

ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land

Melbourne — 10 October 2016

Members

Ms Bronwyn Halfpenny — Chair

Mr Tim McCurdy — Deputy Chair

Mr Simon Ramsay

Mr Tim Richardson

Mr Bill Tilley

Ms Vicki Ward

Mr Daniel Young

Staff

Executive officer: Dr Christopher Gribbin

Witnesses

Mr Roger Fenwick, regional director, eastern Victoria,

Dr Mark Norman, chief conservation scientist, and

Mr Ben Fahey, state leader of invasive species, Parks Victoria.

The CHAIR — We apologise for running a little bit behind time. I think we can still have the allocated three-quarters of an hour, but we were thinking that there might be a number of other issues come up, so hopefully, if necessary, we can arrange for you to come back at a later time if all members are not able to get their questions answered. It is just that we have a teleconference with someone from New Zealand and we have to follow that time line there.

Thank you for coming in. Again, welcome and thank you for coming to the inquiry. There are just a couple of formalities, which you will probably be very familiar with. The hearings are being recorded, and you will be provided copies of the transcript proofs prior to them becoming publicly available for you to check for accuracy. Anything that is said within the public hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege; however, outside the public hearings that may not be the case. Perhaps we could just start with introductions for the record. How long we will your presentation be going for?

Dr NORMAN — Fifteen minutes, if that is all right.

The CHAIR — Good. Everything refers back to Parks Victoria really in terms of this inquiry, so I am sure there will be a lot of questions as well from members.

Visual presentation.

Dr NORMAN — Thank you, Chair, and thank you, members of the inquiry for receiving us today. Control of invasive animals is a very important issue to Parks Victoria, and we welcome the opportunity. I will just quickly introduce us and the things we will cover. I am Mark Norman, the chief conservation scientist at Parks Victoria; Roger Fenwick is the regional director of east region; and Ben Fahey is the state leader of invasive species. Today I will set some of the context of Parks Victoria and some of the major conservation issues we have got, then Ben will talk about our policy and planning framework and then Roger will talk from both a statewide and operational perspective right down to where he has been very actively involved in shooting trials and programs going on in different parts of the state.

If it is okay, I will give a quick outline. I want to start by talking about — a lot of this will be familiar to you — the statewide extensive problem covering a large range of species. We have categories of species, of which you are all aware. There are predators — foxes, cats, wild dogs; grazers, like rabbits, deer, goats, horses; and omnivores, like pigs. In fresh waters we have got introduced species, like trout and European carp, and then in marine systems there is a huge range of animals that have come in on shipping from the earliest tall ships through to recent ballast releases into our ports and harbours.

The impacts take a lot of different forms. There is direct feeding on the plants and animals, there is habitat destruction in lots of different ways and there are big impacts on water quality. The direct impacts also occur on agriculture and other land uses, as you are well aware, but also these invasive animals are often the vectors for bringing in diseases, pests and weeds. That is the context of the broader issue.

In terms of Parks Victoria's role, we are responsible for over 2700 parks and reserves that cover 4.2 million hectares. This is 18 per cent of the state and 54 per cent of Crown lands. Those parks and reserves were declared because of their significant natural or cultural heritage value. Under our legislation we are mandated to protect and manage the plants, wildlife, habitats and sites of cultural significance, and we have to ensure quality safe and sustainable public access in the experiences in those parks. So I cannot overstress that they have largely been reserved because of their natural and cultural significance.

We have a whole range of invasive species control programs across the state. We control introduced predators, we have total grazing management across both introduced and native species and we have extensive weed control programs. Our priorities also include, as a priority, protection of threatened species and habitats. We work with a wide range of agencies to tackle these invasives, and we work as part of whole of government.

I want to give you a quick run around the state of where we are dealing with the issues and what they are. Many of these will be familiar to you. Up in the north-west we have got major goat and rabbit issues and programs. Along the Murray at the northern end of the state this is not unfamiliar. We have issues with

feral horses and feral pigs. Deer is obviously a major theme of this inquiry, and there are major impacts in the alps and across Gippsland. There are wild dogs in the alps and far East Gippsland, so major issues there. We have got feral cat issues across the entire state, but the legislative framework currently means we have to hand cats to local authorities, and the only place we are not bound by that is on French Island, where we have had an active cat removal program for quite a while, which has led to a federal focus around French Island being one of the five cat-free islands to be designated by the federal government as a priority.

Then in our marine systems we have got a huge suite of things going on, from habitat changing, Mediterranean fan worms to eating-everything Japanese seastars. Fox obviously is a statewide problem as well, but we have got major programs controlling them in the Grampians and far East Gippsland.

I thought I would do a concrete example of where the rubber hits the road on this. This is deer rubbing and tree death up in the Dandenongs. It really hits the conservation assets in a small nature conservation reserve called Yellingbo, where sambar deer are doing vegetation and water-quality destruction. This is the last place for the last 40 helmeted honeyeaters, and it is also an isolated population down to about 70 Leadbeater's possums, which have very limited habitat, and the deer are coming into this space in a significant way. We have an active program with accredited volunteer shooters that are helping us remove the worst impacts of sambar deer up there. I think some of you have actually visited up there and seen some of the program.

I just want to finish my bit by saying this is not a new problem. The acclimatisation society in the 1800s tried to establish over 340 species. They tried to introduce 18 deer species. Four have established to cause us some of the issues we have got today, but this is not a recent thing and it is fairly large-scale. I will throw to Ben now to set us in a kind of policy and planning framework.

Mr FAHEY — Thanks, Mark. In this section of the presentation I just wanted to describe our broad operating environment. It is made up of complex natural and cultural landscapes as well as a significantly complicated policy and legislative framework.

This is just a basic diagram showing how all of those things translate to us doing stuff on the ground. We are influenced by federal legislation, state conservation legislation and government policy. Our management of services are grounded with DELWP, which defines what it is that we are responsible for delivering and managing on behalf of the secretary.

We have got a state invasive plants and animal policy framework that is administered by DEDJTR. We have got recovery and threat abatement plans. They are written to help guide management on particularly threatening and nasty species, like pigs and goats. We have got management plans and action plans that are written in accordance with legislation themselves. There are management plans — the National Parks Act, for example — and action plans through the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act. We have also got a really important system in Victoria that the committee may be aware of that defines land reservation purpose and provides some long-term integrity to our policy settings. The land purpose review process is administered by VEAC at the moment, but previously by the Environment Conservation Council and the Land Conservation Council.

So who does what? This is out of our submission, but it is worth highlighting here that we have got a few key players in this space that have different roles. DEDJTR is responsible for setting state-based policy for invasive species. They respond to new incursions, and they represent Victoria on national invasive species issues. They also have an enforcement role, and that is where the policy unit for game management sits in the state of Victoria. DELWP, of course, are responsible for biodiversity and public land use policy for the state and investment and policy research and regulation, but with a really strong focus on biodiversity and land use. Parks Victoria is the delegated land manager for the parks and reserves of the state, so our role is operational. We manage invasive plants and animals to reduce their impacts and apply research and monitoring to understand whether what it is that we are doing is effective and required. The CMAs have a strategic role in the regions by providing pest plant and animal strategies that we incorporate into our planning as well.

What is invasive animal management? As you would have seen through the various people that have come to present to the committee, invasive species are a shared problem and require shared solutions. Pest animals do not recognise boundaries, and we need to work across boundaries with our partners and landowners to achieve outcomes. Whatever we do needs to be justified, effective and humane. We need to look at the actual impacts rather than the perceived impacts. For example, just because a pest animal is in a reserve does not necessarily mean that we might intervene to manage it. What we do is based on the impacts at that place. We need to use the most effective management methods that can reduce the impacts and that are safe, specific and humane. The last point there is that we need to demonstrate achievement in terms of reduced impact. To do that, pest animal management these days is not about killing things. People love pictures of ute loads of foxes and rabbits and things like that, but that is really a by-product of actually understanding the issue and managing it appropriately.

The way in which we are starting to strategically plan our conservation outcomes across the state now, in addition to management plans and all those other legislative and policy objectives that I outlined before, is that Parks Victoria has split the state into planning units. There are 16 different broad ecosystems that we have defined into planning units for conservation plans. We developed this process in response to the Victorian Auditor-General's audit of 2010 that was critical of the way in which we were planning and some of the rigor around the way in which we were determining our priorities. Conservation planning provides us with a process to determine the assets at threat and the most appropriate and effective responses for those. We are currently working on those throughout the state but with a focus on Wilsons Prom, the Otways, the Grampians and river red gum, with some others coming along, Mallee and Wimmera included.

This is just to give you an example and run you through just really quickly as well. Over the last six years this graph represents the species we have actually treated and how many hectares we have treated them over across the parks estate. You can see that orange shows fox, which is one of our biggest investments in pest animal management, pale blue shows rabbits and light green shows goats, and they form the trio of our primary investment in invasive animal management. In 2015–16 the area treated was just over 1.2 million hectares, and previous to that, in 14–15 it was obviously a lot higher due to the implementation of a broadscale aerial shooting program for goats in Murray-Sunset, that being the first time we have done it at that scale. To deliver this amount of treatment over that many hectares we invest just over about \$3 million a year. I will now hand over to Roger to talk through some operational examples.

Mr FENWICK — Thanks, Ben. Thanks, Mark. In terms of the region, I represent eastern Victoria. A lot of dedicated staff live and work in the regions, so they are really connected to their community. That is something that I would like to stress on behalf of them as well, so they are part of the solution and the conversation.

As Ben alluded to, we have a lot of monitoring. We think about what we are doing, and we plan our monitoring and research. We work with communities. We have our own monitoring programs. We get citizen science. We have conversations with the CMAs and other groups, as Mr Tilley referred to earlier, to make sure we are hearing what is going on on the ground, and we set up significant monitoring programs. We also support research through Mark's division in terms of the wider scale ecological issues. So we are a key player in initiating that and also listening, and our staff on the ground — their knowledge as well is really important. A local ranger has a lot of information that we certainly do not ignore.

These monitoring programs are set up for a range of purposes and reasons, and we can get on to that probably a bit later with the Q and As, but fundamentally in eastern Victoria they are set up around — in the Alps, for example, they are set up around condition monitoring to actually see what the condition of the peatlands is, which are significant assets in the Alps. They are set up to test methodology. In the Alps we are running a trial operation around different methodologies to get a sense of cost-benefit analyses and the outcomes, and we also set up presence/absence monitoring — so cameras. This is just an example of a photograph of deer in a peatland up in the Alps from that monitoring program.

We then deliver. The regions are accountable to deliver stuff. Their job is to make sure that we pick up a policy direction with the resources that are available and put things on the ground. I am probably being

biased, but I think Parks Victoria has a big crack at this, and I know our regional staff are highly committed to doing this work. We have a program with the ADA and Sporting Shooters Association working in really close partnership where we run targeted operations, which was referred to earlier on this morning, I heard. They are really successful, highly professional associations and groups. Their volunteer hunters are hand-picked by those groups, so Parks Victoria work with those groups to pick them — very successful programs. If there are any issues with individual members in that group, then the associations are very quick to have a chat with them and deal with those members to make sure that the professional approach of volunteer hunters is second to none.

We also work with commercial shooters and a whole range of different methodologies. For example, up in the Alps we were testing different approaches to see which particular approaches get the best bang for buck. So we work really closely with the GMA, as I said, ADA and SSAA. Wilsons Prom national park — you may be aware we run a hog deer program, a highly successful one, in a park that many thought would be a bit difficult to run programs like this in a few years ago. Parks Victoria have stepped up and made that happen really successfully, and with our partners — —

Ms WARD — When you say ‘successfully’, do you mean the way that it was implemented, or do you mean the — I think it was 42, 43 were culled?

Mr FENWICK — There have been a number of operations now. There have been over 80 hog deer removed from the park — highly successful. It has only been three operations — so quite short. Wilsons Prom, as you know, is a very high-use park, so we targeted the area around the Tidal River, for example, which is why it was closed for a few days, to do that activity. Normally we would not close the park. This sign here is an example of where we put ‘Area closed’ signs up, and we communicate so visitors know that a hunting operation is going on in particular areas.

Ms WARD — How many deer do you think are in the park?

Mr FENWICK — We are not sure, but we know that there is in excess of 1000 hog deer. There is quite a bit of research going on in this space, as has been referred to.

The CHAIR — So what is the measure of success when you say it is successful? I think that is where the question was.

Mr FENWICK — This was a trial of a model around the actual operational delivery in and around a place like Tidal River, so to actually implement that has been talked about for a while, and we have not been able to do it. It is because of the partnership, the professional approach of all the partners and our willingness to have a go at it that actually delivered two very successful operations and also a sighting of a sambar deer, which is bad news ecologically, but also — —

The CHAIR — Around Tidal River?

Mr FENWICK — South of Tidal River. That has now given us other operations that we are working on which will not involve closing the park, so we will be continuing more. As a trial for the model it is a bit similar to but more condensed than the Alps one, but it is giving us a lot of really good information, and again our partners have learnt a lot as well. The GMA and the DEDJTR vets were there taking a lot of samples to understand the biology of the actual animals. The hunters took the meat with them, so it was a very successful coordinated project.

The CHAIR — So is that the point at this time — because it a trial — success not in controlling the deer but success in working together and showing — —

Mr FENWICK — Correct. To quantify all of this, all of Parks Victoria’s work at the moment focuses just on two key objectives. One is to protect the highest quality assets and do what we can in those spaces, and the second one is to actually help the wider community and our own park management agency understand the best methods for conducting deer and other invasive animal control programs. That is what we are working on at the moment.

Dr NORMAN — For the opportunity to ramp them up.

Mr FENWICK — Correct. So we are in a really strong position from that work. Just quickly, other examples — and as Mark said, we also deal with a whole lot of other species, so we are not just dealing with deer, but I have just focused on that for the benefit of the committee. Deer, foxes and horses are the three top ones that we spend — but we also do a lot of work on goats, marine, pigs and other aspects of the work.

Just finally, another couple of examples in terms of operation. The Mitchell River National Park has had significant work done recently, again with the ADA, sporting shooters and the Trust from Nature, where there was a lot of revegetation work going on. The deer were hammering the revegetation, and there have been over 1300 hours of volunteer work helping reduce and take over 70 sambar deer from that location to protect that work that was done but also that environment. I have spoken about Wilsons Prom and touched on the Alps.

Also, just to finish, we are working very proactively with a lot of communities in terms of that good-neighbour approach. We are sort of leading along with the local Harrietville community on a whole range of conversations about how we can support empowering local groups to deliver their own deer management programs, a little bit like the VFF were talking about — so shared programs — and we are helping from our knowledge of running operations and working with that community to provide options for them, as we have done previously with wild dog baiting, for example. Community baiting now in the Deddick area is a result of agencies working together with community and having a shared approach to particular issues. It is not just one agency or the neighbours, so I totally agree with the comments that were made previously in that space. To finish, and as Mark said, we are in a strong position to scale it up if we were asked to do so. On behalf of all of the Parks Victoria staff, that is the end of our submission.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Is it possible to get a copy of the slides, just for the transcript? Good. Thank you.

Mr RAMSAY — Thank you for your presentations, the three of you. Our reference says:

... for consideration and report no later than 30 March 2017 into the benefits of Parks Victoria and other agencies such as the Game Management Authority's use of community hunting organisations and individuals in the control of invasive animals on Crown land including but not limited to the following —

and there are three other sections to that. Your presentation showed a response to the Auditor-General's report 2010 where it indicates that Parks Victoria's strategy was somewhat short-sighted, did not provide the sort of modelling, valuations and reporting frameworks that he thought there should have been, and you have indicated you have now classified the areas differently and tried to address one of those recommendations.

Ben actually said it is not all about shooting, yet your presentation indicated to me that in fact it was all about shooting, because that was the primary method of control. Using a classic example, you have a picture here showing shooters. I have not heard a lot about other control methods. The VFF has indicated some concern about whether in fact you are committed to aerial baiting. I know there has been some trial work done, and I think the minister indicated perhaps a couple of seasonal baiting programs but nothing long term, and that was always the criticism of the Auditor-General; there are no long-term strategies for the control of invasive pests.

So I guess a question to either one of the three of you is: what are the long-term control responses to the increasing populations of invasive pests, because apart from shooting we have heard about potential trapping, maybe, and potential baiting. There is concern about the use of 1080. There is presumably another chemical that could potentially be used. I am more interested in long-term strategies.

If I may just get a response from you; we had PrimeSafe here in relation to what to do with carcasses under a professional cull model. It appears that deer, while they are called game, if you google it, are actually not recognised as game under the Victorian meat act. Therefore there is no provision to refrigerate and process

that meat for either human consumption or pet meal. I just wonder: what will it take to move the status of the deer into being able to provide a useful resource in relation to food?

Mr FENWICK — There are a couple of questions there, Mr Ramsay.

Mr RAMSAY — Three bites.

Mr FENWICK — I can start. For the benefit of the committee we focused on the deer operation. As we did allude to, though, there are a range of other pest animal activities that we are involved in. So foxes, for example, include baiting. We are certainly exploring all options. The presentation was definitely focused around deer, so that is why we focused on the shooting element of that. We can probably at a later date provide more information to the committee about all of the — —

For example, with Northern Pacific seastars you dive and you physically pick them up and put them in a bag and take them away because you cannot put toxins in — —

Dr NORMAN — Where there are early invasions.

Mr FENWICK — That is right, in the water.

Mr YOUNG — That is a form of hunting.

Mr FENWICK — Correct.

Dr NORMAN — Just not edible, unfortunately.

Mr FENWICK — We can certainly provide that sort of detail.

The CHAIR — That would be appreciated, thanks.

Dr NORMAN — You have already made that document that summarises the range of techniques — —

Mr FAHEY — The control techniques; correct.

Dr NORMAN — We can supply that to the committee.

Ms WARD — Which also has an evaluation attached to it.

Mr RAMSAY — That was going to be my question.

Ms WARD — Sorry.

Mr RAMSAY — It is a good question.

Mr FAHEY — In terms of the long-term strategies it probably relates to where you are needing to manage and for what reason and what species you need to manage. So for foxes, for example, we use a lot of broadscale 1080 baiting; trapping in areas where you cannot use baits. Certainly the preference is for broadscale baiting. That is the most effective technique we have got at the moment. Shooting occurs through some of the volunteer programs that we have got, but we do not expect that shooting can provide long-term outcomes in the management of that particular species because it is established at such a broad scale.

Mr RAMSAY — So did you do an evaluation on the bounty that was — —

Mr FAHEY — No, we do not administer the bounty, so that would be DEDJTR, I think.

Mr RAMSAY — Just from a shooting point of view, regardless of putting a value on the animal, was shooting, from the evaluation, a useful tool to use for the control of foxes?

Mr FAHEY — We do not look at the effectiveness of the bounty.

Mr RAMSAY — No, forget the bounty, but shooting generally; it was said to us in another hearing — say the bounty where you have got a focus on shooting a catchment out of foxes, that in fact what it does is encourage the breeding up again, and I guess the outcome was not as good as one would have thought. Is any of that work being done in relation to where you focus on particular areas, clean them out and then you find that they have relittered to a point where the population is back to where it was?

Mr FAHEY — What we do know about most pest animals and particularly foxes is that they have a long history of control in Victoria and that reinvasion is a big issue, so you need to have a long-term approach and use the most appropriate tools. In that case most of the time it is baiting. Shooting is used where you have got site-specific constraints where you cannot deploy the most suitable tools. It would not be the preference in most cases.

Dr NORMAN — But also for us, because our mandate is around protecting the conservation assets in those spaces, we tend to create our programs around protecting those areas from the worst impact. So in the most extreme we fence out the foxes and cats. The next level out might be an intensive ring of trapping programs or poison baiting programs to protect the most vulnerable settings. So it sort of goes in onion rings on the PV estate, and then we work as partners with other agencies as you get further afield. But it is not us that ends up testing the effectiveness of the scale statewide or across public and private land. We are a partner in the process, but we are the operational end of it.

Mr FAHEY — And you referred also to, I think, a question about PrimeSafe and the Wildlife Act?

Mr RAMSAY — Yes, I know it is probably a little bit out of your responsibilities, but an interesting point was made.

The CHAIR — Do you have a response to that?

Mr FAHEY — No, I just put a note down. I think it is probably something to ask regulators other than us.

Mr YOUNG — Thanks for coming in, guys. It was a great little presentation. I have a few quick questions. You mention in your submission that the Sustainable Hunting Action Plan is being worked on by the government. Have you got any indication of when that will be available or when it is supposed to come to fruition?

Mr FAHEY — No.

Dr NORMAN — That is not being led by us, so we are not party to the timing of that.

Mr YOUNG — But you have had input into that?

Mr FAHEY — Yes.

Mr YOUNG — Can you explain some of the input you have had into that plan?

Mr FAHEY — We have seen some preliminary drafts of the plan and provided some input in regard to our role as a land manager — so the sorts of things they are proposing and how they will impact or be useful in the context of the conservation estate.

Mr YOUNG — Just before, you mentioned the way cats are, and it certainly did not feature high on your list on your graph with how much money you spend on each species. I think you mentioned the legislative reason for the way they are treated. Can you just explain that?

Dr NORMAN — Yes. Feral cats are not treated as pests in Victoria, yet they are considered a threat to wildlife and conservation assets. The current rules say that a cat has to be taken to the local authority and tested to see if it is a domestic cat and then put down appropriately, which is a vet and a green needle thing.

The scale of cats we have on remote estate and the local authority having the authority over the cat issue — it is only French Island that lacks a local authority with only 200 people on it. We are almost two-thirds of the island in terms of estate, and that has been fantastic for reducing the impact of cats. And there has been good community buy-in where they have all been voluntarily desexing their cats. That is what has raised the profile of the cat issue.

I think there is work to be done about reclassifying cat categories so we are equipped again to play in that space without this, 'Let's drive the one cat to the local council, get it put down by the local vet and then let's go back to the next cat'. The scale of it is much, much larger as an issue.

Mr YOUNG — That seems rather confusing because a shooter can shoot a cat; that is not an issue. If you are on your property and you come across a cat, you can shoot it.

Dr NORMAN — You are allowed to control a domestic animal coming onto your property. Do you know the regs, Roger, or not?

Mr FENWICK — It is complex. Basically, yes, if it is on your private property and not on public land. But we are more restricted.

Mr YOUNG — And you are public land. That is what I am saying. Arguably if someone else's cat comes onto your land — I will call it your land for these purposes — you should be allowed to control it. Does that mean you do not do any control of feral cats?

Dr NORMAN — With the resources we have got we spend it on other introduced species, and so the only active cat program has been on French Island.

Mr FAHEY — That is right, yes, at the moment.

Dr NORMAN — Is there a little bit of work in the Grampians, the smoky mouse, heath mouse stuff up there or not?

Mr FAHEY — Yes, there are small projects from time to time, but because we do not have access to the best possible tools or the most effective and cost-efficient tools to do the job, it is not a very cost-effective way to manage cats.

Dr NORMAN — There is also a bait very close to release that is called Curiosity, which is a fantastic name for a cat bait. That could really change the whole arrangement, because they can get deployment systems where a cat will come and try and bite something, and it shoots the poison into the throat, so there are all sorts of opportunities there.

Mr YOUNG — Thanks for that. Before you were talking about public land and why they were purchased, and basically why we have them is for their environmental and cultural values. State game reserves are a type of public land that we have. They were purchased in the 1950s, which is when it all started, mainly for the reasons of cultural value and hunting. Yet as I understand it, some of the rules and regulations around state game reserves actually stop you from hunting some pests and feral animals on them. These are pieces of land that are specifically set aside for hunting, and during game seasons you can hunt those types of game on them, but you cannot hunt other pests. Can you provide an insight into why that might be and what the implications are?

Dr NORMAN — Again, the categorisation of the introduced species involved is not a responsibility of Parks Victoria. We are the operational end; we are not at the deciding which animals get classified end, but we are happy to be part of that conversation and support that conversation.

Mr YOUNG — So in regard to, say, cats, for example, again on state game reserves — —

Dr NORMAN — That is going to be DEDJTR and DELWP, conversations around the classification of those species. That is correct, Ben, isn't it?

Mr FAHEY — Yes. As far as I am aware, the state game reserves, as a classification of wildlife reserve, only allow for the hunting of wildlife at the moment, not pest animal species. Any change to that would be a matter for the department.

Dr NORMAN — And deer are considered wildlife for the sake of those game reserves, or not?

Mr FAHEY — I think there are a couple of reserves where deer are allowed to be hunted, but not — —

Mr YOUNG — The same goes for national parks. You get examples where you are allowed into some areas of national park to hunt deer, but if you come across a dog or a cat or something, you are actually not allowed to shoot it. That seems like really — —

Mr FENWICK — I can add one point to that. The hunting opportunity across Victoria is quite significant in a worldwide sense, which is great, and all the agencies play a part in that, as do Parks Victoria. But when you shift from a recreational activity to a control activity, our job as land manager, if the question came to us, is we balance — we are the classic Librans; our job is to balance — a whole range of community use expectations, recreational use expectations and, as Mark said, quite importantly, around the ecological expectations.

So it is not as simple as just allowing a recreational activity to take control of activities. While I can understand the logic in that in certain circumstances; as an agency we are cautious about that approach. As you know, I think in the Alpine National Park there is now an increased area for the purposes of recreational hunting, so we are acutely aware of providing those types of opportunities with government, but it is not the answer for a control activity conversation. It might be part of it, but it is not the whole answer.

Mr YOUNG — Thanks. On page 11 of your submission there is a handy little graph that I have seen before — I would imagine most of the committee has — in terms of being able to actually eradicate a pest. To me, reading this, you basically get to a stage where it is inevitable that it is here forever; you are not going to eradicate it. Where would deer fit into this graph?

Mr FAHEY — Deer would definitely establish right up in the big green end.

Mr YOUNG — Right. So with the big green end we get to a point where we know it is here forever. How does that fit in with what you were saying before about broadscale management, because if it is something we have to accept — that they are going to be here forever — it is very hard to implement broadscale management, especially broadscale management that you are eventually working towards eradication of. How do we sort of work that with deer?

Mr FENWICK — I can start. In the alps, if we use the alps, it is around asset protection. On that curve it talks about asset protection. There are other ecological systems in the alps that are important as well, but the peatlands are significant for a whole range of reasons, so we target our operations around those areas. That was the onion ring conversation that Mark was having. Then as that onion ring conversation happens it starts to bring in other agencies and organisations, again depending on what you want to achieve. If the whole community wanted to eradicate deer from Victoria, then that would be a conversation that we would have — —

Dr NORMAN — Whole of government.

Mr FENWICK — Whole-of-government conversation, sorry; that would be a conversation that we would have. At the moment at Parks Victoria our accountability is to focus on the impact on those ecological processes, and that is what we — —

Dr NORMAN — And they can be quite dramatic. It could be that suppression of deer around the replanting of 300 000 trees in an area gets them to a stage where they can survive on their own, and then you manage to transform the habitat for your other wildlife or — —

Mr YOUNG — So it is a case of prioritising assets.

Mr FENWICK — So you move on the curve. That curve is great; the biosecurity curve is a great tool for a lot of management agencies. The idea of it is you can move around; you move around that curve depending on the circumstances. But it helps to have the conversation to understand what you are trying to achieve. So that is a good point.

Mr YOUNG — So in terms of hunting, it has been suggested by quite a few people that hunting will never be a tool that is able to eradicate deer, just by the sheer nature of how it is done, and in many cases, we have been told, it has negative effects by just dispersing or moving populations of deer from one place to another. But when we get into an asset protection model, arguably hunting would be one of the best methods because you can put it around that asset and disperse the deer away from that asset, which is kind of the idea of what we are trying to do. Would that be a fair assertion?

Mr FENWICK — And we are open to having those conversations, as you know. That is why some of the trials that we are implementing at the moment are looking at and they are monitoring — the alps, for example, is set up over a three-year trial to test it. So we have got them set up in sites where there is no hunting, we have sites where there is hunting, we have sites where there is no hunting but we are doing operations, and so on. We are trying to test all this, so our trial is designed to help the wider whole-of-government conversation in this space.

Dr NORMAN — And the toolbox is enormous. What they are considering with the release of the European carp virus will probably knock out every European carp in Victoria over probably a year. So there could be things that come in for deer that help further down the track. Regionally we are using mixes of baits for feral horses. Mustering and rehoming through to other options are being considered. It is about constantly trying to find the best fit, and we start with our most precious and try and work the pressures back on those, or we hit the early invaders and knock them out as quickly as we can before they cause trouble.

Mr FAHEY — It is probably worth adding, with recreational hunting, as I think Rog touched on before, it is really important to define whether we are expecting recreational hunting to deliver pest control outcomes or animal outcomes or whether we are providing a recreational hunting opportunity. That defines how we implement that sort of stuff on the ground and is certainly how we define it in responses here. With the recreational hunting angle it is important to recognise that although it exists throughout the Parks estate, there are lots of areas that are available to hunting, and in the state forests as well. What we really do not have a good handle on is whether it contributes a meaningful outcome. We know that deer hunters remove a lot of deer — we have all seen the stats on that — but we have not got any evidence behind that that compares that against, say, environmental impact protection or reduction of environmental attacks as a result of that. I think that would be a good area to invest in.

The CHAIR — And that is the purpose of the trials, or not? That is just more about the cooperation?

Mr FENWICK — No, really our trials are focused on what we have talked about, what we are accountable for managing, but we are certainly open to supporting the conversation around wider research into recreational hunting impacts in terms of ecological processes. But as we are trying to be clear here: it is not a Parks Victoria accountability. We are the manager of the park and not the policy setting. But we are certainly open to being involved in those conversations.

Mr TILLEY — Just a couple of quick ones. Previous witnesses, the Vertebrate Pest Management Association, indicated to this committee that there was little consultation with professional pest managers in relation to the trials of community hunters. In developing the trials — this is straight out of the book, all right? — did Parks consult with professional pest managers to investigate appropriate approaches to trial or to establish evaluation criteria?

Mr FENWICK — In the alps we did, because we are — —

The CHAIR — The Dandenongs they were talking about. They displaced — contractors, yes.

Mr FENWICK — Look, I can only answer for my patch. I am not sure about the other guys, but I know in the alps we certainly have and will continue to, and as our presentation demonstrated we are looking at all options. That is all I can say.

Mr TILLEY — There was evidence during your presentation there that the ADA and SSAA had been consulted with. Did it include any Field & Game, because part of their charter is — —

Mr FENWICK — Yes. In the east, for example, not so much in deer, but we have got a strong relationship with Field & Game around Jack Smith Lake. We have actually done fox shooting programs there, fox drives. So Parks Victoria committed to working with partners. There are a lot of people interested in these issues, so our job is to work with them and understand, and we have to ultimately make cost-benefit and management decisions based on the best outcome for all Victorians. So we juggle.

Dr NORMAN — We have extensive research partner programs, so there have been 350 projects over the last five years; and our permit system has 2500 researchers permitted to try and get us the best information out there. So we have got very extensive networks. We deal with the centre for invasive species science in Canberra. We are trying to get the best information all the time. We are trying to be as collaborative and open and networked as we can.

Mr TILLEY — I just have a couple of more quick ones.

The CHAIR — Can I just ask on that, though, just so we can understand: do you get other people's research? I am just trying to understand it. You said that other people do the research.

Mr FENWICK — No, no. We carry out our own monitoring and research programs. We really value-add the funding we have to also have partnerships with nine universities and a range of other research bodies so that actually we might contribute \$20 000 towards a program that raises half a million.

The CHAIR — But do you evaluate the effectiveness of controlling invasive animals?

Mr FENWICK — Yes. So then in my directorate we have 18 staff covering management effectiveness, the science, the contributions towards the planning and policy, and the contributions towards the conservation action plans. So that team is evaluating what is going on, and it worked very effectively in the alps on the impact of feral horses in alpine areas, exclusion plots and all those sorts of things. There is a lot of our involvement in what is happening on our estate, particularly conservation efforts.

Mr TILLEY — So those areas have been identified as game and educating recreational shooters. Do you have a view about this targeting, whether you are targeting a hind over a stag, or what impact that may have?

Mr FENWICK — We have been in conversations with GMA, ADA and Sporting Shooters on that, so what you are talking about is incentivised sorts of programs.

Dr NORMAN — No, it has got to be about the reproductive impact. If you choose a female, it takes out more than — —

Mr TILLEY — Well, both — incentivising, yes.

Mr FENWICK — So in terms of a policy view at Parks Victoria, we have not got a set view yet, but we are certainly having those conversations and we will continue to.

Mr FAHEY — The draft greater alps national management plan does propose that we might try something like that, but again, us not being the regulators, if you are going to regulate a harvest like that, then it involves the GMA being on board doing that.

Mr TILLEY — And on a final note, on a little bit of a different subject, I notice a stag wallowing in those peatlands, as you discussed. Have you got any photos of any cattle doing the same thing?

Mr FENWICK — Not recently, no.

Mr TILLEY — Point taken, but have you got any evidence or proof of cattle ever wallowing?

Mr FENWICK — I cannot answer that. I know there was significant research done into that matter, so I am sure there is.

Mr TILLEY — Yes, right.

Mr FENWICK — But certainly we do for horses and other species, so it is not just about deer, but yes — —

Mr TILLEY — The cattle do not wallow, do they?

Mr FENWICK — On my understanding, I have a beef farm personally and they do not, but they do wander down my gullies if I let them get in the fence and they will trash that. Anyway, that is a personal thing.

The CHAIR — Thank you for coming in today. Just in terms of our deliberations, we may ask you to come back.

Mr FENWICK — We are very happy to come back. Thank you for the opportunity.

Witnesses withdrew.