

ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land

Bright — 19 October 2016

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Mr Steven Tucker, project officer, environment, Alpine Shire Council.

The CHAIR — We will now recommence the hearings for today. I thank Mr Steven Tucker for coming to give evidence today. Just a few formalities: first of all, the public hearings are being recorded. You will receive a copy of the transcript to check for accuracy prior to its becoming publicly available. Also, anything you say today is protected by parliamentary privilege, in accordance with the parliamentary committees legislation. However, that same parliamentary privilege may not apply for things said outside the public hearings.

With that, I will hand over to you. If you could perhaps, Steve, just give us a little bit of background about yourself and your position. Then you can talk to us for 5 or 10 minutes and that will then give us lots of time for questions.

Visual presentation.

Mr TUCKER — Thank you for inviting me. My name is Steven Tucker. I am the environment officer here at Alpine Shire Council. I have been here for about 18 months. Previous to that, I was a ranger with the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service across a few different areas of the state for about nine years.

I suppose in brief any programs to remove invasive animals on Crown land should not impact on the many positive opportunities that Alpine shire offers for its residents and visitors — that is, to engage in a life lived outside. Alpine shire is comprised of approximately 98 per cent public land. The shire is a drawcard for thousands of visitors who undertake annual active and passive recreational pursuits. Tourism is our key economy and attracts over 1 million annual visitors.

The control of deer is a key management problem impacting both residents and tourists alike. Vehicle strike on major roads such as the Great Alpine Road in the cooler months is an ever-increasing problem, as is the pressure that deer place on fencing integrity and the competition for pasture. This year alone a local smash repair business is reporting a marked increase in the number of vehicles presenting following deer strike. Largely local vehicles, roughly 50 per cent, have sustained damage to warrant them being written off. Components of my information are drawn from my previous exposure to the supplementary pest control program held on the national parks estate in New South Wales. Risk management would be a key for any activity that Victoria chooses to trial or implement. The choice of locations where volunteer hunting can be safely undertaken along with the proper means of ensuring legitimate park users are excluded from any operational area are paramount to the safe implementation of any such program.

The trial in New South Wales, which has been underway for about three years, is utilising reserves that have a low visitor demand as well as having existing pest control programs in place that will benefit from supplementary hunting. When the New South Wales operations are underway, national parks staff are positioned at all possible legitimate entry points into the reserve. Barricades and signage are also in place at other points, warning potential visitors that the area is closed for pest control operations.

As mentioned earlier, 98 per cent of the shire is Crown or public-owned land, of which the alps and the foothills are, I suppose, large drawcards for visitors. With the changing seasons now, deer are being observed above the tree line, above the 1600-metre level, all the way down to the valley floor. With deer now having a wide range, this may bring any potential programs into conflict with existing park users without delineation of the operational and visitor-use zones.

In terms of the operation of any such program, shooting is best undertaken when part of an integrated approach to vertebrate pest management. The problem with deer is that there are not many other options available. There are a few in trial, but it is still best done with a firearm.

Deer are largely solitary or only form fairly small groups. This will potentially make it more time-consuming to achieve the desired number of target animals removed through any program. The use of supplements or lures could be incorporated into programs planned for Victoria. Depending on the season, deer have responded well to certain mineral salt blocks in New South Wales trials. This can draw the animals into more advantageous areas for shooting — better clear zones, lines of sight and so forth. But the

issue with lures is that they may also entice non-target animals such as native animals, other problem animals or highly sensitive animals such as brumbies.

To improve the success rate of the New South Wales program various equipment has been brought in specifically for the trial, such as approved spotlights along with thermal imaging scopes, which are being used in New South Wales this year. The New South Wales program includes monitoring before and following controlled hunting. This undertakes faecal pellet counts of the pest animal along with surveillance camera footage, which is also aligned with any ecological impacts attributable to the program, such as the improved recruitment of threatened plant species or the increased number of, say, active malleefowl mounds.

One of the key components of any, I suppose, hunting trial is compliance with the program. The supervision of any such program, if it was to be done in Victoria, I would assume would be under Parks Victoria and also DELWP along with the Game Management Authority. Their compliance with the program is paramount as well. With any hunting operation the trophy animal is often viewed as the target animal, particularly when chasing deer. But all deer need to be viewed as the target animal, not just the mature males with large sets of antlers. When the opportunity arises it may be better to initially target the younger, less wary animals rather than the older, hardened animals.

To achieve a win-win for all participants and for the environment and volunteer hunters, there should exist the opportunity for volunteer participants to take a trophy and meat where suitable. But this should not be done where there is any likelihood of negatively impacting the success of the individual operation. The use of social media in the New South Wales trial is largely discouraged. Currently the coordinators of the program there request that volunteer hunters do not post any such pursuits online, but if they do they are to refrain from capturing the image of any identifiable logos or brands. In the Victorian case I would be assuming that this would include government logos for DELWP, Parks Victoria or the like.

This is an image taken from Instagram for a hashtag search page for one of the townships in the shire. This is something that we cannot control. Anyone can set up an Instagram account. We have noticed a lot of people posting hunting images on what some people may view as a fairly benign site. Some of these images have in the past shown blood and the bullets that have been retrieved from the shot animal. There may be some members of the community who find that offensive, particularly potential visitors to the area. You would hate to think they, potential visitors, are throwing all their eggs in the one basket by looking at Instagram, but social media is just so accessible now.

In the New South Wales trials specific staff have been employed to oversee the program. This should be considered in any Victorian trial because it is fairly labour-intensive and you would not like to draw away from your existing workforce.

Basically, in summing up, hunting is a popular pastime in the Alpine shire. It does create money as well and does draw hunters in, but we support any endeavours that target the increasing number of deer as long as the safety of other park users, voluntary hunters, Crown land neighbours and any agencies administering the program is made paramount. Thank you. Are there any questions?

The CHAIR — I am sure we will have lots of questions. Could I just ask: coming from the council, what do you see as the role that council does play, should play or is playing within the area of controlling invasive animals?

Mr TUCKER — We have noticed a lot of deer damage, particularly in the township itself, such as in plantings we are putting in out at Wandiligong. We have been getting lots of comments from residents of Harrietville about the increasing number of deer. It is something that we are very conscious of ourselves driving around at night time, particularly on the road between Harrietville and Bright. That is a known hotspot for deer strike.

Mr McCURDY — ‘Sambar strait’ they call it, do they not?

Mr TUCKER — Yes, I have heard that. They are just everywhere at the moment. Even talking to the local smash repair business the other day, they see a link there as well. Where there are areas of HVP plantation that have recently been cleared out at Eurobin, out there, they have noticed a lot more deer activity in the freshly cleared areas.

The CHAIR — One of the issues is the perception or reality of community safety. There is already hunting by recreational hunters in state parks, so why would this be seen any differently in terms of concern about other tourists or visitors or users of the park? At the moment they are just trials; they are small and very focused and there is a lot of oversight. If you are going to roll this out, it will be a much larger thing. I know you are saying you need specific people from Parks Victoria to do it, but in terms of overall compliance and regulation, do you think we can do it? What sorts of changes, whether it is legislation or other changes, would you need? That was two questions, and they were long. Hopefully you have remembered the first one.

Mr TUCKER — I am thinking back a few years. When I was interstate I remember seeing an article on *Landline* about a similar trial that was conducted up in the north-west of the state, around Hattah-Kulkyne National Park. There are aspects of that program that are being applied in New South Wales. Some of the areas in New South Wales are more successful than others, because they are more open and the terrain is flatter, and also it is largely done on foot or from the vehicle. There are some areas there where there are a lot more pest animals than in other areas.

The trial in New South Wales is vastly different from what was initially proposed. They were looking at a lot more reserves, but they have brought it back now to about I think 9 or 10 reserves in New South Wales. The closest to here is Woomargama National Park in the upper reaches of Lake Hume. Where the terrain is suitable and where it is safe to conduct an operation in Victoria, I think it could be done. The New South Wales program prides itself on the risk assessment that it performs. There are lots of repeat volunteer hunters who come back year after year. I should not say ‘year after year’, but operation after operation. They see the benefit in what they are doing. It has, I suppose, really been taken on board by sectors of the Sporting Shooters Association of New South Wales.

The CHAIR — Just quickly, in terms of community perception, have you got any ideas or suggestions about how it may be that we can make recommendations to government, whether it is to educate or raise awareness within the community if there are going to be recreational hunters in national parks? We had someone give evidence from Wilsons Promontory, and I think once it had been explained and there had been some consultation, it was fine. But I just remember one comment he made was that, when he did not know, he walked down the street and all of a sudden this bus pulls up and all these people in camouflage jumped out, and he goes, ‘What the hell is this all about?’. So in terms of local government, for which raising awareness and education is a big part, how could we do that?

Mr TUCKER — That is one of your keys, I think. Community consultation and tapping into existing communication networks that we have, I think, is paramount here. Coming from an area in New South Wales where our main pest animals were feral goats and feral pigs, deer cause a lot more issues down here. Just the sheer numbers of them and where they congregate. They are on the side of the road. You often hit them with a vehicle, and they are big; they will take a car off the road. That is something that really strikes me as important down here, particularly when they are now everywhere. One of the things that I noticed was that you can buy specific tree guards down here for deer — tree guards this high — whereas I have not seen those before. Our Landcare groups are noticing a big impact in revegetation works that they have been doing, particularly around Harrierville and Frosty Corner and so forth — there is lots of deer damage there.

Mr McCURDY — Steven, just following on from that, as a local council do you have any other strategies in place? A lot of the complaints I hear from people at Harrierville — and there were even a couple of ladies in the audience this morning who lived just on the edge of town — are about the destruction and the damage that is being done close to town. Obviously shooters cannot help in that situation. Shooters can reduce the numbers out of town, but if we continue to have deer in Harrierville and on the edge of town leaving destruction, apart from the tree guards you were talking about, does the

council or your experience in New South Wales have any other recommendations or examples that we can use to try to reduce numbers or even remove them, dispatch them, from the local communities and get them further up in the bush?

Mr TUCKER — Yes, I suppose so. I am not sure whether they have been trialled or not, but there are other things you can apply to the foliage of certain plants. Certain branded things, like Sen-Tree, which is a material that is either sprayed or somehow applied to the foliage with a grit in it. It actually makes them — —

Mr McCURDY — We heard about that earlier this morning. I was not actually clear on what that was.

Mr TUCKER — Yes, Sen-Tree. We have actually — —

The CHAIR — That is the stuff made out of egg and something?

Mr TUCKER — Yes, it has got like a — —

Mr McCURDY — It has got a PV, I am going to say, glue as well.

Mr TUCKER — Yes, and it has got like a silica compound in there, which I suppose is just like chewing on something, biting into a sandwich, with a bit of grit in there. I have actually in a previous role suggested that to ladies who are having issues with kangaroos browsing. It is marketed for golf courses and large turfed areas and so forth. That is an option. I am not sure whether it has been taken up here or not. It is an option worth trying anyway. I know it is fairly cost prohibitive. It is pretty expensive. At Alpine Shire Council I do not think we would have the capacity to undertake any large-scale deer drives or anything like that to get them out from the edge of town.

Mr McCURDY — Certainly on the back of 98 per cent of public land. I think people, certainly metropolitan Melbourne people, do not understand that when 98 per cent of your boundary is on public land it is a big issue. It is something you cannot handle on your own as a local council.

Mr TUCKER — No.

Mr TILLEY — Steven, thanks for your contribution today. I appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedule. You earlier mentioned in your contribution the number of vehicle crashes and the number of local businesses and smash repairers. Have you got any figures around that at all?

Mr TUCKER — I could not get any firm figures, but it was either one vehicle a week was presenting in Bright, particularly during the ski season in winter — there is a lot more traffic here then. One vehicle a week was presenting to just one smash repair business in Bright on average.

Mr TILLEY — Is the council also aware that on the GAR, passenger bus services have given a directive to their drivers to only drive at a maximum speed of 80 kilometres an hour between Bright and Harrietville?

Mr TUCKER — I was not aware of that, no.

Mr TILLEY — I want to change the conversation a little bit in relation to local government and pest and weed management. In particular are you familiar with the submission from the Peri Urban Group of Rural Councils?

Mr TUCKER — No, I am not, sorry.

Mr TILLEY — Okay. In general terms, whether your position has anything to do with it, are you aware of anything about additional responsibilities that may have been put upon local government in relation to the costs of dealing with pest and weed management? Has anything been further placed upon council in recent years?

Mr TUCKER — I am not aware of any large, major changes. I know that we have got limited resources. In my capacity I am also on three days a week emergency management, two days a week environmental, so two days of the week I am on roadside weeds, land care and tree planting. We try to jump on board cooperative programs wherever we can. Where we can get more bang for our buck, we will jump on. I suppose we are knowledgeable of our responsibilities under the Catchment and Land Protection Act. We have got a roadside weed plan and a list of the roads that we control. We have got specific programs for broom, and our large major weed is blackberry, which is everywhere.

Mr TILLEY — When you say ‘hop on’ with other agencies, whether it be the CMA, Landcare, you have strong partnerships in the shire?

Mr TUCKER — Yes, we have got strong partnerships with NECMA, DELWP, and we are a keen supporter of the green army that is currently underway in the shire.

Mr TILLEY — That is good to hear. Are you aware of any additional funding that may or may not have come from state or commonwealth governments to support you in your pest and weed management over recent years?

Mr TUCKER — Yes, over recent years. I know that we receive a fixed amount of roughly \$19 000 annually from DELWP for roadside weed control, and that goes into our existing program that we also fund as well.

Mr TILLEY — So how many kilometres of road would you have?

Mr TUCKER — I think, of the roadsides we control, based on past control programs, we have got what might be 120 kilometres of roadside that we actively control. But total numbers I would not be able to provide, sorry.

Mr TILLEY — Okay. To change the subject, in your contribution there, having a look at Instagram — I was just having a flick through — apart from only seeing one picture that depicted any sort of deer-related experience in Mount Beauty — —

Mr TUCKER — I suppose this picture here was recently taken. I was made aware of the issue in the last six months. I am not a user of Instagram myself, but — —

Mr TILLEY — What I am getting at is there is a significant number of pictures depicting whether they are native or European bees; there is a significant number of pictures of bees in the area. What interests me is that as part of the inquiry we have recently heard about the experience of the European wasp and the effect that it may or may not be having on biodiversity. Is that part of your portfolio? Are you experiencing any significant rises in numbers of European wasps in the shire that are presenting a problem for biodiversity?

Mr TUCKER — Not in terms of biodiversity. It is more about problems with tourists and residents. My understanding is that it is a seasonal problem too. After these floods it will be interesting to see what it is going to do to a lot of the nests in the creek lines and so forth and the riverbanks, where they nest a lot of the time. We have got a budget for European wasp nest destruction, particularly on council estate, and we will go there and remove them when we are notified.

Mr TILLEY — So indicatively what sort of budget is set aside for that sort of control?

Mr TUCKER — I would not be able to say. It is in another department.

Mr YOUNG — Thanks, Steven, for coming in and giving us your time. I am also going to touch on this and the social media aspect of this sort of stuff getting out, as well as the parallel with your submission pointing out that you are 98 per cent public land and that tourism is obviously a major part of what you do. Has the council thought of putting the two together and trying to use this sort of stuff as a tool to bring more people in for tourism? Hunting is a huge economic driver, and people spend a lot of money when

they visit places like this to hunt. If we couple that with the effect that hunters could have on pest mitigation, has the council put any thought into trying to advertise the place as being a great spot to come and hunt and do both things: drive tourism and remove pests?

Mr TUCKER — No, we have not actively pursued that line of, I suppose, marketing. No, it is not something that I am aware that we have done, and I cannot comment if we are going to do it in the future. I would have to raise that with our economic development team.

Mr YOUNG — But it has never come up, it has never been discussed? Is there any history of it?

Mr TUCKER — Not that I am aware of, no.

Mr YOUNG — Perhaps that has just sparked a conversation about it, which would be good.

Mr TUCKER — Yes.

Mr YOUNG — You talked about people being possibly offended by those images. Do you think that maybe it is because there is a bit of unfamiliarity?

Mr TUCKER — Yes, I think that would be the case. There might be a lot of people that this is not part of their everyday lifestyle. There are probably a lot of people out there who are not familiar with the whole paddock-to-plate concept, so it might be a bit confronting for them, so that could very well be the case, yes.

Mr YOUNG — And potentially exposing them to more of that sort of stuff and the realisation that, yes, as you said, paddock to plate — ‘This is where food comes from’ — and the other reality that there is a pest, they are causing problems and this is a part of the solution, that familiarisation would start to alleviate that?

Mr TUCKER — Yes, I think so, but I think we also need to be aware that ultimately deer are not classified as a pest animal. That is probably another thing that needs to be raised in this whole inquiry. While it is not a declared pest animal, I suppose there are limits that apply, are there not? If it is seen as a pest animal, it is potentially no holds barred, but while there is a licensing system in place and permits and so forth, places where you can and cannot and closed seasons, that is going to therefore limit the amount of animals that can be taken out of the system.

Mr YOUNG — Since you brought it up, that is actually not something that is in your submission.

Mr TUCKER — No, it is not.

Mr YOUNG — Can you just explain for us some of the limits that there are on deer by virtue of the fact they are game?

Mr TUCKER — I cannot. I am not in that line.

Mr YOUNG — We have heard quite a bit of evidence on this. It is something that has come up, and literally a lot. Through the discussions it has been very difficult to determine how deer are protected, and ‘protected’ is the word that is used a lot, whereas most of the regulations and laws around deer have been removed so that there are no inhibitors to people controlling them and there are no closed seasons. There is nothing like that that would stop people from hunting deer or removing them.

Mr TUCKER — I suppose there are certain techniques that can only be allowed in certain situations. What about spotlighting?

Mr YOUNG — Well, you cannot spotlight them on private property.

Mr TUCKER — On private property, yes.

Mr YOUNG — So there is no difference in that sense than other pests.

Mr TUCKER — I cannot comment on that.

Mr RAMSAY — Just one question: going back to the funding issue that Bill and Tim talked about, you indicated \$19 000, I think, for roadside weed control.

Mr TUCKER — Yes.

Mr RAMSAY — It was reported in the *Weekly Times* today that the state government is only providing the funds for biosecurity for one year in its budget, so for councils to be able to forward plan in relation to expenditure on pests and weeds — and there is only a commitment for one year in relation to funding — have you had some discussion with the government in relation to a longer term commitment?

Mr TUCKER — That is the first I have heard about it. We have currently got \$60 000 in total for our roadside pest control program, so a loss of \$19 000 is going to be a huge hit.

Mr RAMSAY — You talked about the damage caused by deer, particularly out in your areas of management — the local parks and trees et cetera. Is there any support funding from the government in relation to dealing with the impact of that?

Mr TUCKER — No.

Mr RAMSAY — Has there been a request for funding?

Mr TUCKER — Not that I am aware of.

The CHAIR — I could ask what are the rates spent on, I suppose. I will not though.

Mr RAMSAY — You have capped them.

Mr McCURDY — Wages usually.

Mr TILLEY — It might be a bit out of your portfolio, but PrimeSafe principally would be responsible for putting regulations in, but when it comes to human consumption, and local government being the frequent inspectors for that, would the shire see it as a way — I mean, in Myrtleford — for game meat to be available through some of the wonderful foods you can make from game and things like that? Would there be a burden on anything like that? What do you call it in local government — a food inspector?

Mr TUCKER — Environmental health officer.

Mr TILLEY — That is it. Is that you?

Mr TUCKER — No, it is not me. I suppose if there was a portable facility set up, I would not see a problem in council being involved. I know that where I came from in New South Wales, before the export crash that affected Russia, New South Wales had, I suppose, an active kangaroo harvesting program. They were called mobile chillers. There were chillers set up everywhere, from Dubbo — —

Mr TILLEY — That is what I want to hear; keep going on that stuff.

Mr TUCKER — Lots of chillers were set up, and they were also for feral animals — pigs as well — so there are lots of game meat suppliers out there.

Mr TILLEY — Earlier you mentioned that you spent nine years in New South Wales working with the statutory bodies there, so obviously wanting to bring some of those good experiences into Victoria. Are there some other things that might be missing in the area here that governments need to consider?

Mr TUCKER — I suppose there needs to be a market for it, and there needs to be processors. There was a privately run emu farm that bordered one of the reserves that I was responsible for. They actually had to send all their live animals down to Myrtleford for processing. That was the closest facility that could process emus. It is one of the key things, I think; you have got to have the processors nearby in a market.

The New South Wales Office of Environment and Heritage used to, and still does, licence the commercial and non-commercial shooting of kangaroos in New South Wales.

Mr TILLEY — And on a final note, with your work with New South Wales national parks, we have all kinds of bush user groups, bushwalkers and things like that, and certainly around this area where you register your intent and your estimated times — you put in your time of departure and your estimated time of return — would you see any benefit there with those other user groups if recreational shooters were to do similar?

Mr TUCKER — I think we are looking at different things. The terrain and the topography here is suited to back country activities. The examples in New South Wales largely targeted reserves that had low visitation. It was earmarked around where there were programs already in place. A lot of those reserves also did helicopter shooting. They were done once or twice a year, based on budget. These programs were done I suppose to fill in the gaps and actually target areas that had not been flown or were outside the scope of past programs.

Mr TILLEY — So those user groups would be significantly segregated from one another, so your shooters would be significantly — —

Mr TUCKER — Yes. Lots of resources went into the New South Wales program. Lots of resources went into the initial programs in each reserve. I think all of the staff who were employed in the program across the state would converge on that one reserve for that weekend, and then they would travel around to all of their colleagues' reserves to, one, learn about the reserve, and two, undertake the control on the day. The process has since been refined. Some reserves have had four or five shoots done now. I think it is a well-oiled machine there now. They have been funded for a three or four-year trial. I think they are about halfway through now. Some reserves have taken out a huge amount of animals, particularly pigs and goats the further west you go. Other reserves — smaller numbers.

The CHAIR — Can I just ask one quick question on that? What is their way of evaluating, because I am assuming after the trial they will do some evaluation, and one of the things we are hearing is: how do you evaluate? Do you do it based on how many are killed or how many are still left?

Mr TUCKER — To evaluate the success of the program — I was a ranger in national parks, so we had in our region one reserve that was in the program — Goonoo National Park, just north of Dubbo. That was in the area that I worked. The programs in place in New South Wales came on board where there were existing pest control programs in place. Supplementary pest control was not seen as a standalone program, and it was only happening in reserves where that pest animal was seen as a key threat to either a threatened plant community or other threatened animals there — for example, in Goonoo the key asset of Goonoo was malleefowl. Malleefowl in Dubbo, that was the eastern edge of their range, so the key threats there were foxes and goats. So the primary target was fox and the secondary target was goat. With that, the most suitable firearm was matched for the job, so if you were to come across larger pest animals, they were not part of the program. It is very regimented.

The CHAIR — So the evaluation would be how many malleefowl are left.

Mr TUCKER — Yes, like how many active malleefowl mounds. There were lots of surveillance cameras in place, I suppose targeting illegal activity, but also animal movements. Also they were conducting faecal pellet counts — the amount of goat poo per square metre, both pre and post. There is probably more monitoring that goes into those programs than actually weekend operation.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much; thanks for your time today.

Witness withdrew.