

ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land

Melbourne — 10 October 20126

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Mr Gerry Leach, chair, land management committee, and

Ms Lisa Gervasoni, senior policy adviser, land management and planning, Victorian Farmers Federation.

The CHAIR — Welcome to Mr Gerry Leach and Ms Lisa Gervasoni from the Victorian Farmers Federation. Thanks for coming in today to this public hearing of the Environment, Natural Resources and Regional Development Committee inquiry into the control of invasive animals. Just before we start, just a few formalities. The evidence that you give today is being recorded, and you will be given a copy of the transcript — the proofs — prior to them being publicly available, just to check for accuracy. Also, whilst in the confines of the public hearing, whatever you say is protected by parliamentary privilege; however, outside the public hearings there may not be the same protection. I am sure there is probably not really a lot of concern in terms of this inquiry, but perhaps in starting, as you have probably been advised, you could give us a 5 to 10-minute presentation, and then the committee members will have questions to ask. In starting your presentation, if you could just give a little bit of background and your titles and so on for Hansard.

Mr LEACH — Thank you, Chair. My name is Gerry Leach, and I chair the Victorian Farmers Federation land management committee. In my own right I am a farmer at Walpeup in the Mallee region of Victoria. Thank you for the opportunity to present to this parliamentary inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land. Chair, do you want Lisa to introduce herself at this point as well?

The CHAIR — That is probably good to start with, yes. Thanks.

Ms GERVASONI — Lisa Gervasoni. I am the senior policy adviser in land management and planning at the VFF.

Mr LEACH — Thank you. The VFF is concerned that the decrease in and difficulty in achieving recurrent funding for management of invasive animal species on public land will compromise the ability to minimise the environmental, social and economic impact of this critical issue. We are concerned that the cost-benefit analysis model seemingly focuses on biodiversity outcomes rather than the full range of statutory considerations under legislation, including those under the Catchment and Land Protection Act. VFF members are concerned with the impacts of pest animals on production and their livelihood. The impact of different invasive species includes but is not limited to direct stock loss from attack, such as foxes and wild dogs; potential stock loss from disease from invasive species, such as wild pigs, goats and deer; reduction of fodder from invasive species, such as rabbit and deer but not limited to them; and direct environmental impact and land degradation from species such as rabbits.

The CALP act of 1994 has as one of its three purposes ‘to set up a system of controls on noxious weeds and pest animals’. The Crown is bound by the act and is defined as a landowner. Section 20 establishes a general duty which requires:

- (1) In relation to his or her land, a landowner must take all reasonable steps to—
...
(f) prevent the spread of, and as far as possible eradicate, established pest animals.

Action by private landowners alone is rarely successful at mitigating the impact of invasive species on productivity. Public land managers do not appear to see the CALP act responsibilities as core business. Failure to keep park management plans in relation to invasive species current may demonstrate a perception by public land managers that the management of invasive pests is of a lesser priority to direct management than a flash promotion of natural values. Pest, plant and animal strategies need to give equal weight to the social, environmental and economic impacts of invasive animals in identifying the cost of invasive animal species. This then provides the ability to assess the costs and benefits of management programs. An annual report should be prepared, outlining the expenditure on invasive animal management, both private and public; the success of the program; the reduction of the impact of invasive animals on listed flora and fauna; and the loss of production due to invasive animals, such as stock loss, erosion et cetera. This provides data to allow monitoring of the benefits of different programs and techniques.

With respect to firearms, the VFF accepts that firearms play a role in the management of invasive species. We support a strategic and nil-tenure approach to the management of invasive species and recognise that

best practice will vary by species and will include a range of tools. A specific species management plan should be prepared that not only discusses the appropriate tools to be utilised but also the other actions that may be required to occur and the sequence, timing and controls for the action to be effective.

The agricultural sector has concerns regarding the management of these programs to ensure that the control mechanism is safe and effective. Where non-professional shooters will be utilised there is an even greater need for the development of standards that are to be met and for oversight of the program, including compliance, community engagement, data collection, evaluation and impact. An example of the issues to be considered in managing this kind of program is outlined within the current VFF policy statement in relation to wild dog control. Wild dogs continue to have a devastating impact upon livestock and farmer livelihoods in East Gippsland, the north-east and the Mallee. It is important that resources be allocated to this issue to allow the full range of tools available to be utilised in controlling this pest.

The VFF believes that many issues identified by the Victorian Auditor-General in 2010 are still relevant today. The VFF believes that the system still lacks an overarching sense of purpose and direction to guide all agency activities. Where there is an attempt to undertake coordinated planning at a landscape scale, the basis of the model does not allow for the consideration of the cost of invasive pests on agricultural production. Farmers do not know who to contact to raise issues of invasive pest animals residing in nearby public land and do not have certainty that this will be given serious consideration. Ensuring effective programs to eradicate all invasive pest animals within public land will have both environmental and economic outcomes.

We thank you for the opportunity to make this submission on this topic, which is of great interest to our members. The VFF also has a policy position on invasive plants and animals. The policy is holistic and crosses all agencies. It recognises that political commitment is required to confront the pest and weed problem in Victoria and that there is a need for the government to become more proactive about managing weeds on public land. This includes ensuring appropriate resources are allocated for on-ground works to stop weeds from diminishing natural values on public land and from spreading onto private land. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Just the suggestion about an annual report — has that ever occurred in the past? There is no motive behind the question; I am just interested to know, I guess because sometimes we forget about what happened before and whether it was a good idea. Would we be reinventing the wheel or whatever?

Mr LEACH — Not that I am aware of in terms of this issue, but if we look at a lot of natural resource management issues — look at Landcare funding, for example. A Landcare group may get funding for pest control, and they have to report annually, and it is quite extensive in terms of what is required. I think it is the MERI approach — monitoring, evaluation, reporting and I cannot think what the ‘I’ stands for.

The CHAIR — We will find it. That is all right.

Mr LEACH — Can you, Lisa? No. But anyway, basically it is a process that leads to further action. That is just one example.

The CHAIR — So in some of the reporting that is happening, the annual report would bring that all together, as well as government bodies being part of it — which are not now.

Mr LEACH — Our view at the VFF is that unless we are monitoring, evaluating and therefore reporting on what is occurring, we do not know whether the expenditure — by ‘we’ I mean the broader community; you as parliamentarians and the rest of us involved — or resources that are being put into it are in fact being effective. That is, whether we are holding our own or losing ground, or what in fact the impacts are of increased resources or better efficiencies.

The CHAIR — In your submission you talked about the membership of wild dog management groups and said that it should reflect the sectors of the community affected. Is there something behind that? Is that

not happening at the moment? I mean, we have heard from various people who are members of or who have set up their own wild dog advisory groups, but is there an issue or a problem there?

Mr LEACH — Thanks for the question. Yes, there is an issue. At the moment there seems to be a hiatus in terms of what is happening with the wild dog ministerial advisory council, if I have got its name correct — that is its purpose anyhow. Nobody outside government seems to know exactly what is happening. It has been quite some time now since there has been action. My understanding is that there was a committee, its term was up and there has been no announcement in terms of its replacement or reappointment. We think it is imperative, given the really serious issues in terms of wild dog management, because we are not just talking about environment and productivity; we are also talking about human health issues. I hope we do not get to the day when someone gets killed by a wild dog, but the potential is there. I think it is really important that the government make a decision on that advisory committee.

The CHAIR — Is it a Victorian one?

Mr LEACH — Yes.

The CHAIR — And there are the regional ones.

Mr LEACH — There is a national one and there are Victorian regional ones. Now, nationally that is going quite well, but we are not aware of what is happening in Victoria. We would initially very much like the minister to talk to us. We would be happy to give advice to the minister in terms of what we believe should be happening, because we have got some members out there who are really very, very concerned about this. It is also an animal welfare issue, to be quite frank.

The CHAIR — Do you mean in terms of attacking stock?

Mr LEACH — Exactly, yes.

The CHAIR — Could you talk a little bit further about the impact that the wild dogs are having? Maybe from your own experience or even some — —

Mr LEACH — I am here to represent my members, not to talk about my own experience, but I can say that I actually farm our family farm, which has 17 kilometres of frontage onto the Murray-Sunset National Park. There are no wild dogs in the Murray-Sunset National Park at this stage, but I know of farmers in the Southern Mallee who adjoin Wyperfeld, and obviously in the north-east and East Gippsland there are really serious problems there reported by our members. The worst part of it is that what it often does is force the farmer out of what would otherwise be the most productive form of enterprise. At the moment that is the sheep industry. So there are farmers who have gone out of sheep and into cropping, for example, which is more marginal in those areas. Then on top of that they run into the issue of native vegetation regulations, which prevent them converting from grazing to cropping because they cannot remove the isolated paddock trees, which means they cannot use GPS modern technology, which means again they are even more marginal.

If I can just elaborate a bit further, the reality of not just wild dogs but all of these pest animals that we talk about is that it is no good doing a bit of a sprint job on them and thinking that we have got them under control, because it is an ongoing thing. The moment we take the pressure off, they then reappear. So it is not just short, sharp bursts; it has to be a constant long-term acceptance that they are here and that we have to invest.

In terms of investing, some people might say that it is private gain. We would certainly dispute that because the situation is that the public land is providing a harbour for these pest species. While they do some damage on the public land, often the major damage they do is actually to productivity on the private land. So there has to be, we believe, a recognition. As I mentioned earlier about the CALP act, every landholder, be they public or private, has the same responsibilities under the CALP act. The only difference is that under the CALP act a private landholder can be charged for failing to comply with the act, but of course the secretary of the department is not going to charge themselves, so it is a bit one-sided.

We would, in that respect, say that while the responsibilities are the same, the action that can be taken is not the same.

The CHAIR — And I guess there is also the fact that, even if there is funding for private land, there is also a lot of in-kind work put in by farmers anyway, so it is not as if they are doing nothing other than relying on public money. I think they are doing lots of things off their own bat and at their own expense.

Mr LEACH — Farmers spend a lot of money on protecting their assets, their productivity, from invasive species out of public land. We believe that there is a need for a much more cooperative approach between the public and private land managers. That is not a slight at all on the individuals who are managing the public land; the reality is that we have set a large area of land aside for public land, I think, relative to some other areas of the world. I am not quibbling about that, but if we do not resource it, then we are actually letting down the whole of the community that wants a good natural environment, and those adjoining landholders are having their productivity impinged upon by the failure to fund.

The CHAIR — Just a quick one before I pass on to Simon. On that, we heard on Thursday or Friday last week, when we were up in Gippsland, the Gippsland catchment authority saying that they have a role in bringing all of the parties together — private and public — and working well in a very cooperative manner. Are you suggesting that that might not be happening well enough or perhaps it is okay up there but in the Mallee or in other areas maybe there is a bit more cooperation needed? Do the catchment authorities play the same role throughout Victoria?

Mr LEACH — First of all in my response to you I should reveal that I am a former CMA chair, so I am very familiar with how the catchment management authorities operate. I have no doubt that it will be different in some areas to others. The reports that we are getting from our members would indicate that things could be done a lot better right across the state. I cannot really say whether the Gippsland model is better than, say, the Wimmera-Mallee or somewhere else, but we would be certainly keen to look at that because, if it is — and we will certainly go back now and talk to some of our members from that area — we have had no indication that that is working well.

The CHAIR — And if you do it would be good if you would not mind passing the information on to us. That would be great.

Mr LEACH — Certainly.

Mr RAMSAY — Thanks, Gerry, for your presentation. You covered some country. You went from wild dogs to native vegetation clearing and back to the wild dogs ministerial council, lack of funds and a couple of other points. I take your points. Wild dogs have been a long-term problem and an issue for VFF members and farmers generally. I am surprised that there is not a formal ministerial council, because we heard in Gippsland that basically there is a landholder who formed a wild dog committee, but it had no formal structure around it; it was just a group of farmers who decided they would get together, whereas in the past I understood there were formal wild dog committees under the auspices of the minister. That is probably something that the committee will look at in its discussion and recommendations.

There are two points I want to cover here. I am going to the deer, because you have made commentary around removing the protective species status of sambar deer, and I invite you to talk about why you have taken that position and what the implications are. We have heard from PrimeSafe that in fact for rendering purposes and human consumption the terminology around game or deer does not invite that opportunity — —

Mr LEACH — Sorry, I missed the precise words you used there, Simon.

Mr RAMSAY — Game. As I understand it, for PrimeSafe and for potential renderers or processors to be able to process deer, for example, they have to be specified as — and I will stand to be corrected on this, but it is my understanding — both a game species as well as whatever the other one was; I cannot remember. It is not classified as that, so therefore it is not able to be under the act. I will just have to refer

back to my notes to the act in relation to it being classified as game to be able to be used for human consumption or for pet food.

You talked about the reclassification status of sambar deer away from protected, so I am interested to know where you want that to go and also in relation to a number of submitters who have argued that deer should be reclassified as pest animals and what you see as the positive and negative consequences to that. I also invite you to make comment around the Auditor-General's report in 2010 which was quite critical of Parks Victoria in its short-term strategies in managing pests in Victoria. In fact, that is connected to the lack of funding, which you have already identified as a concern for the VFF. We have Parks Victoria coming in next, and it might be an opportunity for the VFF perhaps to respond to that Auditor-General's report and the concerns he raised in the report as to where you think Parks Victoria should be in relation to its primary role of managing the public lands.

Mr LEACH — Thanks, Simon. In terms of sambar deer the VFF has never really understood why deer should ever have been a protected species in the first place. They are not native. It is quite clear now that they are quite invasive. Again, we are getting reports from members that there is very significant damage being done by deer coming out of public land. We are not concerned so much about what happens to the deer, whether it is harvested or whether it is just shot on site or whatever. Our concern is that our people want to be rid of them.

I guess it is for others to say, but I know that some time ago in my role, as you would know better than anyone, Simon — I have been in this role for a long time now at the VFF — in the early days of my position we had a meeting with deer hunters. I cannot remember the name of the organisation, but they were horrified at the thought that we would want to remove the protected status, because they liked the hunt, so to speak. In other words, it was a sport to them. We do not farm for sport; we farm primarily to make a living, and on the side of that we feed everybody. I just hope when you have lunch, you remember where it came from.

Mr RAMSAY — That is an old line but a good one.

Mr LEACH — To us, if the deer can be controlled in a way such that they are used for productive purposes, that is fine, but our main concern is that their protected status be removed so that they can be controlled. I am not saying eradicated. I think we get a bit carried away when we say eradicated with a lot of these invasive species. The reality is that they are here and they are here to stay. As I indicated earlier, it is a long haul that we are in for. It is not going to end. We have just got to get on top of the management of it. That is the situation with the deer.

Regarding Parks Victoria management, I am not critical of Parks themselves in terms of management. There may be some aspects where you could look at a better use of the resources they get, and that might be by private operators in some places doing some of the work, but the real issue is the resourcing of the organisation itself. It does not matter how efficient they are, if they are not getting the resources — and we have to accept that if we set land aside for conservation or recreation purposes, we have to be prepared to resource it — it should not be resourced by the adjoining landholders.

Mr RAMSAY — Just one last one, if I may, perhaps to Lisa. Am I allowed to ask a question of her?

The CHAIR — Of course.

Mr RAMSAY — I am just wondering what your thoughts are in relation to the government's strategy being developed at the moment around *Protecting Victoria's Environment — Biodiversity 2036*. Have you had a chance to look at some of the detail around that? Do you think they are heading in the right direction, or do you have any comments regarding an alternative strategy?

Ms GERVASONI — In regard to the biodiversity framework, I think it is still in quite an early stage as to exactly what format it will end up being in, but again it is a similar issue to what is at hand. It is about getting the balance right and about making a decision based on a range of costs and benefits rather than just looking at one issue in isolation. It is about seeing the whole puzzle, not the individual pieces. From

the VFF perspective we are about making sure that, whether it be pest plant and animal management or biodiversity management, the system that is put in place considers both public and private outcomes and actually addresses and respects the role of private landholders and their ability to use their land for the purpose for which it has been zoned.

Mr RAMSAY — Are you engaged in the process of developing this new strategy?

Mr GERVASONI — We had a briefing on Friday. It was sort of a workshop, and that is the extent of the engagement part from some previous steering committee roles, but we have not seen the final outcome as yet.

Mr RICHARDSON — Thank you very much for coming in, Lisa and Gerry. I have just got a question going to the point about food security and the comments you made about eradication. Regarding the economic arguments — the economic impact — of the \$620 million that was in the submission, if you are not going towards the process of eradicating a large percentage of the species, any investment made will be very short term before the species effectively catches back up through its breeding procedures. I think that is the crossroads between how these species are managed. What is the VFF's position on that as an approach? Because if we are just tinkering around the edges, any government investment, even in the tens of millions, is not going to address the current problem that is facing farmers. What are some of the strategies that you think would be most effective in supporting your members?

Mr LEACH — Thanks for the question. Our view is that each invasive animal species should have a management plan about it. It is no good us talking about whether we eradicate or whether we control. What we have to do is determine what sort of outcome we want and then how we go about achieving that outcome.

I think the premise of your question is about wasting funds on a program that then cannot be sustained, and I agree entirely with that, but it is both morally and economically wrong to say, 'Well, we can't control that pest to the level that we want to, so therefore we give up'. I do not think we are in a position where we can say whether it is economical to control any particular species at the moment, until such time as we do a management plan for that species, because all we are doing is groping in the dark. It is really critical that we get that done. The management plan should also include what level of community engagement there should be.

I should declare at this stage that I chair the Victorian Rabbit Action Network, which is jointly funded by the state government and the Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre. The Victorian Rabbit Action Network is being funded to follow through on the concept of community engagement in rabbit management. We have seen some very successful programs.

In a sense — and I am being totally politically bipartisan here in saying this — it follows on, I believe, from the Joan Kirner concept that she started with when she established salinity management groups in Victoria. She saw the need for the people who had the problem to actually come up with the solution or at least be part of coming up with a solution with government support. That concept flowed through to the establishment of catchment management authorities. I have seen it in my own area in the Mallee in terms of an ovine brucellosis program — that is a venereal disease of male sheep — where we were able to manage the disease. I say 'manage' because we reduced the incidence of ovine brucellosis from 37 per cent of flocks down to less than 1 per cent. That is awfully close to eradication, but I do not think we can ever say we have eradicated it, because you cannot be absolutely sure that you have.

What I am saying here is that I think community engagement can be a huge part of the investment from the community's perspective, coupled with government resources, to get those sorts of outcomes. I do not think we should at this stage say we cannot sustain the level of funding that there is now. The level of funding that is there now is not adequate, but if we get a better level of funding, coupled with resources put into community engagement, then we may be able to get somewhere. That community engagement involves both the public and the private sector. I have mentioned the Victorian Rabbit Action Network. I notice that Ben Fahey from Parks Victoria is one of the next presenters, and Ben is in fact on the Victorian

Rabbit Action Network, representing Parks Victoria. So when I talk about community engagement, I am not just talking about the private community; I am talking about public and private. It is a matter of getting the best mix of those resources, but we cannot expect the community to do it alone without government resourcing.

Mr RICHARDSON — So just going beyond that point, what are some of the key priorities for the VFF in terms of the mammal species that are the biggest threat? Is it the wild dog population that is the biggest threat? And in the scale of priorities, what are the biggest threats certainly to your members?

Mr LEACH — I think I listed them before, but if you are wanting me to give you a hierarchy, I think that would be not only wrong but dangerous, from my perspective, because we have got some members who will say wild dogs are their biggest problem and others who will say rabbits are their biggest problems. Some will say foxes are their biggest problem, and others will say deer are their biggest problem. It depends where you are, whether you are adjacent to public land —

Mr TILLEY — All of the above.

Mr LEACH — yes — and what sort of topography you have got, what type of farm you have got, and so on.

Mr RICHARDSON — It makes it very difficult if you are putting in a management plan for individual animals if there are 8 to 10 species that are to be targeted in a region and then trying to put a management plan, with maybe \$13 million worth of resources, in an area that could have millions of invasive species. To then put a management plan together that is generalist is probably part of the reason why we are here and undertaking this inquiry.

Mr LEACH — No. With respect, I am not suggesting a management plan that is generalist; I am talking about a management plan that is quite specific. I think that is really important. I would not think that we should be doing a management plan for one species in one area, whilst that would be a subcomponent of it. If we are looking at something like, let us say, wild dogs, it needs to be an overall plan with subcomponents of it. But, no, I do not accept at all that the plan should be generalist. I think it has got to be quite specific.

Mr RICHARDSON — Just stepping away from mammals for the moment, what about invasive weeds and those impacts as well? We are looking at invasive species across the board. What are some of the challenges? Can you give a bit of an overview maybe of some of those challenges and some things that you might want to see changed as well in this space?

Mr LEACH — The situation with weeds is quite similar to invasive animals, except for one thing: the weeds do not move around to the same extent. Now, someone with serrated tussock might say otherwise because it can spread pretty rapidly, and sometimes of course weeds are spread by animals, either by their eating them or carrying them on their fur. But our position on weeds is the same: we need to have a management plan for those weed species. Now, under the Catchment and Land Protection Act weeds are supposed to be categorised within the region, and there should be currently management plans within CMAs for invasive weeds. I am not sure where that is up to in terms of status at the moment, but certainly in my time in catchment management, if you did not have a government-approved plan, you did not get funding. It was as simple as that. It was a pretty good incentive, quite frankly. The principle of invasive species is much the same whether it is animals or weeds.

Mr RICHARDSON — And what is the economic impact across the board, then, for weeds and those other invasive species? Have you got an economic assessment of that as well?

Mr LEACH — There are figures, and Lisa has probably got them there now, in terms of what they cost — not what individual weeds cost, but in terms of the total cost of weeds in Australia, and more precisely in Victoria. But I think that should be the first thing that is dealt with in a management plan for an invasive species. What is the cost of the species to us currently, what would be the cost of controlling that

species and what level of control is required or feasible? The VFF would be only too happy to help government set up a process for developing those plans, I can assure you.

Mr RICHARDSON — I know I have hogged a lot of your time, Gerry, but — —

The CHAIR — Is there any more about weeds, because we are about animals?

Mr RICHARDSON — No, no. I am trying to get a comparison between economics of animals as opposed to weeds, I think, as a broader snapshot of Victoria.

The CHAIR — Ah, yes.

Mr RICHARDSON — But just finally, where is the tipping point regarding food security in Victoria for invasive species in terms of farming, and what are your members saying? What is the view? Is it years? Are we looking at decades? What is the tipping point?

Mr LEACH — I should not say this — it is a somewhat sarcastic view, I suppose — but the sad reality from Victoria's farmers' perspective, and indeed Australia's farmers' perspective, is that we are not at risk of running out of food. We often look at our colleagues in other countries where there have been food shortages and we think, 'You lucky people', because those communities value their farmers so much more because they are fearful of running out of food; whereas here we export two-thirds of the food that we produce. So we are a long way from ever running out of food.

The important issues are two things. One is that food and fibre production is a very significant export income earner for Australia, so in terms of our balance of payments, Australian agriculture plays a very big part. We are extremely efficient producers. But one of the biggest impediments to that efficiency is invasive species.

Mr YOUNG — Thank you, Gerry, for coming in today and giving us your time. I just want to go back to what Simon was talking about before in regard to your calls for the removal of protected status for deer — and they are your words, protected status. Can you just explain for me how they are protected?

Mr LEACH — My understanding is that farmers have not in the past had the right to control deer, unlike other invasive species. Deer were in a sense treated the same way as wildlife were, such as kangaroos, emus et cetera — in other words, native wildlife. We could never understand why that was, because they are not native wildlife. They are an introduced species, and therefore they should be treated the same way as any other introduced species. There should be no controls on their culling.

Mr YOUNG — You said 'in the past'. Is that still the current situation?

Mr LEACH — My understanding is that there has been some change. Lisa, are you familiar with that? Sorry, Lisa has not been with us long. I am putting her under the pump when I ask a question like that.

Ms GERVASONI — I think it was still listed as a game species when we checked.

Mr LEACH — Yes.

The CHAIR — I guess we are asking about the practical implications.

Mr YOUNG — Yes. Whilst it may still be listed as a game species, is there any impediment to farmers controlling them on their own property? As I understand it, rules have changed more recently and there are no restrictions now for farmers.

Mr LEACH — If that is the case, that is fine, but we will get some clarification of that, if you like.

Mr YOUNG — Just on that point — and you will have to take my word on that one, given that now the situation has changed — —

Mr LEACH — Sorry, can I add something to that? Just because farmers have the right to cull that species, it should not be the end of the story. The public land manager still has a responsibility really to ensure that the invasive species that they, whether intentionally or otherwise — obviously unintentionally — provide harbour for does not become a problem to their neighbour. I think some time ago there was a program called the Good Neighbour Program, which had a pretty small amount of funds. It was not the amount of funds that was the issue. The issue was a concept. I think the concept of the public and private land managers that adjoin each other working together is a concept that should be encouraged. I think there has been a drop-off in that.

Mr YOUNG — Absolutely it is our responsibility to make sure that these things are not impacting on farmers and on public lands in ways that they should not be. Can you give me an idea of what would change if they were to be changed from a game species to a pest species in as far as their management? What practices would actually be different and do you have any idea of what the actual implications are of reducing numbers or reducing impact by these pest species?

Mr LEACH — It depends on whether there are any restrictions on them if they are now called a game species. I had assumed because they are called a game species that there would be some restrictions still on their control. If there is not, that is fine, but let us be open. If they are an invasive species, let us call them that, and let everybody be clear that they are allowed to control them.

Mr YOUNG — One of the reasons for having them still a game species may in fact be for the purpose of licensing for recreational hunters on public land so that they can apply through the same system as other game species, and that keeps a check on who is actually hunting them on public land. As far as controls, there really is not much difference between a game and a pest species in the control of deer. But given that point, would you agree that controls available on one form of land, being private, public or any other, should be available on all forms of land if they are to be effective control methods?

Mr LEACH — There has to be coordinated control in that respect. I think we cannot just have a situation where anybody can go onto public land and hunt a species. I accept that we have got, for example, a national park. Whether they are game or wildlife or invasive pests or whatever they are, the reality is that there are restrictions on who can, and at what time and so on, conduct control of them on public land.

There will always be differences between the control of an invasive species on public land versus private land. The issue is how you manage that control and how you coordinate the control, because it is no good having the private land manager taking certain action, totally oblivious to what the public land manager might be doing. The two need to be able to work cooperatively together because by doing that we will get a better outcome for both parties.

Mr YOUNG — Something else on a completely different tangent that you touched on earlier today was about the costs associated with damages caused by invasive pests, and we were talking about dogs before. We have had some recent witnesses give evidence to this inquiry that was along the lines of what you were saying — that there are people that think it should be the responsibility of the farmer to pay for all of the control and the damages that are caused by, in particular, wild dogs, which is what was discussed at the time. I was wondering if you could just provide some comments and your perspective on that.

Mr LEACH — Those comments, with respect, would be quite wrong, because it is quite clear, as I said in my opening remarks, under the Catchment and Land Protection Act that the requirements of the public land manager are the same as the private land manager except for the fact that legislative action cannot be taken against the public land manager. But according to the act they both have the same responsibility. If people are thinking that there is a private good in controlling animals on private land, the reality is that being adjacent to an area of public land should not be an impediment to being able to farm profitably. So part of the management plans that I talked about before should include recognising the responsibility of both the private and public land managers to each other in terms of cross-contamination of invasive species.

Mr YOUNG — Just one last one: in your submission you talked about, and I think it was in the recommendations at the end, that the government must deliver half of the cost to construct and repair fences in between private and public land. What is the actual case now for government contributions to that, and what other contributions are there directly involved in that barrier situation?

Mr LEACH — As I understand it, under the Fences Act, I think it is called — the act relevant to fences anyway — there is no onus on the Crown to provide fencing between Crown land and private land. We have argued at the VFF for a long time that that is quite unfair. It should be seen as part of the cost of having land set aside for public land management.

There are some isolated cases where there has been cooperation between the public and private land manager, particularly in the instance of kangaroo fencing. Kangaroos are obviously not listed as an invasive species, although many farmers would argue that they invade their land, and the reality is that they do. That was recognised by the public land manager for two reasons. One is that there might be a moral responsibility, but there is also an environmental aspect to it as well, and that is that if kangaroos have unfettered access to private land, they breed much more rapidly than they would in the natural environment because they have access to water and to improved pastures et cetera. So the result is that whilst they are harboured in the public land, they actually then, because of their increased numbers, cause problems on the public land as well. I have used kangaroos as an example, but just because you asked about the fencing and it was kangaroo-proof fencing that was used.

I am not saying that we would like to see an increase in that. What we want to see, quite frankly, is the Fences Act changed so that there is a fair and equitable responsibility between the public and the private land manager to appropriately fence their properties.

Mr YOUNG — And possibly an easier system to get permits to cull kangaroos.

Mr LEACH — We would endorse that too.

Ms WARD — Just before we finish up, I do not know if you have had a chance to see many of the submissions that farmers have put in to us.

Mr LEACH — I have not.

Ms WARD — A number of them talk about concerns around shooters shooting on their property or close to their boundaries and issues with leaving carcasses near farm boundaries that can attract wild dogs. We have heard different evidence around how wild dogs feed as well. Have you got any views on that or anecdotes that could give us an insight into what your experience is?

Mr LEACH — Yes, we have had members express to us concern about carcasses being left in wild dog areas, because it (a) encourages the wild dogs to come onto the private land and (b) also means that they have got fairly good nutrition. Again the fertility in wild dog species is very much related to nutrition. So as their nutrition rises, their capacity to breed rises as well. But it also forms a habit: they know they can come onto the private land to get food. If they come back and there is no carcass there for them, well a live animal is the next best thing for them. So yes, we would strongly endorse the view that that is quite concerning.

The issue of people coming onto private land shooting has probably been an issue in Australia since not long after the First Fleet arrived. Some people seem to think that you can go onto someone else's land and do what you like, but obviously it could be trespassing if you have not got permission — or would be trespassing if you have not got permission. The worst thing is that if firearms are involved and if something goes wrong, then there are all sorts of implications.

Ms WARD — Do you think that there is a role for a controlled cull using both professional and amateur hunters?

Mr LEACH — I presume by amateur you mean someone like Field & Game?

Ms WARD — Someone not professional.

The CHAIR — Recreational.

Ms WARD — Yes, recreational — that was the word I was looking for.

Mr LEACH — I do not think there should be a line drawn between whether people are paid or not paid. I think it is a matter of people having the expertise. That is the critical issue. Our view would be that the rules should be drawn up. There should be things like standards in terms of the firearms that are used, and there should be standards in terms of the level of competency that people have. So it should not just be the Wild West out there; it should be a controlled environment.

Ms WARD — What are your thoughts on hunting as a tourism potential?

Mr LEACH — I have not really thought of it. Again, I think what I just said about a controlled environment would have to be very much the case. I hope you are not suggesting we shoot the tourists! I am sure that is not what you meant. But I am not sure that having people — if you are suggesting people — witness the shooting is a very good — —

Ms WARD — Or whether you have hunters who come in in groups and are led by a guide and go through parts of our forests.

Mr LEACH — The issue comes back to that control. If it is a controlled environment and they are competent, that may be a way of doing it, but that competency is such a critical factor, particularly when we are talking about firearms.

Mr TILLEY — Gerry and Lisa, thanks for your time in coming and the work that the Victorian Farmers Federation does for the rights of primary producers and freehold title in the state of Victoria. I will just continue on with the conversation a little bit more. My colleagues have pretty well covered a lot of it, but I just want to get down to the nitty-gritty and continue that conversation about some of the points that you mentioned. Certainly through the good neighbours policy would the VFF, your committee in particular, agree that it is a shared responsibility to some extent between freehold and public lands?

Mr LEACH — It is just not my committee by the way.

Mr TILLEY — Yes — sorry, Gerry.

Mr LEACH — I am here to express the view of all of our members, and that is what our committee does. In terms of shared responsibility, yes, as I indicated before, I believe the best outcome would be a cooperative approach between private and public land managers, just as there are programs where a number of private land managers get together. They might not even be near public land, but we have got plenty of examples of where private land managers get together. For example, in fox control they do not go out as individuals and control their foxes; they work as a team over a large expanse of land because that is much more effective. Likewise, in terms of invasive species it is much more effective if all of the landholders involved work cooperatively together, be they public or private land managers.

Mr TILLEY — Yes, that is right. Gerry, on that note, earlier you mentioned that often farmers do not know who to contact, and during this time we have discussed the work of the CMAs — and you have been actively involved in that and no doubt Landcare and every other organisation in our regional and rural areas. Particularly I pick on a practice there that has recently been conducted with the north-east CMA, and that is particularly with their brochures and paperwork and trying to engage primary producers and those that use our public spaces on access to freehold or leasehold, whatever the case may be — farming, anyway. Would you have a view there at all? Sometimes, because of rural isolation and those types of things, with communication between those that are farming and our communities that come and visit an area — whether they be recreational shooters or just general bush users — are there some challenges there with the communication that is going on in those areas?

Mr LEACH — Yes. I think the situation there is that, just as I talked before about a management plan for each species, part of that management plan should include how public and private land managers communicate with each other. I know someone who, as I said before, has land that adjoins the Murray-Sunset National Park, and, for example, every time Parks Victoria proposes to do planned burning they get a letter from them. Probably in this day and age snail mail is not the best way to communicate, but I think part of developing those plans that I talked about for each species should include how the public and private land managers actually communicate with one another. Because you can have the best plan in the world, but if you have not got a good communication component to it, you might as well leave it in the drawer.

Mr TILLEY — That is the point I am trying to get to and trying to get from you, Gerry. The representation of the excellent work that the VFF is doing is getting primary producers to communicate and report, for example, invasive species, particularly if it is wild dog, fox, cat — anything like that. It is getting primary producers to report to the department so there is good public policy and an attaching of the appropriate levels of funding. Do you find with your membership that they are reporting to the VFF? Or is there something getting lost in that space, so that we can come up with good, solid public policy on reporting procedures?

Mr LEACH — I think that is a really good point, and it is not something that we have had the resources to do. But I notice with some pest species now there are apps available, where individuals can put onto a map where they have seen a particular species. Maybe that is one way of doing it. But rather than getting down to specifics, what I would be saying is that we need, the VFF would be very happy, to sit down with Parks Victoria and work out a plan for communicating with landholders, because I think it is an area we have not done well in in the past or certainly an area we can improve on, particular in this day of modern technology. It is so easy to communicate if you have got the right process in place.

Mr TILLEY — In closing, with the impacts of invasive species on farming practices, if there was better access for recreational shooters or professional shooters or whatever — working with the department and recreational shooters — and if they were given better access to penetration, would that ease the burden on freehold? I am particularly talking about the north-east — we have got everything.

Mr LEACH — Better access would certainly be one component of it, but as I have said before, whoever or whatever it is, there has certainly got to be good management of that, because when we are talking about firearms particularly, we are talking about a potentially dangerous situation. I think one of the really important things here is that no-one has mentioned aerial baiting of wild dogs, so I will mention it now.

Mr TILLEY — Please.

Mr LEACH — The VFF have been quite concerned at how tardy we have been as a state in terms of carrying out aerial baiting of wild dogs. I understand that there is a program on at the moment, but I think again we cannot have this stop-start situation. We have got to work out a plan, and I am talking about decades. It is no good saying, ‘Let’s do something for 12 months and see how it goes’, because we have to look at how we manage this problem in the long term. It may well be — I am not saying that it is, but it may well be — that allowing shooters to go and shoot wild dogs might actually do more harm than good because it will frighten them out of an area that you might want to bait. So we have got to think about the implications of whatever we do. If shooting kills wild dogs, that is fine, but if it only scares or scares 90 per cent of them and shoots 10 per cent of them, we have not got anywhere.

The CHAIR — Can we move on?

Mr TILLEY — Yes, I am nearly finished.

The CHAIR — This is the last question.

Mr TILLEY — Yes, thanks. On that note, when we are talking about firearms and the use of firearms and the membership of the VFF, how many registered firearm holders would also be members of any other shooting organisation?

Mr LEACH — We have no figures on that at all.

Mr TILLEY — Thank you for your time. I appreciate it.

The CHAIR — Thank you, and sorry to Bill. We much appreciate that you have given us a lot of information, so thank you, Mr Leach, and thank you, Ms Gervasoni.

Witnesses withdrew.