

ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land

Mansfield — 20 October 2016

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Mr Brendan Mahoney.

The CHAIR — Welcome, and thank you for coming to give evidence to this inquiry on the control of invasive animals in national parks. I understand you have got a presentation. We will go with some of the formalities to let you know the evidence that you give today is being recorded and a copy of the transcript will be provided to you to check for accuracy before it becomes public. Also, anything you say in the public hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, that same parliamentary privilege may not apply outside the public hearings. The secretariat or Christopher may have spoken to you. I think you are giving a presentation for 5 minutes or so and then it will be opened up for us to ask you questions. You have a presentation. Have you got a hard copy of that to provide to Hansard?

Mr MAHONEY — Yes, I have already given one to them.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Visual presentation.

Mr MAHONEY — I will shoot through this as quickly as I can. I am Brendan Mahoney. I live out at Merrijig — a fourth generation farmer — not far from Michael. I have been deer hunting all my life, shooting all my life, foxes and so forth. I will flick through this. I have tried to keep to the point. I could ramble on here for a couple of hours.

The CHAIR — We are not trying to hurry you up, but it is often good for us to have plenty of time to ask you questions.

Mr MAHONEY — Yes, no worries. Okay, I will shoot through this fairly quickly. Of all the invasive animals that we have got, the wild dogs are the only problem in my opinion. We have got rubber jawed traps for the dogs. These are traps that I made because we could not buy them out of America for a while. I copied the American ones. I have caught 30 to 40 sheep in those traps and let them all out. They are a very good design. They are as humane as you can get. I shoot the foxes all the time. I got only about 35 or 40 this year. I normally get 50 to 60 just in my patch — I do not travel anywhere — just on the farm at home in Merrijig. We shoot them or trap them, however we can get them. That fox is in the middle of the paddock just on a bit of an old carcass that was there. The first dog that I ever trapped only three or four years ago went a long way. He dragged that log a long way before we found him the next morning. There are too many of them in the bush — too many wild dogs. It is not sustainable for them.

Deer are the same. All the deer hunters now with the gun laws the way that they are, if you have not got a gun licence, you cannot go hunting. Gun licences — if you have got one of them, you might as well be a JP. Let us face it: the hoops that you have to jump through to have a gun licence. I have got a blasting explosives ticket. It is easy to keep.

The meat. More meat. How much meat? In our back paddock along the bush we have shot 15 grey deer in the last five weeks. There are a couple of different reasons for that, but there are plenty of deer about. Trophies is another industry. It was a good night out. There are six there, all pretty healthy. If the populations are kept low, the population is healthy. General rule of thumb: they get overpopulated, they get diseases. Sheep on the left, deer on the right. It is all more meat. Every farm everywhere does their home kills.

Then there are the kids. You take the kids away to teach them how to shoot when they are young with the shotguns and all that sort of thing, and all the school shoots. Josh on the far right is my son there with all the others. There is one other person that was not there — Bec Smith. She was shooting so she could not get her photo taken. She cleaned up and beat all the blokes that day. She is a pretty good shot. She might go to the Olympics. Around Mansfield we have got half a dozen Olympic shooters. It is a big sport. It is very competitive, and it is promoted. Well, I would say it is not demoted to the extent that it has been in years gone by.

Those are just more foxes.

Marking the lambs: this is what we do for a living. You see the bush in the background. There you go, that is a fact: you have got between 5 and 10 per cent of lamb deaths in their first three weeks. That is foxes. That is quite significant; a lot of them.

Whose dog was it? I hung the dog on the fence on the property where I do all my foxes, because in years gone by — forever and a day in England — the gamekeeper had to hang them up on the fence to show they had been doing their job. It is an age-old thing. A couple of people asked that it be taken down. One person asked the ranger, ‘Can you check whose microchip is in it?’. It does not make sense from where I sit.

For people and the general public we need a couple of million dollars to have an advertising campaign. It is a different mindset that you have to have a think about with tourists. Deer hunters are our tourists. Why do you seem to put them aside from all the other tourists? You have got deer hunters and they are all tourists. It makes me pretty wild that you segregate them and think that they are not tourists, because they are.

Anyway the problem still exists with the dogs. There are too many of them. No-one paid for the sheep. If the damned dog had had a chip in it, I could have sued someone. The council would have actually taken it to court to recover my costs. In this case, though, you are all state government of Victoria.

Mr TILLEY — I wish.

Mr MAHONEY — Okay. There is one on camera: another dog. I have got cameras out for the deer hunting; we are looking for the deer. We know they are about. Are there any Tasmanian devils left in Tasmania? No. They would be on camera. Mark my word, nothing gets past anyone’s cameras, and there are thousands of them in the bush now — thousands of them. Everyone knows what is out there.

Mr TILLEY — So you have not seen a thylacine?

Mr MAHONEY — A?

Mr TILLEY — You have not seen a tiger? Jungle drums and bush.

Mr MAHONEY — No, but I have got everything else on camera that there is to be got. If there were any of those — or the panther that has been seen — you can be pretty safe that if they have not got them on camera, they are not there. The cameras get everything.

That is just my view. I am a farmer. I had 60 sheep killed one year and 80 lambs out of a mob of 140 sheep. Every single wombat hole in that paddock had four dead sheep stuck in it. It is your dog that did that. There is one that has been caught. How you catch them — it is not easy. It is fairly tricky. It is not your standard run-of-the-mill thing that people know much about. But it can be taught — you can teach it. There are a lot of tricks that you can use so that your average hunter can actually go out and set some traps and catch a dog. It can be taught.

That is the dog that I referred to that killed 29 sheep recently. That is another one that I caught a couple of years ago. They are the traps. If I had let him out he would have just run away. His foot was a little bit swollen or bruised — not a problem. Those traps are really good. That is another one. That was a bitch that I caught in the same area. It was a very old dog, so I took a photo of it. You see all the grey on it. I do not know how old it was. That dog might have been 8 or 10 years old. That dog was running with it. I caught those two dogs three weeks apart. There is a lot of border collie in that dog with the long fur on him. There are different breeds of them.

I caught that dog recently 6 kilometres out of the bush. These black wild dogs are coming right out of the bush like that. It is something that we are going to get more and more of, not just because there are too many dogs in the bush. The dogs are a different breed now. Dingoes have a lot of respect for human beings. Dingoes will not come near us. These crossbred dogs, though — the DNA shows that they are 80 per cent wild dogs, not dingoes — have got different traits. If you take a German shorthaired pointer, with the traits that they have got, the way they point, and then cross it with a kelpie, it means the traits of

the wild dogs are changing. They are coming further out of the bush. They are comfortable living out in the paddocks, and they are dangerous. They are getting very dangerous when they are like that. That is another dog on the trail camera.

Solutions: this is my spiel. Foxes are easy. Bring back the fur trade. It was suppressed by the Greens. It was suppressed by every single animal liberation movement that you can think of. Anyone who wears fur down the street will probably get eggs thrown at them. That needs to be changed. All those fox skins that you saw — I threw them all in the creek. They were wasted. It is just a waste.

Charlie and Graeme Stoney were talking about the horses. They were managed and controlled, not eradicated. I would hate to see deer ever being eradicated. They are so valuable. Tourists come up here in droves every weekend. I will put my hand up here and say, 'Tourists — skiers'. Downhill skiers on Mount Buller have caused more environmental damage than any deer hunter ever has.

There are six lots of horse riders. There are 4000 deer hunters, I would say. If I were Michael, I would be keeping my mouth shut. We have got an overwhelming majority of deer hunters coming into this area. That is a huge lot of money and a different mindset. Who are the tourists? You are in Mansfield now, not in Mount Buller.

The CHAIR — Have you got many slides, so that we can ask you some questions?

MR MAHONEY — Yes, okay. There is the deer harvesting. They need to be harvested, because there are too many. The deer hunters cannot keep up with them. If you get too many deer hunters, you get more problems. I see it that they need to be harvested. If you harvest them, you can shoot the does, the female deer. Harvest and control. If you let half a dozen licences to shoot deer here, with a spotlight, fair between the eyes, which is the most humane way, and process them, those licences will be valuable. Those guys with the licences will toe the line. It will be controlled. You are talking about their livelihoods now.

Processing plants: you cannot be driving too far, so you need a few of them; just small processing plants, built close to where the deer are. You can even process the farm-killed stock as well, if you want to, as a going concern. I am talking about a proper business. That is just my estimate. If you are paying the deer hunters \$5 a kilo and they are doing two, three or four nights on average, some nights you are not going to get any and some nights you might get five or six. There is a job in it, a well-paid job. It needs to be well paid. You take your \$10 and your fox skins to collect a scalp — it will have to be a bit better paid than that, I can tell you. It is a job. If you can do that every day, it is about \$30 000 a year. Why not?

State and federal governments have progressively shut down nearly every abattoir right across Australia over the last 20 years through regulations. It is a well-known fact. It is all ready to go, but it has to be small. The deer population is not infallible. There is only a certain rate of deer that you can pull out of there to run a sustainable business and protect the deer hunters. Those tourists coming up here every weekend — that is quite substantial.

The CHAIR — We might ask you a few questions now. Simon, do you want to talk about the wild dogs or something else?

Mr RAMSAY — I do. I see his present slide is on the wild dogs. I think you posed a question about government interference or lack of commitment in the control of wild dogs.

Mr MAHONEY — Yes.

Mr RAMSAY — Obviously trapping is something that you see as a good tool, but what can the government do to help with the control of wild dogs? I think there is a summer and autumn baiting program.

Mr MAHONEY — The baiting programs are very good. It is not estimated how many dogs they poison. But do not worry, they poison a lot. But they do not bait out the back of my place. They run through and they do a baiting program for three weeks. They put out one lot of baits along the ridges, once.

Aerial baiting where you drop out 3000 baits and you physically poison everything that eats meat in that whole area — foxes, cats and dogs — that is a baiting program. What they are doing at the moment is like putting a bandaid on things. It is not even controlling them. Whatever they are doing at the moment is not enough, because the wild dog population is growing and growing and growing.

Mr RAMSAY — More trappers?

Mr MAHONEY — I like traps because they are a bit more humane. If you said, ‘Brendan, go out and shoot a dog’, I might not be back for three weeks. If you said, ‘Go out and trap a dog’, I would ask: ‘Righto, how many traps am I allowed to have? Do you want one tonight or tomorrow night?’. It is very effective. But the number of traps that you put in the ground will correspond to the number the dogs that you get at the end of the day and how big and wide an area you can cover.

I am not allowed to set any traps, even when your dogs are killing my sheep. I am not allowed to set traps on Crown land. That is the law. When the dogs are killing my sheep and I ring up the dog man, Dave Klippel, he says, ‘I’ll be there next week’. Then he says, ‘I’ll have a look’, and he has a look around. Because I am setting traps, he says, ‘He’s right. I’m going back out. I’ve got six or seven other guys out there that I’m looking after already’. So I get left behind. He just has not got time. He is not allowed to have traps set for any more than 72 hours without checking them, and of course there are 33 up here and no-one else can check his traps, it would seem. So on a Friday night before a long weekend he pulls them all up.

Dogs come in at various different times with the weather. A whole lot of different things affect the way they operate, but one thing is the bush is running out of wallabies, kangaroos, wombats and lyrebirds, and there will be none left in another three or four years.

Ms WARD — Brendan, you mentioned licences just a few slides back around controlling pests in our forests or around your land; how do you see that working, whether it is licences for hunters or for trappers?

Mr MAHONEY — No. The hunters are not shooting enough deer to keep in front of natural attrition. I would see a licensing system very similar to the abalone licences. They would be valuable; they have to be made valuable, and that way you have got full control and full integrity of the guys going out shooting deer. They have to shoot them at night with a spotlight. Remember where we are going; with suppressors you are not going to have any noise and spotlights in another four years will be obsolete. You will not use them. The night vision that is on the market now is just about there. The last spotlight that I bought was nearly \$400 for the best one that I could get. It will be \$800 or \$1000 for a night-vision scope next time. The good lights will not be needed anymore.

Ms WARD — How long have you been using your traps for?

Mr MAHONEY — About five years.

Ms WARD — And how many dogs and foxes do you reckon you have caught?

Mr MAHONEY — I would have caught 30 or 40 foxes in them. They just get in them from when you are trapping the dogs, and I have caught five dogs — five wild dogs, only on my patch. I have not gone anywhere else. I am not allowed to.

Ms WARD — I understand, thank you.

Mr TILLEY — Just a couple of quick ones, Brendan. When you mention that governments have shut down everything, have you had any dealings with the regulator, like PrimeSafe, directly yourself?

Mr MAHONEY — No.

Mr TILLEY — Well, it is no good pursuing that. I suppose on educating about the regional, country way of life that you experience, how do we go through a process of educating the metropolitan conservation types that do not necessarily understand the way of life and the impact of invasive species? Is

there any solution or suggestion you might have by way of education? I find myself, being a country boy, that we are often invaded by the views of the city. They simply do not understand.

Mr MAHONEY — A big advertising campaign; more slides like that on TV. People get comfortable and complacent with things after a while. If I drove down to Melbourne with a load of dead deer in the back of the car, I would probably get pulled up fairly promptly by someone. If it was commonplace, every day, like it was 25 or 30 years ago when we used to shoot foxes all the time, and there were cars driving up and down the street quite frequently, like my Toyota, with three or four foxes on the front. You are not going to put them in the front with you; you hang them on the bull bar and take them home and skin them. Back in the late 80s there were three guys in Mansfield who shot over 300 foxes each and they bought a brand-new Toyota with them. Do not underestimate for 1 minute how massive that fur industry was back then. That was one winter, and they bought a Toyota, a Landcruiser.

Mr TILLEY — But it is also reasonable to say that we want tourists to come in who want to enjoy our region, our spaces.

Mr MAHONEY — They are our tourists coming in to shoot our foxes. They are our tourists. The mum-and-dad hunters, who seem to be the squeaky wheel, are actually a minority here.

Skiers on Mount Buller do environmental damage, if you want to look at different things like that, and they leave rubbish on the side of the road and everything else. Now there seems to be a lot of focus put on deer hunters and rogue deer hunters. That is what we are looking at today, I suppose. I could elaborate on a few other industries around here, like rogue pushbike riders who wander all over the damn road in front of you, and when you get hit, you know, if you run over one of them, they will turn around and say, ‘You’re the motorist. You’re at fault’. Pushbike riders.

Mr RAMSAY — You would not have rose-coloured glasses on, would you, Brendan?

Mr MAHONEY — I nearly hit one once.

Mr RAMSAY — I love cycling.

Mr MAHONEY — Yes, a lot of people do.

The CHAIR — Maybe on that note, thank you for coming in and giving us the information. I think the slides were really good. They provide a lot of good information for us as we are considering the issues.

Witness withdrew.