

ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land

Melbourne — 10 October 2016

Members

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Mr David McNabb, general manager, Field & Game Australia.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Mr McNabb, for coming in to present to the public hearing today. This is an inquiry by the parliamentary Environment, Natural Resources and Regional Development Committee into the control of invasive animals. Just before we start, we will go through some of the formalities. I am Bronwyn Halfpenny. I am the Chair of this committee and also the member for Thomastown district.

I need to let you know that the proceedings today are being recorded, and you will get a copy of the transcript once the proof is available so you can check it for accuracy before it becomes public. Also, whatever you say at the hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, that is not necessarily the case once outside the hearing, where you may not be covered by parliamentary privilege. Those are the legalities.

Perhaps we could get started with just a bit of an introduction about yourself, your title and a bit of background.

Mr McNABB — I am David McNabb. I am the general manager for Field & Game Australia. We are a national organisation that runs across every state and territory, which is quite a privilege. We have just under 20 000 members. I have a bit of a background around what we do and our particular interest in this inquiry which I can run through, if that is suitable.

The CHAIR — Yes, that is fine. I think you probably would have been told you can make maybe a 5 to 10-minute presentation, and then that gives us lots of time to ask you questions.

Mr McNABB — A bit of value added. Thank you, I appreciate that.

I will outline our particular interest in this inquiry. We are not directly involved by what we do and our history with deer population control in national parks specifically. Many of our members are involved with cross-membership, particularly with our colleagues who we work very closely with, the Australian Deer Association. We recognise the ADA as the subject matter experts in those particular components of the terms of reference of this inquiry. Our assessment of the issues leads us to endorse their submission, and it falls in with the principles we have.

Our expertise and our history lie particularly with the state game reserves, so a broader part of the public estate. The wetland habitat conservation and water fowl, that is our history and our genesis. Today, these public assets are managed by a web of bureaucracy, with discrete management for land, water, wildlife and by the nature of what we do, the management of firearms and their use on those state game reserves particularly.

We have a history in Field & Game Australia of commitment to conservation and very active and practical conservation. We formed in 1958 in response to reports that the Pacific black duck could be extinct in as little as 10 years due to loss of habitat. I was intrigued to see a little bit of the previous witness, having been in New Zealand this year and seen what has happened with the black duck — their grey duck — because of habitat and some issues. This tells us that these things are not theory, they could very well happen. They have got a real issue in New Zealand with their grey duck — our black duck.

The private-public partnership between conservationists, hunters and the government of the time created a game licensing system and arguably that was to do the things the government should have been doing at the time anyway. With the funds from those licences purchased by hunters, we delivered the revenue that allowed government to fund the acquisition of these threatened wetlands that were being drained and used for other purposes. It should be noted that the hunters themselves lobbied to have licensing implemented. They place a high value on these habitats and the continuation of their culture and traditional use. That is a key part of the motivation for what we talk about with some of the principles we have brought forward in the submission.

These wetlands provide a critical breeding sanctuary for our native waterbirds, offsetting habitat loss from agriculture and other purposes and also facilitating legal hunting during the prescribed season, a purpose which is often overlooked today. The Victorian government recently announced the most recent state game reserve, which is the 200th in Victoria, and it recognises the role that habitat plays in sustainable

hunting as well as the importance of access to public land for hunting activities. It is in this context that the influence of pest animal management is defined from Field & Game's perspective and our members' perspective, including the control by hunting. Pest animal hunting is currently not permitted in these state game reserves, which is to the detriment of the native species that these reserves are intended to provide precious breeding habitat and sanctuary for.

The demonstration of volunteer effort in managing pest animals is demonstrated through several points of data, and it focuses on the areas that we are active in, and that is the volunteer hunter effort. We see this as one tool in a holistic management program with a clearly defined objective of monitoring, along with other management activities, such as fencing, baiting, trapping and a range of others, which creates better environmental and ecological outcomes.

A report issued in 2014 by what was then known as DEPI into the economic benefits of hunting in Victoria showed \$439 million in economic benefit, which is the equivalent of just under 3500 full-time jobs. There are some good headlines there, but there are many interesting facts that sit within the report and these align with what we know about our members' activities and where they spend their time and effort. It is these that I would like to call out in reference to this inquiry.

The studies showed that hunting of the game species deer, duck and quail contributed \$177 million. Hunting pest animals contributed \$262 million.

Ms WARD — This is in Victoria, per annum?

Mr McNABB — Yes, as of 2013. And I suspect that with the rainfall we are experiencing in 2017 we will probably see an uplift in activity, but that is a hypothesis.

We know that from the insights gathered from our membership — and this is from a membership survey we conducted, also in 2013, coincidentally — that 90 per cent-plus of our members actively hunt pest animals throughout the year. By comparison, and to put this in context — we are known as the duck hunter organisation — 80 per cent of our members hunt duck, so that just goes to demonstrate where the effort and time goes.

The Victorian fox bounty has run since 2011, and hunters have removed over 410 000 foxes in that time. Since 2007, our own records show that our members have removed over 30 000 feral and pest animals, including just under 11 000 foxes. That is primarily on private land and is performed at no cost to the taxpayer or indeed to the landowner. In the financial year 2014–15 — and we are just collating the 2015–16 stats at the moment — our members reported they had invested almost 11 000 hours just in that year on fox control programs. The simple analysis we use is the government's own statistics, where general labour, volunteer labour, is at about \$20 an hour and costed out, so you could start to monetise that volunteer effort very quickly.

We always work in facts and data, and we prefer to. The nature of our game is such that there is plenty of emotion wrapped around it, so that is what we must do. We believe that those numbers are conservative. I will go and argue against myself and say that. I have a belief that those numbers are conservative, but I do — —

The CHAIR — Mr McNabb, is it possible to get — I am just having a bit of a look — any sort of documentation that you have?

Mr McNABB — Sure.

The CHAIR — You do not have to give it to us now of course, but it would just be good to have it for the transcript and for us to have a look through, if that is all right, into the future.

Mr RAMSAY — It is in the submission.

The CHAIR — Yes, but I suppose it is the background — the methodology or whatever, that sort of stuff.

Mr McNABB — Yes, for sure. I can certainly provide that.

The CHAIR — I am not challenging you in any way. It is just good to have all that.

Mr McNABB — Indeed. But killing foxes regularly is what our members see as part of what they do. It is just part of their contribution to ecological outcomes, and many of them do it not because they are motivated by a bounty or filling in a return. They see the broader benefits — protection of lambing programs and all those sorts of things.

It is reported that each fox eats on average 27 native birds each year. Therefore it can be assumed from the scalps taken alone through the bounty that recreational hunters have reduced the mortality rate by almost 11 million birds. Taking into account that 410 000 foxes represents a portion of the pest animal control performed by recreational hunters generally, the reduced mortality rate may be a severe underestimate of the true benefit of recreational hunters.

To bring these insights together, the Gannawarra shire is home to the significant Ramsar-listed wetlands. Many of those wetlands are state game reserves. Kerang, for example, as part of the Gannawarra Shire Council, is most welcoming to duck hunting in the short, highly regulated duck hunting season. This is because they recognise the contribution made to the area by hunters and hunting. Gannawarra Shire Council — and this refers back to the DEPI report of 2013, released in 2014 — received \$10.4 million from the economic benefits of all hunting, of game and pests. Of this, \$6.1 million was contributed from the hunting of pest animals, so again the majority of the benefit was from pest animals. By way of comparison, the recent dairy industry issues earlier this year were reported in the media to have impacted the Gannawarra area, and Kerang particularly, by around \$25 million.

Our members and hunters already spend more time and effort hunting pest animals than game species, and presently an effort of applying control programs using volunteers is limited to those programs that operate in partnership with land managers, requiring formal programs with Parks Victoria and similar land managers and other agencies. These limitations hinder volunteer efforts from protecting our native species from predation. Research by Delta Waterfowl in North America has indicated that through their focus on predator management through tracking they have increased waterfowl nesting success rates from 15 per cent, which in their assessment is less than is required to sustain populations, to 39 per cent. These areas of public land, the state game reserves, are intended to be preserved as habitat for native species of both flora and fauna, and it is ironic that that sanctuary status, intended to protect our native species, also protects the invasive species that prey on and compete with our native species. By that I am saying that we access those state game reserves for 12 weeks of the year for duck hunting purposes, and for the rest of the year there is very passive management of those reserves, which effectively creates a sanctuary for foxes and other invasive animals.

The terms of reference of the inquiry were quite specific, and the question that FGA has is to define the opportunity to harness that volunteer hunter effort for targeted outcomes on the broader public estate. In our case we are particularly interested in those key wetlands that exist within 75 000 hectares of the state game reserves in Victoria alone.

Conservation, restoration and maintaining the habitat are key for Field & Game, with long-term projects such as the Heart Morass, near Sale in Gippsland, demonstrating the ability of private partnerships to deliver conservation and biodiversity outcomes. The Heart Morass is a prime example of how invasive animal control by volunteers can be effective in improving biodiversity. Field & Game and our subsidiary the WET Trust have restored over 1300 hectares of degraded grazing land after about 100 years of agriculture, and in the last 10 years we have turned it back into a thriving and diverse wetland. This restoration has been inclusive of active pest animal hunting of rabbits and foxes, the removal of 20 tonnes of invasive carp from the waterways and blackberry spraying. There was probably more than 20 tonnes of

carp removed because I saw another two big containers removed from there yesterday. Yesterday we celebrated 10 years of this wonderful restoration project, and this is a fantastic community project as well.

I refer back to the details contained in our submission of the regular monitoring and data collection that takes place around the Heart Morass. And by way of example, Heart Morass runs 11 kilometres along the Latrobe River and abuts the Heart Morass State Game Reserve, which is government-managed land. So you have got a great case study, if you like, of two different ways of managing our wetlands. Pest animal control is one important component of a management framework, but it can be supplemented by our focus on improvements to habitat and access to water. This security of biodiversity is not present typically in state game reserves or other public lands where recreational hunting of pest animals is not permitted.

Field & Game's conservation projects are run, staffed and implemented by an overwhelming majority of volunteer personnel, and these volunteers are motivated by the value they place on the continuation of their hunting culture and traditions and/or the ability to utilise these project wetlands for research, education or other recreation. Again, for example, with the Heart Morass down there, over 4300 schoolkids and over 360 teachers have gone through under the Bug Blitz program since 2009. The open day to celebrate 10 years was attended by 350 people. They do field days essentially on wetland ecology, and it is really, really well received. In turn this provides wetland habitats and waterbirds with an intrinsic value, adding to the value they already hold for hunters who access these lands. It is a key motivator which we cannot understate. The issue is whether the multitude of government resources applied to manage our natural environments through parks and public land, including our state game reserves, are delivering the optimal ecological and environmental outcomes, and this can be determined by the response to this question: is the current multilayered management designed to achieve specific outcomes or is it an outcome of a broader bureaucratic organisational design?

We touched in our submission on the hunting record in Victoria. Our belief from the statistics that are available is that hunting has an exceptional safety record. In the 10-year period to 2010, hunting or shooting-related incidents that resulted in tragic deaths were 1.4 per cent of all reported incidents, and of this about a third were from vehicle accidents related to hunting activities, and none of those involved were non-hunters. It appears you are twice as likely to suffer a fatality from hiking, mountaineering and other adventure-type recreational activities, from the statistics we were able to access.

Extensive safety risk assessment has been conducted previously for deer management trials — and this is where we got some exposure working with our colleagues in the ADA — and as part of other personal controls such as fox drives on private or public land. The latest example is the hog deer hunting trial that has been announced on Snake Island, and it follows on from successful models that have been used for over 20 years. I understand two VicPol assessments have been conducted, and they have both come up with the same results, which is that there are no safety or risk issues there, outside of the normal risks that would apply.

The other issues developed in our submission were the barriers to utilisation of any harvest of pest animals: deer, kangaroos or other animals. There are accepted practices worldwide that bring wild food into the commercial food system. That is something that we are strongly supportive of. An initial step is to allow the commercial processing of wild food that is harvested through either game hunting or pest animal control into the commercial system for own use — so for personal use, not for commercial gain — and it is really just around efficiencies and maximising the use of the protein they result in. The UK and — as we heard there — New Zealand allow wild food into their food systems.

The other option is to review the current restrictions on the use of sound moderators. We touched on this in our submission as well. These appear to be dealt with here in Australia by a perception, whereas in New Zealand they are readily available for use, and in the UK it is considered the norm. You have the opportunity to continue with the harvest of deer in the UK, for example, with the use of sound moderators in highly populated and high-density areas and you get the same outcomes. It enables the ability to control deer and other pest animals — foxes and the like — as well.

Management that includes the hunting of pest animal species creates further motivation for recreational hunters by adding value to access and the ability to perform conservation and hunting activities on the same site.

There is another theme there as well, which is around tourism. I have been doing some preliminary work with some colleagues in North America, and they see the hunting opportunity here in Australia as absolutely enormous, and that would include what we would consider pest animal hunting. It is just unique, it is different and there is a way of generating revenue.

Ms WARD — Just on that, what challenges are you able to identify that currently affect that tourism sector?

Mr McNABB — Yes. There are two that have been of particular interest. One back on our general remit, being duck hunting, is that there has been some opening up of regulations to allow international tourists to hunt ducks here, and we have just struck — —

Ms WARD — Only for ducks?

Mr McNABB — This is a particular case study.

Ms WARD — Yes, okay.

Mr McNABB — We have been able to open this up through some great decisions that have been made to bring these people in and to enable them to get there and hunt ducks without a whole heap of bureaucratic overlay, under supervision. We are working through this at the moment, so there might well be an outcome — the ability to access state game reserves and public land to hunt ducks on. So there are all the enablers there, but the physical access part seems to be restricted at the moment.

Ms WARD — Restricted to tourists or — —

Mr McNABB — Restricted for tourists to have access.

Ms WARD — Right, to those places. Okay, so they can go onto private but not public.

Mr McNABB — Yes, and Victoria has got fantastic infrastructure for hunting, so it is about how to leverage that. They can buy a game licence, which is money to government, and all of those sorts of good things. We can track, record and collect data and work out whether this is actually a viable thing, whether it is working and whether we can improve on it. The other one is kangaroos. We shoot to waste with control programs. There are, for example, the wallaby programs on Flinders Island, where tourists come in and they spend a fortune. The ability for these North Americans, for example, to shoot some of the species that we see as pests and for which we have control programs — they would pay big dollars for it. It is just putting a different lens on it. I had never even considered it until we had done a little bit of work around it. So there is an opportunity — —

Ms WARD — Is North America the only market you have identified, or the main one?

Mr McNABB — These are the ones I am having dialogue with at the moment, yes. I can only speak for those I am talking to. I know where there is some potential demand. I would not want to speak outside of that remit, because it is a bit of a broad brush.

Just to push through quickly, habitat restoration and conservation is only part of a bigger picture to ensure that our native species are able to thrive, and that is our core motivator as an organisation. There is little point in maintaining an isolated, pristine habitat if introduced animal species are allowed to move freely in and out of that habitat and are protected while within the boundaries. It is a state game reserve so we cannot access it to reduce the pest animals there.

In summary, Field & Game Australia recognises very clearly the role that recreational hunting can play as part of a wider pest and invasive animal control program. It is an effective tool that is safe, targeted and

humane. Australia has a vast pool of volunteer resources available and willing to participate, and our membership is a good cross-section of the community. All that is needed is the framework to provide access for further legal, regulated hunting activity in Victoria across the public estate.

We are a hunting organisation, but we have invested heavily in conservation — we always have. We want science and public policy that support better habitat for wildlife and for the people in the equation to utilise. Field & Game Australia seeks policy formation based on facts and data and not instinct, intuition or prejudice.

As a final comment, Field & Game Australia was invited to present at the recent conference Conservation through Sustainable use of Wildlife. This was hosted by the University of Queensland at the end of August and in early September. It brought together a range of academics from around the world as well as hunting organisations. In the presentation that I made on behalf of Field & Game Australia, I concluded with a summary of the key requirements that we have developed for wildlife management, and I will quote a little bit from the presentation just to wrap up.

We cannot forget or indeed ignore the role of people in the complex equation of wildlife management. People have created this highly modified landscape, and people have the privilege of harvesting our natural resources today. People today have an obligation to manage the landscape and our natural resources. My view is that that requires a continued and an increased commitment to four key components. They are habitat and water, in our instance, and monitoring — so gathering data — whether of waterfowl to make game management decisions in duck seasons, whether it is decisions around deer as a pest versus a game species or whether it is foxes. Another key component is a strategy that supports the use of the vast infrastructure dedicated to hunting and growing that in Australia. Victoria is in a unique situation compared to the rest of Australia. I speak as a non-native Victorian who has been here for 10 years. A further key component is an adaptive management program that is essentially a cycle so that any management practices that are put in place work as a three-legged cycle, if you like, that includes continuous monitoring that we can then go back and use to inform management decisions, and also research that is conducted to help pull through new data. Our recommendations to this inquiry, which are outlined in our submission, are all in line with this approach.

The CHAIR — Thanks. That was a really good presentation. The Metropolitan Clay Target Club of Epping have educated me about the environmental work that is done, and I know that they do a lot of stuff around the area as well. It is a great job that you do.

I suppose I would like to ask bit more about the Heart Morass program, because that is about the purchase of private land to restore it to its natural state. Is that a program that you could then put into place on public land? The previous speaker spoke by teleconference. Were you in here when she was speaking?

Mr McNABB — I heard probably the last half. It was fascinating.

The CHAIR — There is this idea, which probably everyone says, that you need to target an area and say, ‘We need to protect this. This is where there’s a problem with biodiversity and pests’. Do you think this program would be something you could adapt to other areas within public land?

Mr McNABB — For sure. It is interesting because it is actually an adaption or an evolution of the original model, which was a public-private model that created the game reserves from 1958 onwards. We have realised that the current priorities for government are many, and the funding needs to be prioritised to where those key issues are and they will not necessarily be for our issue.

The CHAIR — In some areas it is being done, but it is not being done with the private sector, if you like; it is just being done through the department.

Mr McNABB — Yes. So this is essentially taking that model and moving it to another level. The challenge is scale. That investment for the Heart Morass just in terms of pure capital is about \$2 million. It is completely privately funded. That private funding includes some fantastic support from philanthropic sources, which has created the community partnerships, taking the link through this Bugs Blitz program,

which I cannot speak highly enough of. They are bringing students through and their teachers, and they get some wetland technology. They have now created, they being the Bug Blitz people — success has a thousand fathers, and I will not profess to have had any part in it — have linked that now through to art as well, and we saw some of that yesterday.

The CHAIR — So the actual area, in terms of the pest animals that have been gotten rid of, is that an ongoing upkeep thing?

Mr McNABB — Yes, it is.

The CHAIR — And it is through the volunteers from your organisation?

Mr McNABB — Yes. I will quickly try to find some stats. It is essentially, because what we have there is you have about 11 kilometres of river frontage, you have got a state game reserve, you have got a river and some more farmland and then state game reserves. You have got the RAAF base across the way. So you have got what could be an oasis, which can work for us and can work against us as well.

One of the things I really took away from the recent conference in Queensland was this concept of clusters. We are working towards it intuitively anyway. Typically when we target a state game reserve, say, up around the Kerang area, we will also link a fox drive to remove as many foxes as possible over a weekend to try to get the populations right down. We are working with all the local landowners as well, private as well. So you have got to take this cluster approach.

The landscape we have created today builds these beautiful wildlife corridors, which are good and bad fences. In the current environment that we are dealing with at the moment there is a lot of flooded farmland, because this wonderful rain has also created problems. We will end up with pasture being flooded, which is fabulous country for ducks to go and nest in and rear a hatch of ducklings. The problem with that is that typically on the other side of a fence a fox just runs along downwind of the fence and it has a natural guide or track to run to, and it will pick up the scent and it will go in there and take the nesting ducks and then will go and have a good feed.

So we have got to create these shelter belts as well, and that is why, having the location we had down at the Heart Morass, we can actually build that out. I think the number is about 20 000 native trees have been replanted there to replace what had been removed from there to run an agricultural enterprise over three different properties that we have acquired. So to build that up, and that creates that shelter belt as well as corridors to protect nesting ducks. The reality is you cannot create one of these wonderful wetlands purely for the benefit of waterfowl. Nature has this funny way of just finding it out as being a really good place.

The other thing we are looking at literally this weekend as well is the nature of that habitat. We have identified it could be great potential for hog deer. Australia has got one of the only viable commercial and marketable populations of hog deer in the world. Certainly it is not their natural habitat, but good management and creating good habitat has allowed for that. So there is another potential benefit from the work done at the Heart Morass project in creating habitat to extend the hog deer range as well.

All those things come down to great volunteer effort. It is close to Sale, so it is close to a population centre for some people who are really committed to the project and have been for 10 years or more. We have effectively got people on that site every day — certainly every week — and it is either one person doing some work or it is a group of people going out to do some spraying or bringing some cattle in for a very defined grazing program. We will get revenue from that. It will also knock down all the exotics and allow the native grasses to flourish again. There are so many components to it, but having that volunteer effort there to it is crucial.

So back to your question: is that scalable? Can we find \$2 million every time we want to buy 4000 acres of wetland and preserve it, and do we have the volunteer effort that is there, that can bolt straight onto it? I would love to think so, but I am not sure. What I have said Heart Morass has from a scalable perspective is a living laboratory. We can take some great lessons and transplant them potentially back into the state game reserves.

So we have done some research that has been written for us by the University of New England that picks up 20 years of waterfowl surveys through spring and wetland habitat surveys. We have identified two key regions in Victoria and a number of wetlands within those regions that are particularly important for waterbird production, waterfowl production particularly. So our thinking is, how do we take the lessons out of the Heart Morass and mobilise and motivate volunteers who are local to that area in south-west Victoria up near Kerang to apply those learnings and actively manage these state game reserves, rather than everyone just waiting for the lights to turn on in the third weekend in March? And then by the middle of June, when hunting season is finished, we turn the lights off and walk away again. I hope that answers your question.

The CHAIR — Yes, it sort of does. I suppose we want to look at all ways and ideas of dealing with these problems.

Mr McNABB — Yes.

Ms WARD — Clare Veltman — you would not have heard her — was the previous speaker. One of the things she spoke about was that she did not see that recreational hunting was necessarily effective in reducing the population of invasive animals. What I took away from what she was saying was that they are very good, or can be used as a way to control animal populations, once there has been a reasonably dramatic or some kind of decrease as a result of professional shooters. In New Zealand, for instance, it was helicopters. What would your response be to her comments?

Mr McNABB — Yes, I would have to agree. Purely based on sheer weight of numbers and the geography that we have to cover, I think it is absolutely right. I think hunting is one tool in a suite of management options. I mean, hunting can create behaviour change in wildlife, so if the intent with wild goats or kangaroos, for example, or whatever it might be, is to get the numbers down to zero or close to zero, you would look at all the options and how shooting and hunting would contribute to that population objective. If it was wild goats in some hill country, for example, tracking and removal might be in the first instance to take out 80 per cent of the population or 70 per cent of the population before they get smart to it, and then you come in later and shooting might be the final solution, if that does not sound too much like a cliché. Alternatively the use of sound moderators and very targeted selective shooting might be the way to go. I have been involved with professional kangaroo culling from time to time.

Ms WARD — Using sound moderators?

Mr McNABB — No, it was well before my time. This was a long time ago. And the ability to get a population down to zero with the use of firearms — by definition, they are loud — is not particularly effective. But certainly in terms of controlling populations or very targeted solutions, it is definitely an effective management tool.

Ms WARD — One of the challenges that has been put to us around having recreational shooters involved in trying to help reduce invasive pest populations, particularly deer, has been that the focus is often with hunters on stags and larger animals. Is there a way that you think we can help manage that or that we can work with hunters to help them expand more, if they do not already, the type of animals that they should prefer to shoot?

Mr McNABB — Yes, and I think there is an approach with values here. So my personal interest would be for meat for the freezer, so for me that puts a particular perspective on it. It was interesting at this conference in Queensland. There was, I think, Australia's largest processor of kangaroos there — a fellow operating out of South Australia — and he has implemented a shoot-females-only policy. There is a fair bit of debate within his own industry around that actually, and I would defer to him as an expert. Mine would be based on my own personal values and some limited experience in this. But certainly education over regulation would be the thing that we see as the most effective approach. I know our colleagues at the Australian Deer Association have had some clear sort of leadership messages around what to harvest, when and limits per day and those sorts of things. That probably goes back to then ending up with piles of

dead animals that you cannot utilise effectively for whatever reason; it is a real challenge for us by nature. I cannot give you some data that says, 'This is the answer' and I would not like to.

Ms WARD — Yes, that is fine. We have also had a little bit of mixed feedback in terms of how dogs are used and what happens with dogs. We understand that now that a lot of dogs have got GPS, less of them are being left behind, but there are still other people who feel that that is an issue. But also around the idea of deer carcasses being left behind on their properties and that that can help encourage wild dogs, or dogs that are left behind, to be around farms and therefore invade those farms as well, do you have thoughts on that?

Mr McNABB — I have never hunted with hounds, so I cannot speak specifically for them. I understand that there is a long history of them, and that they are very effective by the nature of what they do and what they are in terms of finding deer. My deer hunting is usually limited to a very nice walk in the bush, and I often walk out with nothing more than what I came in with. But that is okay. My particular expertise is with pedigree gundogs more for game birds, but they are also used — —

Ms WARD — Yes, retrievers as opposed to — —

Mr McNABB — Yes, pointer dogs, German pointers, Hungarian vizslas and those sorts of things. They work very closely, there is more of a direct team — with the hunter and their dog — and they do have to have GPS tracking. But I have come across people in the bush that have been looking for their dog or their hound that had not come back a week ago, and they had been out there every night trying to get that hound back because it is a valued and favoured hound. But that is my only personal experience.

Ms WARD — And that is in the last year?

Mr McNABB — Yes, so that is my own personal experience. In terms of the wild dog aspects, I did have the benefit of hunting with a very experienced hunter about a year ago, and then we sort of split up and walked away. Then there was a loud shot and all the rest of it, and I thought, 'You ripper!'. What had happened was that some wild dogs were getting a bit too close for his comfort, so he shot one of the wild dogs. There were three. We then just finished the deer hunt for the day in that particular area, so we walked out and packed up and drove off. Those are the implications of it.

Ms WARD — Whereabouts was this?

Mr McNABB — This was out of Licola, so out in the far east and, well, north-east. But he saw them; I did not see them. Half a dozen of us spent two days in the bush, and, you know, they were not roaming over the hills. In terms of carcasses and the like left around farmland — —

Ms WARD — So what we are hearing is that for a lot of hunters, they will not be too far from where the beaten track is. They do not go too far off the beaten track, if you like, which can often not be too far away from properties. So some farmers have submitted that there will be a carcass somewhere within a kilometre or so of their property. The wild dogs come down; they are attracted by that meat. Then that animal disappears or they lose interest in it because they are not interested in older meat — they want to actually be predators — so then they come onto the farm.

Mr McNABB — Right, I see. I could not speak with any authority on the ecology of the wild dogs, and I would not pretend to. Certainly they are hunters and they roam. I guess a question is: were they going to be there anyway or did that carcass particularly bring them there, after which they then crossed the fence and went onto the property? And it is a question; it is not an answer, I am sorry.

Ms WARD — No, that is okay. Thank you.

Mr YOUNG — G'day Dave. Thanks for coming in and giving us your time today. You provided a whole range of ideas in your submission and a bit of insight for some members of the committee who may not have a lot of experience in those areas, so thank you very much for that. I just want to touch on something that has been brought up quite a bit by numerous witnesses, and it is the point of difference

between a professional shooter, or someone who gets paid to, and a recreational shooter. It seems to be the suggestion by many people that a recreational shooter is not able to be up to the same standard or, simply for lack of scrutiny, is not up to the same standard. I was wondering what your thoughts are on how proficient recreational shooters are and also how the culture of shooting allows them to be outside of proficient activities.

Mr McNABB — Yes. It is a great question. It was explained to me about a week ago by a government agency that to be a professional shooter, you have got to fill out some stuff, grab an ABN and whack a sticker on the side of your ute and away you go. That was someone else's views. The nature of the recreational shooter is that there is a motivation to spend a lot of time — some of our families would argue too much time — in participating in what we do and time in the bush. I am a fairly novice deer hunter. From the time I have spent with experienced deer hunters in the bush, just the skills and knowledge and experience that they have in how to get around the bush, how to deal with it and how to handle themselves as well as safety and all those sorts of things are just phenomenal. So I can use that as an example in terms of the specific terms of reference about deer control on Crown land and national parks particularly. That is my observation.

In our group specifically — which is around game bird hunting typically; although I would say that actually we spend more time hunting pest animals than anything else — we have got a very active series of, I think it is 55, shooting ranges around the country. Our sport typically involves shotguns. There are something like 40 events every month put on, which are clay target shooting events. Those events are called 'simulated field'. They were designed as out-of-season practice for hunters. Like all these things, they get their own life and create a sport in their own right. We know that 90 per cent of our clay target participants are active hunters.

I would give you another quick example, if I can draw that in terms of proficiency. I was in Darwin two weekends ago, I think it was. It is all a blur. We delivered hunter education up there — the shotgun education program developed by the Victorian state government and invested in by the Victorian state government. We have taken that into South Australia and now the Northern Territory. There is a skills assessment at the very beginning of the day, and then as you fulfil certain skill requirements — so six out of eight targets — you keep moving back in range, and the range in shotguns is the real contributing factor to challenge. The folks up there in the NT are very, very proficient. They are shooting regularly. The range up there — the branch up there — opens every Friday night. Part of that is to do with climate. As well as that, they shoot once a month, plus they are always, or very regularly, out there. So the proficiency of those folk I was really impressed with, and I found it to be quite a high standard. That is just pure time doing what we do.

You could not take a novice who just walks in, gets a licence and gets a firearm and send them off on a hunt, but to my mind you would not do that in any either hunting scenario or control program. You need some demonstration of skills.

Mr YOUNG — Yes. So would you agree with me if I said that there would be more benefit in sharing proficiency through education and through, say, gaining experience from other hunters and other shooters and just being around that culture than there would be from shooting a 6-inch circle at 50 yards at a range and making sure you can hit it 9 out of 10 times?

Mr McNABB — Yes, absolutely. Marksmanship practice, whatever it is, is always good, but it is what it is, and it is no substitute for time in the bush. The scenarios are different. What you are dealing with is different. You know, you have just walked up a hill out of Licola; there is a fair bit of sweat on your brow. You are not sure whether you are going to be able to stand upright or not. 'Do I want to take that stag there or do I want to redo this whole stalk so that I can actually recover the stag effectively and take it out to utilise the meat?'. That is the hunter's motivation, because in those cases they will take the meat out. That might not necessarily fit with a control program, where the objective is different. But again, as a hunting organisation, we are challenged on not utilising the meat in every scenario that we can get. But yes, time on the range is great, but time in the bush is better.

Mr YOUNG — You talked before about state game reserves and, to paraphrase some of the sillier restrictions and regulations on hunting pests and the inability to control them simply because of the land tenure, can you just elaborate on some of the specifics about that and what needs to actually change in order to reverse that situation?

Mr McNABB — Yes. As a hunter I cannot access Johnson Swamp state game reserve out of Kerang outside of the prescribed hunting season — a fabulous bit of country. Earlier this year we saw it in a drying regime, and the birdlife on there was absolutely incredible. It was a fairly isolated oasis by definition because of limited water provided there and not throughout that natural system. So you have got great waterbird and waterfowl concentrations there. No doubt you will have foxes and all the other bits and bobs running around there. I cannot do anything about it. I cannot shoot foxes while I am on there. I cannot mobilise our local branch and our members to go and shoot foxes on there. And certainly outside of a 12-week hunting season, I cannot go in there in July or August and run fox drives on there without going through some bureaucratic programs and having to make sure we have got memorandums in place between ourselves and Parks and all the rest of it.

To be quite fair, Parks are very, very favourable to these approaches, but we have got to build a systemised approach. We were just having, earlier, conversations again. Now we have got to go through and redesign and redo memorandums of cooperation and run those out through their network. We have got members sitting there ready to go with great skills in this as well. Does that answer your question?

Mr YOUNG — Yes, for our purposes it does.

Mr RAMSAY — I had a couple of questions.

The CHAIR — Sorry, I thought you had already had your go. It is getting a bit late in the day, sorry about that.

Mr RAMSAY — That is all right. I have got 5 minutes, David. A submission in relation to the classification of deer as pest animals has come up. I apologise if you have already mentioned that in your summation, but I was interested to know from your own organisation's point of view of where you see that classification sitting and on what basis. Could you respond to that, and then I will have another question.

Mr McNABB — We have the privilege of being a national organisation, so I see how this works out. I was in Adelaide a week ago talking with members over there, and I see in Western Australia, where I come from originally, how deer are dealt with as pests. And I can see what we have here in Victoria and the benefits that are afforded deer in the management regime because they are afforded the status of a game species, and yet they can be controlled where their numbers are overabundant as well. So my view is it seems to work. The evidence underpins that it appears to work here in Victoria with the status as a game species and — so it is not an or, or a but — having those abilities to manage the numbers. You know, like landowners can do with spotlights on their private property for example.

So I think the status as a game species attributes a value. That value motivates the recreational user enormously, and it is a really difficult one to define. In some of the submissions we are involved with at the moment the social benefits — you know, the shared benefits, the triple-bottom-line stuff — gets talked about a lot, and I am starting to see an emerging awareness that we do not really know collectively what the social sciences are around the social benefits of it. My intuitive approach to it is that this is one of those things where you apply a value to something, you motivate people, you can then mobilise people to do things around the management of them, whether it is wetlands and ducks or whether it is deer and deer habitat, tree planting at Clydebank morass, whatever it might be.

Mr RAMSAY — The reclassification to pest then is more about allowing greater flexibility of recreational shooters to be able to shoot at will at a pest — even though it is a game species — as against a game species without the pest classification. Is that basically it? Have I understood it?

Mr McNABB — I mean, where they are a pest and you have got a management program, it does not really matter what you call them. If we classify a particular animal as a pest, then it just puts an onus onto

the land manager, whether it is a private landowner or the government, to manage them. If there is no value then on them for a hunter, for example, just as one user in many, then it will be a challenge getting to motivate those people to do something, whether it is to improve habitat to keep numbers down. Winton Wetlands obviously is a classic example. It is an iconic wetland for us. It changed from being able to hunt to not being able to hunt. We have walked away from it. We keep getting approaches, asked to go in there and help with fox management and all sorts of bits and pieces. We are like, 'Well, we have limited resources. We have high-value wetlands elsewhere'. That is not to say Winton Wetlands is not a high-value wetland, but there is no value in it for us. We will not participate.

Mr RAMSAY — So you are happy with the status quo. Can I just ask objectively: a lot of the discussion is around the role of the recreational hunter to controlling invasive pests. My learned friend here has provided all sorts of justifications for the role of the recreational hunter to play an important role in that, as well as being able to expand what I see as an important recreational hobby, as against a professional shooter who has a designated job role of removing or culling invasive species on the basis that the job is to remove as much as possible the numbers or populations. So do you see a dual role there for both the professional hunter and the recreational shooter, which is part of our reference with the shooters association and their role with the GMA in helping control — not pests now, they are — game species in relation to deer as one method of control?

Mr McNABB — Sure. Yes, absolutely.

Mr RAMSAY — From an objective point of view?

Mr McNABB — Yes, from an objective point of view. If you have got a goat population in the Murray-Sunset National Park and the ecological objective is to get that population to zero, you put everything you have got to do it. But then one thing I have learnt over many years is you can sign off on a project, but you have got to sign off on the funding as well. So it does not mean just because a project gets signed up as a good idea that you have got the funding to do it. That is where that balance of multiple management tools — including recreational hunters complementing professional hunters, complementing some trapping and removal, whatever poisons, all those sorts of things — might be the suite of tools that are used.

In relation to deer, having had the privilege of doing what people referred to as armed bushwalking or the most recent one was an armed men's shed, which is deer hunting when you go away for a weekend and the social benefits that come from it — —

Mr RAMSAY — I am sure the female shooters would not be impressed about that.

Mr McNABB — No, but I can only speak from what I know, which is my perspective on this. You know, the country that you get into, I just cannot see how you would ever remove the numbers just physically. Some of that stuff I am struggling to stand upright on the sides of these hills, and it is that thick and rugged that no matter what management tools you apply across the state I just physically cannot see how you would get the numbers down to a situation where you could potentially have an objective of getting the numbers to zero at some point in the short to medium term. I just physically cannot see how you could do it.

And foxes — back onto our particular sweet spot for Field & Game Australia, similarly with foxes — it just takes a lot of targeted ongoing, consistent effort on a landscape scale within a defined geography to take those numbers down to almost nothing, but as soon as you take the foot off they will rebound again. Nature is funny like that.

The CHAIR — Thank you so much for coming in and preparing the information you have which has been really valuable. Thank you.

Committee adjourned.