks; I think they are manageable using the frameworks that are there at the fundamental level.

Ms WARD — Do you know what the commercial demand is for venison? Have you got any ideas?

Dr TATHAM — I thought there might be a couple of these questions, so I did collect some information. The PrimeSafe annual report, which gets tabled in Parliament very shortly, reports on the animals slaughtered in abattoirs. So, for example, last financial year a record number of lambs were harvested — 10.2 million lambs. That is the largest ever. In comparison there were 2685 deer processed. That is up very slightly on the previous year when there were 2649. There are two abattoirs which are licensed to slaughter farmed deer in Victoria, so it is a very small industry.

Ms WARD — I heard on Friday that there is a challenge with taking some deer to the abattoirs if they are over 70 kilos, that they cannot be processed because they are too heavy. Are you familiar with that?

Dr TATHAM — It is not a regulatory issue. If anything, it would be an issue associated with the infrastructure at those abattoirs. We give permission to process deer. We do not talk about the different species or varieties. I would not want to speculate any more than that.

Mr RAMSAY — Brendan, where are we up to with the trials of kangaroos in relation to pet food? My understanding is there are a number of renderers ready, willing and able to take on more kangaroos, but the trial seems to be going on forever.

Dr TATHAM — Thanks very much, Mr Ramsay, for your question. The culling of kangaroos is obviously the trial that is occurring at the moment. The way that works is that there are three knackeries that are approved to collect the kangaroos which otherwise would have been culled. For the first 27 months of that trial, so just over two years, I did collect that number. There are 40 470 kangaroo carcasses that have been collected and then processed for pet meat that otherwise would have been left on the ground.

Mr YOUNG — What was that number again, sorry?

Dr TATHAM — It was 40 326 to the end of August. So there are three knackeries that are approved to collect those, and then there are a number of shooters, who are approved through the process which I outlined previously, to do the shooting and the collection of those kangaroo carcasses. The numbers there just for your information have expanded quite quickly from the start of the trial to about 59. Well, 59 was the number of shooters that were registered. There are currently 43, and about half of those are full time. My understanding, the advice I have received, is that a couple of those are from interstate, and a number of them have actually moved on from what would have been a contract for culling surplus kangaroos with Parks or with DELWP to then being part of the kangaroo trial. With regard to more businesses, it is available for any of the particular knackeries in Victoria of which there are 12, and that is the 3 that have been able to become registered and operate so far.

Mr RAMSAY — The reason I asked that question is because it would appear that particularly in relation to maybe the key two pests that we are looking at — that is, the deer at the moment, and maybe goats and pigs and a few other bits and pieces — the human consumption of that meat faces some significant challenges and hurdles through different acts and PrimeSafe itself. But the pet food industry perhaps has greater potential for cleaning up some of those carcasses in some of those large-cull areas. We heard quite a lot of evidence on Thursday and Friday in Gippsland about potential large culls, but what do you do with the carcasses, how do you refrigerate in 2 hours, how do you get them to a renderer and get some added value out of the carcass? If the trials were indicating that there is opportunity for pet food expansion through some of our game animals, then it gives greater potential for better use of those carcasses. You might not know this, but it was said to me that if it was just pure deer pet food, it actually is quite hazardous. I am not sure if it is to do with if you feed pure deer food to a dog, it creates some problems associated with the actual food itself. I do not know — whether it is too strong, it is reactionary, so you have got to blend, so you actually need a different mix of game. I am not sure; I am just asking a question about that.

Dr TATHAM — I do not have any information on that, so I cannot comment on that problem. The marketability of deer as pet food I suppose is the point there. What does the product look like, and what is the demand for it? I have no information about that unfortunately.

Mr RAMSAY — If you could shandy it with some lamb and cows and a few other bits and pieces, it would not be quite so toxic for the animals. Anyway, so there is nothing stopping a pet food industry from expanding and being able to use some of our game products as far as PrimeSafe is concerned? It has to meet its multiple requirements of refrigeration and quick access to a renderer within 24 hours or something, does it not?

Dr TATHAM — The standards and requirements for any deer and any game animal are in place. The issue from PrimeSafe's perspective is the Meat Industry Act and regulations. Deer are prescribed as consumable animals, which means that farmed deer can be slaughtered in an abattoir. Wild deer are not prescribed as game, so there is not the legal ability to go and harvest deer in the wild and then move them into the supply chain. That is something that is not permitted at the moment.

Mr RAMSAY — For human consumption or — —

Dr TATHAM — Or pet food.

Mr RAMSAY — Both?

Dr TATHAM — Or for pet food. Yes.

Mr McCURDY — When you say kangaroo trial, for how long a period? Is it about 40 000 over a year or longer?

Dr TATHAM — I will just check my records. From 1 June 2014 to the end of August, so 27 months.

Mr RAMSAY — What changes the classification then, say, from game to something else? What is the process there?

Dr TATHAM — The Meat Industry Act defines consumable animals, and then it also defines game as being a consumable animal, so game, if you like, is a subset of what is a consumable animal. For example, rabbit is a consumable animal in that farmed rabbit can be slaughtered for human consumption at a rabbit abattoir, if you like. Rabbit is also prescribed as game, so it can be harvested in the wild and then processed at a game meat processing facility and then sold for human consumption. In contrast — and talking mainly about deer — deer is prescribed as a consumable animal, so the farmed deer can be processed at an abattoir. Wild deer is not prescribed as game, so it cannot be harvested and enter into the process. If there was an interest in government changing that, that is a matter for government about whether they think about the act or the regulations around prescribing that particular definition.

Of interest, I did put this information together also. In the category of rabbit, being both consumable and game, are also pigs and goats. There is a small number of wild pigs processed through the game meat processing facility — a very small number, and not goats. The business that I visited last week said that they are not really interested in goats for a couple of reasons. One is the health risk associated with goats at their particular facility. That is their personal decision. The other is that the majority of goats are actually collected or corralled live from rather large pastoral properties, mainly in southern New South Wales, and then taken live to abattoirs. So in that sense they are not game, because they have been collected live and then transported to the abattoir and not shot in the field.

Mr YOUNG — Apart from a couple of technical difficulties as far as deer not being classified as game, putting that aside, are you aware of any actual differences between deer and kangaroos and goats that would cause more problems as far as getting around the health concerns and the procedural stuff in the lead-up to that?

Dr TATHAM — Thanks very much for the question. The best information that we have got is the technical advice from the chief veterinary officer, which explains that there are potential risks and that would require a bit of further investigation. I think the answer to the question is from the legislation perspective and the standards and the requirements for ensuring that a product that enters the market is fit for human consumption and has meat inspection associated with it; those issues are there by way of a framework to deal with any game meat.

Mr YOUNG — You mentioned refrigeration within 2 hours. Does that go for the kangaroos that are being used by the pet food industry?

Dr TATHAM — Yes. Thank you for the question. It is worthwhile commenting on that, because in order to move any game animal into either the human or the pet food supply, it actually requires a rigorous cold chain. That is not something that is normally set up out in the bush, but it is required by way of being able to allow animals to move into that supply chain.

Mr YOUNG — So how is that done by the kangaroo harvesters?

Dr TATHAM — What I have mentioned in the report is the option where game is harvested during the day, in which case they have got 2 hours to get that into refrigeration. The other option — I have not mentioned it in the submission — is that if there is harvesting at night, then they have got until 2 hours after sunrise to get it into refrigeration. The way the majority of the kangaroo culling works, and has

always worked, has been shooting at night. Those businesses that are doing that harvesting then collect those kangaroo carcasses and put them into a refrigeration unit that they have out in their proximity — a field depot, if you like — and then they have got 24 hours to move that to the processing facility. Cold chain is something that the industry would need to set up.

Mr YOUNG — In regards to kangaroos that are harvested at night, hypothetically, if it is shot at 10.00 p.m., it does not actually have to be refrigerated until 2 hours after sunrise the next morning — —

Dr TATHAM — That is right. That is what the standard is.

Mr YOUNG — Is that regardless of temperature? Because I would imagine a day in winter would be much cooler than a night-time in summer. Why is it different?

Dr TATHAM — The Australian standard is the bit that defines that. The requirement about moving animals into refrigeration after sunrise is really a function of the practicality of being able to harvest those animals. The intent is to get it into refrigeration as quickly as possible. That is the compliance requirement.

Mr RICHARDSON — Thank you, Brendan, for coming in. Good to see you again. Our committee is charged with the task of finding out how we manage invasive species. One of the conversations that has been had is about the effective use of the resource from a recreational hunting perspective across the board. The estimates from the deer association are that we could be dealing with many hundreds of thousands of deer across Victoria, with an expanding population. How feasible is it that the meat industry has an effective role to play in that, given how specific and how low the numbers are of game species? I note the kangaroo harvest. Do you see a likelihood that the meat industry has a role to play in that work?

Dr TATHAM — Thanks very much for your question. I am not really in a position to be able to answer it unfortunately. While we provide the regulatory framework associated with what is required to ensure that a product is safe to eat, we do not have a role in the marketing or the supply and demand of product. I think there is some further work required around what is the economic viability of an industry for those species. What does demand and supply look like? Which consumers want it? That then drives the size of an industry that would develop around that.

Mr RICHARDSON — So if we take the rabbit example, can you take us through what the process is for the order coming in? That seems to be the other way around to what we have been looking at in terms of recreational hunting, maybe harvesting a carcass and going through that process. What is the current process, and what resources are put in to get to that end product or end result?

Dr TATHAM — Thank you. This is exactly the reason why we visited the facility last week: to understand in detail — how does that work? The game meat processor would take orders from butchers and restaurants and other meat supply business and require a number — let's just pick a number; say, 200 rabbits — for the week. He would ring up his approved harvester and say, 'I need 200 rabbits', and then that person is charged with going and identifying where those rabbits are going to come from and supplying them — on, for example, a Tuesday morning — and then they process them during the day; there are three employees at that business. They would then package them, make sure the appropriate health and hygiene requirements are met and then go through the distribution business for delivery that week. So that is the way that works.

I think what you have identified through your question is that it is different from a supply-driven business; it is really a demand-driven business, and that is the bit that I think needs a bit of thinking, if there is some thinking with regard to policy changes about the supply of some of these invasive species — how does that align with an industry which is demand driven?

Mr RICHARDSON — Absolutely. Taking you to that point, what then are the qualifications or training that the individual, from PrimeSafe's perspective, would have to fulfil to become one of those approved harvesters?

Dr TATHAM — Sure. Thank you for the question. The harvester needs to have a Victorian shooters licence issued by Victoria Police. They need to have a hunting endorsement on that. They need to have whatever approvals are required from the environment portfolio for accessing the resource. Then they need to have demonstrated competency — there is a competency which is for game harvesting, so there is a training prerequisite. Then they are contracted by the game meat processing facility and included in their documentation. It is called a food safety program; that defines everything that goes on at that facility. Once those arrangements are in place, we approve that food safety program, and that is the process which allows them to operate.

As I have mentioned previously, the industry is very small and we have a pretty good understanding of those businesses. If there is an issue, then we are able to identify what is going on. If it was to expand, then I think we would need to look at the instruments, licences and approvals in order to make sure that there are adequate controls over a larger business, a larger industry.

Mr RICHARDSON — Have any of those businesses expressed a desire to PrimeSafe to expand that kind of work? Or is that something that is more government driven? Or has there been any conversation with PrimeSafe from those organisations?

Dr TATHAM — Thank you again for the question. Most of those questions go to the department and to the government. We hear of issues with supply, but that is really just commentary from the licensees.

Mr RAMSAY — Is the Camperdown renderer down there one of those four or five doing that work at the moment?

Dr TATHAM — I am not sure if it is the Camperdown facility but there is one in that area which is accessing kangaroos as part of the pet food trial. It is part of that business, yes.

Ms WARD — Have you got any thoughts on why the game industry is so small?

Dr TATHAM — One of the reasons — and this is from my meeting last week — is access to game animals. The licensee I was meeting with last week has a problem with getting rabbits at the moment, because there is so much water around. It is difficult to get rabbits in that sort of environment.

Ms WARD — You can come to Eltham; we have got plenty.

Dr TATHAM — That is right. I will try and come back to your question, but I think you have raised an important issue, and that is around invasive animals in peri-urban spaces — very different to having large numbers of animals in widespread areas. I think the other reason, potentially — and I am really postulating — is the ability for the industry to have consistent supply and consistent quality of product. So if there is not the ability to meet the consumers' or the restaurants' requirements for rabbits or whatever it would happen to be, and they cannot put that on their menu or they cannot provide it consistently to their consumers, then the consumers will go somewhere else, to a different product.

Ms WARD — Apart from having too much water and not being able to get your rabbits, what would be the other impediments to stopping people from being able to be consistent with delivery or with produce?

Dr TATHAM — With regard to the existing supply chains, there are probably not any. I was surprised to hear that the licensed game meat processing facility only occasionally does wild pigs, and I am really not sure as to why that is. It might be a demand issue or it might be a supply issue. I cannot really comment, but I was surprised to hear that.

The CHAIR — Just with the literature review on the various bacteria, I guess there are two risks: there is the risk to the public in terms of consumption, but then of course there is the risk to workers — well, they have already been processing these animals. Do you think there is a bigger risk to workers in this area in terms of having other animals with propensities for certain diseases? Is there a greater risk to them, or is it the same risk?

Dr TATHAM — Thank you for the question. I think it is difficult to say in the Victorian context at the moment. Potentially it is a greater risk because there is not a control of animal health or disease in that wild population, whereas if you think about a farm, there is quite strong control of animal health in that area. Having said that, as long as there is appropriate training, meat inspection and control of the supply chain, I cannot see any reason why that risk cannot be managed.

The CHAIR — So it is the same risk as to the consumption of the meat as it is to a person working with it?

Dr TATHAM — Slightly different risks, I think, is the answer to that question. If there is a meat processor or someone harvesting, then the issue from their perspective is going to be associated with zoonotic diseases — so diseases or organisms which the animals carry in the wild and then can be transferred to the person who is doing the work in processing the meat. That is slightly different to the risk to a consumer, which is going to be mainly a food safety risk. That is associated with, again, a subclinical disease like that which the animal has in the wild, but it then needs to be managed through the cold chain and there needs to be appropriate cooking and preparation of those products.

The CHAIR — Thanks. Any further questions? You are getting off lightly.

Ms WARD — That was very useful. Thank you for that; it was succinct.

The CHAIR — It was, because one of the issues that is coming up in many submissions and with people presenting is the issue about what you do with the carcasses and whether there is a possibility to use them for some commercial or economic benefit. Thank you so much for coming in this morning.

Dr TATHAM — A pleasure, and thanks for the opportunity. If you need any further information, I am sure the office can contact me.

Witness withdrew.