

ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land

Melbourne — 5 September 2016

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Mr Andrew Cox, CEO, Invasive Species Council.

The CHAIR — Mr Cox, sorry to keep you waiting. We always go over a little bit. Welcome to the Environment, Natural Resources and Regional Development Committee public hearing in relation to the inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land. Before we get started with your presentation I will just go through some of the formalities — that is, to advise you that the evidence that is being taken today is being recorded and that you will receive a copy of the transcript to check for accuracy prior to them becoming public. Also, whatever you say in the hearing is covered by parliamentary privilege, but once you leave the hearing most of the things that you say in respect of this are not covered by parliamentary privilege. With that, if you would not mind just for the transcript giving your name and title and perhaps a little bit of background. The secretariat has advised that it is about a 10 minute presentation and then committee members would like to ask you a number of questions. Thank you.

Mr COX — My name is Andrew Cox. I am the CEO of the Invasive Species Council. I was going to introduce who we were at the start, so I will just launch straight in.

The CHAIR — Sure. Yes, go right ahead.

Mr COX — The Invasive Species Council is 14 years old. We are an independent body that conducts our work based on the science of invasive species. We are mostly interested in stopping Australia's next invasive species, so we are interested mostly in prevention because for the ones that are here it is a lot harder to do much about them. There are some things we can do but we are going to get the real gains by trying to stop new ones arriving either in Victoria or in Australia.

I mentioned we are independent, so we are funded by donations. We are not aligned with government. We have a board, we have memberships, we have a few thousand supporters and we are Australia-wide. As I mentioned, we focus on prevention and early action.

I am just going to outline quickly the problem of invasive species and particularly feral animals, because that is the focus of this inquiry. We regard invasive species as a top three threat to the environment. I probably should have qualified that the Invasive Species Council is interested in environmental impacts of invasive species, not all invasive species. Obviously it has other impacts as well but we are focused on the environmental impacts. That is because invasive species are a major threat to Australia's wildlife and scientists equate it regularly as equal to or the same level of priority as habitat loss and climate change. For things like mammals it is the top threat; it is the thing that has caused most of our extinctions and it is the thing that is causing ongoing threats. It is also a serious issue for frogs — it is the highest threat — and possibly for plants, because a lot of the things that are impacting on plants are often diseases and they often have very long time frames, so we are just still seeing some of that play out.

In terms of the mammals, cats are the greatest threat across Australia. This is a widespread pest, one that covers 99.8 per cent of Australia. I am on the National Feral Cat Taskforce, so that was a number repeatedly raised at the meeting we had last week in Canberra. It is a widespread pest; we have to live with it. The same goes in Victoria with the fox and with the rabbit. For these widespread pests the best you can do is try to reduce the impact from these, and that requires a different approach to those species which are emerging.

With emerging pests, we regard in eastern Australia that deer are the most important emerging pest species in Australia. This is New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania. Emerging pests like that mean it is quite a different way of looking at how we deal with the population.

I circulated prior to this, on Friday, the document 'Recreational hunting NSW: claims v. facts'. We are still working on our submissions but I thought this summarises the issues quite well because it seems like a lot of the interest of the committee is in hunting and its relationship with feral animal control. I just want to start with the front page and talk a little bit about the difficulty in controlling emerging species. On the table on the front on the right-hand side, you will see — —

The CHAIR — We only received this this morning, so we have not had a chance to look at it ourselves.

Mr COX — That is all right. I can take you through it.

The CHAIR — Bear in mind that we have a limited time, but if you could just maybe draw out the main points. Of course we can read it afterwards as well.

Mr COX — Maybe the main point in the table is that right-hand column. For these species that cover large areas, to reduce the populations significantly the right-hand column says how much of the population you need to remove because of these higher breeding rates to actually even stabilise the population. So for a higher breeding animal like a rat, you need to remove 95 per cent of the rats in the population to stabilise the population because they are breeding multiple times each year. If you go down near the bottom, there is the sambar deer, where you would need to remove 40 per cent of the entire deer population just to stabilise the population. These are big numbers. Fallow deer are slightly lower. It depends on their breeding rate and a lot of their characteristics. That is just a reminder how difficult it is to reduce large numbers of feral animals.

I was just going to quickly summarise what is good feral animal control from a pest manager's and a scientist's point of view, because these are things which have been developed over a long period of time, and this is fairly well understood. I think at least the first few pages of this fact sheet describe why this is, and it has got the references to the sources of documents for why we come to that conclusion. The main principles are that the feral animal control is necessary, it is effective and it is humane. It is necessary in that you only do it because you really need to; it is causing some problem. It is effective in that you are actually doing the right thing to address a problem. And it is humane; you are actually addressing the animal welfare concerns.

Effectiveness is a really important characteristic, because if you do not get that right you may as well not be doing the work. You will be wasting your time. You will not be getting the right results. Critical to effectiveness is the purpose: define what it is you are trying to do, and for some of the emerging pests, being clear what you are trying to do. Are you trying to stop it spread? Are you trying to reduce the damage? Or for a very newly arrived pest, you want to try to eradicate it. So the purpose is fundamental. It is the starting point.

What method do you use? I was just going to refer to inside on the second page down the bottom. There is another table, and we are looking at the different feral animals: rabbits, foxes, pigs, goats, deer, dogs and cats. This is the latest, I guess, pest management science view on how ground shooting fits into the effective tools for these different forms of feral animals. For something like cats, which are very cautious, very hard to spot and very smart, ground shooting has very limited effectiveness, and so baits and traps are far more effective. You can have a look at the different ones.

For deer, we do acknowledge that ground shooting is the most effective technique currently available, but part of the problem is there are no other techniques. Part of the thinking around feral animal control is you often use a variety of techniques, and ground shooting in some cases might be one of the tools you use to support other tools, but often it is actually not even a useful tool. So that comes back to the effectiveness — that you have got to actually use the appropriate method. Then thinking back to that containment strategy, where I talked a bit about how for a species — —

The CHAIR — Sorry, we just have a question regarding the table.

Mr YOUNG — And this data particularly. Where has this come from? Where has the hunting been done?

Mr COX — You will see little numbers next to each of the numbers and on the left-hand side little numbers next to the species and that refers back to the references on the back, so they are the published papers.

Mr YOUNG — This all from the state of New South Wales, though.

Mr COX — No, it is not. It is national data, national thinking. The principles I am talking about are not for New South Wales; they are for Australian pest management.

Mr YOUNG — So this is suggesting that only 512 deer were shot by recreational hunters in state forests nationally.

Mr COX — No, I am sorry. In terms of the numbers, when we are talking about state forests, we are talking about New South Wales. The scientific thinking around efficacy is national, but the numbers killed — we had good data for New South Wales — is for New South Wales state forests in that period. The final column is nationwide population estimates.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Sorry; please continue.

Mr COX — As I mentioned before, for widespread pests, you have got a different strategy, and the previous people from the Game Management Authority touched on this, where for widespread pests your focus has to be really limited. Cats are going to be here in Australia until we have some major technological breakthrough. You need to be focused on where they are doing the most damage. We do not need to say, ‘Okay, let’s try to kill a few million cats’, but rather ‘Let’s actually work out where they are doing the damage’, because one cat can do a lot of damage.

What are the threatened species that are impacted? For something like deer there are some plant species that are impacted heavily by the deer rubbing their antlers, so you would focus on trying to avoid those impacts. Where they are near major roads, you would have a car safety purpose and you would try to remove the deer just to avoid deaths on roads, which had become a problem south of Sydney where, quite tragically, there were nine deaths in a seven-year period until they removed the deer numbers near the road. That would be a focus of a pest that is more widespread.

If you are trying to contain a pest from spreading — one that has not reached its full range yet, and deer is one of those species where there are still suitable habitat it could spread to — you would be trying to stop the edges expanding and you would be trying to remove isolated populations, because what often happens is either they escape from deer farms or they are illegally introduced into new areas by hunters. When they are in small numbers you can actually make a difference and you can eradicate those deer. In terms of those two sources of the new deer, a national study found that 60 per cent of new deer populations were sourced from hunters.

Certainly that is part of getting back to the effectiveness, so that would come back to your strategy. Also the other two aspects important for effectiveness are the skills of the people who are doing the ground shooting — whether they are trained or not — and also whether there is a monitoring program in place so you can actually see whether what you are doing is effective.

I was going to now touch on why hunting is usually ineffective for feral animal control in most cases. That is not to say it always is, but generally unregulated hunting — or rather regulated but hunting in the form we are used to in Victoria and New South Wales — is ineffective. I know Victoria fairly well, at least having lived the last four years here up until last year, and I worked for a variety of conservation organisations, so even though I am based in Sydney I am actually very familiar with the situation in Victoria.

Mr TILLEY — Which part of Victoria?

Mr COX — I was living in Melbourne, but I travelled widely. I did some conservation reporting about the statewide status of conservation for both the Trust for Nature and the Victorian National Parks Association. But these principles apply more generally to — and you can apply this for hunting around the world — why hunting is usually ineffective for feral animal control. The first one is because the goals of the hunter are different from the goals of feral animal control. Even the Game Management Authority touched on that, about the different objectives. This is a general comment. Not all hunters have these goals but in general most hunters would and organisations that represent hunters have these goals, which are to

maintain the population of the target species. In Victoria it is deer. Actually the government strategies around deer are largely to maintain the population, of particularly hog deer. That is why they have bag limits — that is why you have restrictions on numbers you can take.

The hunters tend to favour males with antlers, the trophy males. If you are going to do feral animal control, you would preferentially target the females because they are the ones producing the young. Also, males do not favour a particular female; they will inseminate whichever female is available.

There are rules for ethical hunting which focus around no hunting at night, no use of spotlights and, as I mentioned for hog deer, there are seasonal limits, with only one month when you can shoot and bag limits. I was going to circulate a map just to get a sense of deer numbers and distribution in Victoria.

Ms WARD — It might be one we have got. Yes, we have got that one.

Mr COX — I will give you the bundle. Can I refer to it?

Ms WARD — Yes, of course.

The CHAIR — Perhaps once you have done that just a few minutes so we can ask you questions.

Mr COX — Okay. I guess maybe the map speaks for itself. The green dots are sambar deer, which is widespread throughout Victoria. There are probably hundreds of thousands of sambar deer but possibly more, because there is no reliable count of those numbers. Hog deer in East Gippsland and Wilsons Prom is a smaller area. There are red deer in the Grampians and there are fallow deer in a few places. There are also rusa and chital, which are not on this map.

Hunting is often ineffective because the areas targeted are often the accessible areas for the hunters and also because of the way hunting works, hunters tend to spread out, which is contrary to good feral animal control. Also there is the reliance on ground shooting. As I mentioned, ground shooting may not be the most effective method.

Volunteer shooting can be a useful contribution for professional control programs. There are certainly examples in Victoria, such as the Murray-Sunset program where since 2003, I think it is, they have been targeting goats. There is a whole range of other things going on and there is a small number of hunters, 20 to 30 hunters, in a very short period of time. The other example is where you might be trying to have sustained pressure over a very small area, like on a particular farm. So volunteer shooting can actually be of assistance in that example.

Finally, I will just list through areas I am quite familiar with. I mentioned Murray-Sunset. That is a program run by Parks Victoria and we regard that as a successful program, only because of the planning that has been done. It is closely supervised by Parks Victoria and it is an integrated program using aerial shooting for a very short, sustained period and the objectives are very clear. In the Dandenongs and Yellingbo the program that has been undertaken over the last few years, I had a briefing from Parks Victoria about a year and a half ago. It is still a trial. I think some of those elements that are in place can be useful. What is lacking around these programs is that they do not fit into the broader strategy. It is only temporarily lowering the densities for these places. They will come in from other areas. There is no government policy of containment for deer because it is regarded as a resource for hunters. So that limits the effectiveness.

I argue: are we looking at the real costs of this program? At the moment there is close supervision. If there is less supervision, you have safety issues but also the effectiveness changes. I think we need to compare these costs with what a contractor would cost to do the same job, which is what would have happened if that was not taking place. At Wilsons Prom there is a volunteer program just started up last year on hog deer. But again I do not know enough details of that, whether that is useful, but it is — —

The CHAIR — Perhaps some of these comments may come out in some of the questioning from committee members as well. Perhaps if we get on to asking you some questions and then at the end if we have got a bit of time, if you would like to make some more comments.

Mr YOUNG — Thank you for your submission and that bit of a talk. I have a few questions. In regards to the essay project from 2009 — —

Mr COX — The what project?

Mr YOUNG — In regards to the essay project from 2009 that we have been provided — —

Mr COX — Essay?

Mr YOUNG — ‘Is recreational hunting effective for feral animal control?’, the document that we have been provided from the Invasive Species Council. There are a couple of points in here and there are four fallacies that you are talking about in this document. One, that killing feral animals equates to controlling feral animals, and that hunters are not effective at reducing the numbers to a great extent. The second is that the effectiveness of professional hunters is vastly different from that of recreational hunters. It seems a bit backwards to me on the one hand — and this document is favouring professional hunters a lot — to say that recreational hunters are not able to actually take as many deer as needed but professional hunters can. Is that right; is that what you are trying to get to?

Mr COX — There are two points you made around professional versus recreational hunters. Because professional hunters are directed to do a job — about where they go, what time, what they are asked to do — it is a very different ask from saying to recreational hunters, ‘Here’s an area you can hunt’, and they can choose where they go to and they can choose what they shoot. The densities tend to be quite dispersed and the duration tends to be over a longer period. So that is a very different form of feral animal control to what a professional hunter does, with very clear objectives. I am not saying a recreational hunter cannot be directed in that way.

Also a professional hunter has certain skills, whereas recreational hunters have no minimum requirement to be at a certain skill level to be a licensed hunter. They might have some safety checks, but in terms of accuracy and in terms of their skill level, there is no minimum requirement. When we hire a professional shooter, we know what we are getting and we have a certain high standard. With recreational hunters there is a big spectrum of skill levels. So because of those reasons we think professional hunters are going to be more effective at feral animal control if you are looking at a broader area.

A second point around killing versus control in New South Wales and the game council: I worked for nine years as the executive officer for the National Parks Association of New South Wales — from 2000 to 2009. This was when the game council was formed, and we understood and saw firsthand how it operated as a representative body for recreational shooters and recreational hunters. Their main argument was, ‘Look at how many feral deer we’ve shot, look at how many cats, look at how many rabbits’, and those numbers were its proof of effectiveness. Whether you have got 5000, 10 000 or 50 000 rabbits shot, that is not a measure of effectiveness. One dead feral animal is not an effective feral animal control program — that is my point.

I think the Game Management Authority mentioned this: it is about how many species are left after your program. Because of the breeding rates — for example, with hog deer, the shooting is timed to be just when the numbers are the highest. And so if you really wanted to make a big difference, you would shoot the females when the numbers are the lowest, so it is actually perverse the way the hunting is aligned to avoid lowering the hog deer numbers.

Mr YOUNG — So in terms of exactly that point, that the goal of the hunter is to maintain the species for recreational hunting opportunities, how do you reconcile that with the goal of a professional shooter, who might be under the same sort of thought train in maintaining his profession?

Mr COX — I think if you put that to a professional hunter, they would be quite insulted.

Mr YOUNG — And to put that to a recreational hunter, they would also be insulted.

Mr COX — Look, I am not saying that all hunters have a particular motive, but in general most hunters are interested in trophies. I cannot judge what their motives are, but some will be motivated by feral animals. Actually some of the members of our organisation are recreational hunters who understand what good feral animal control is. They often tell us, 'Look, I think you're doing great work. You're saying what needs to be said'. And I am embarrassed by some hunters who have this other view that all it is about is the resource rather than the feral animal control.

Mr YOUNG — You talked, with recreational hunters, in this document about how they only focus on areas that are easily accessible — near roads and things like that.

Mr COX — Mostly.

Mr YOUNG — And then just on what you were saying before, you talked about effective methods of control — how they have to be targeted and how they are more effective when they are near roads as far as improving safety on roads and things like that with deer crossing the path of cars. That would suggest that recreational hunters are actually effective in that exact type of control.

Mr COX — You have got to look at the whole picture. If hunters were deliberately hunting near highways because they were worried about deaths from deer, that would be a good thing, but I do not think they are doing that. They are likely to go to places that are accessible to Melbourne. I mean, it is up to them where they go. It might be a very nice camping spot, or it might be a place they go to every year. This is the thing. If you really have a good feral animal control program, you go to where the problem is or what the purpose is. If you wanted to do containment, you would go to the edges of where the deer are, where the densities are very low. But hunters tend to go where the densities are highest because they can maximise their chance of finding a deer.

Mr YOUNG — In terms of this graph that we talked about before with the data from New South Wales, do you know what the data — —

Mr COX — The graph?

Mr YOUNG — The graph on the sheet you provided.

Ms WARD — The one you gave us when you came in, that we talked about earlier in this presentation.

Mr COX — There are two tables I referred to. Is it the first one or the second one?

The CHAIR — Just for the transcript, we probably should identify what the document is. It is the 'Recreational hunting NSW: claims v. facts' sheet, and it was produced by the Invasive Species Council — invasive animal council.

Mr COX — Invasive Species Council.

The CHAIR — Sorry, yes.

Mr YOUNG — You told us before that the data in this graph for numbers killed by recreational hunters in state forests was from New South Wales, and that is 512 for deer.

Mr COX — For the record, it is on the second page, and it is table 2.

Mr YOUNG — Do you have the data for Victoria for hunter harvests for state forests?

Mr COX — I do not have the data. There is very limited data around. Actually there is some good data in Victoria from the telephone survey they do every year of the deer killed. ARI publish that. So we have not done that analysis. I am not sure whether that data looks at tenure. But the numbers — we are now over 40 000 for deer killed a year in Victoria.

Mr YOUNG — Over 40 000? Could you explain some reason as to why it might be so vastly different between New South Wales and Victoria?

Mr COX — First of all, there are more feral deer in Victoria than in New South Wales. The number of registered hunters, I think, is higher. I need to check that. There has been a long history of hunting in Victoria. But it is mainly because the deer numbers are so high in Victoria.

Ms WARD — Thanks, Andrew. A number of submitters have spoken about the issues around wild dogs and the challenges with that. We have also read a lot around how when animals are left behind in forest that that creates a number of problems, especially for farmers because it can attract wild dogs. With the helicopter culling that you refer to in your essay project that you sent through to us — sorry, who is Dr Carol Booth?

Mr COX — I think there is another document that you are referring to, which I am not aware of. So this is the essay project?

Ms WARD — This is the Invasive Species Council, and it is entitled ‘Is recreational hunting effective for feral animal control?’, and it is by Dr Carol Booth. Now I assume that this was a part of your submission.

Mr COX — Can I have a look at the front cover of that?

Dr GRIBBIN — Sorry, this was not part of the submission.

Ms WARD — Sorry.

Dr GRIBBIN — But it is a publicly available document.

Mr COX — Yes, I need to — —

The CHAIR — We apologise. We thought it was something that you sent to us.

Mr COX — Thank you.

Ms WARD — It is a similar line, if you like, to your recreational hunting in New South Wales. In it, as Daniel has identified, it talks about a number of what the Invasive Species Council calls fallacies. I am interested in the conversation around helicopter shooting, where you are in isolated areas and you are shooting deer. I assume that because you are in isolated areas you are not able to remove the carcasses, so what does that mean to the habitat in which those deer are shot and the species around them, including additional invasion by wild dogs?

Mr COX — I am not — —

The CHAIR — Just for a second, I just want to apologise that we have sort of sprung this on you. As I said, we assumed it was from you. I note it is from 2009, so it may even be out of date. I do not know, but anyway — —

Mr COX — I am happy to answer the question.

Ms WARD — Thank you.

Mr COX — What I was referring to, I am happy to talk to it, because they are a consistent theme, these issues. I am not aware that aerial shooting is permitted in Victoria for deer.

Ms WARD — No, sorry; we could move deer to one point. The balance between the helicopter shooting versus ground shooting is what I am interested in.

Mr COX — Maybe I should make the point, though, that it would be good if aerial shooting for deer would be approved in Victoria, because that would be one thing that, if we wanted to do more about deer, we would instantly do. But in terms of, I think you were talking about, the carcasses that are left on the ground, it really depends over what period. If you do it over a sustained burst, there would be an oversupply of food for feral animals, and that would not be enough time to encourage breeding. But if you are doing it every month over a year, it would be a problem. Normally the short pulses of killing large numbers of animals from the air, according to the vertebrate pest experts, is normally not a problem, because while it might feed some feral animals in the short term, because the bodies decompose, then that food is no longer available. So if they are producing young, they would starve.

It depends on the period. If you are doing all of the shooting in one period, you might say, ‘Okay, January is the period when we do the aerial shooting’, and then you have dead animals on the ground. Then that would only be a short-term food supply. I think you are right to raise this concern, because it does factor into the thinking about how they do the control programs. With the goats, for instance, in Murray-Sunset they do do aerial shooting of goats, and they accept that there will be many. They do not remove the carcasses because it would be too costly and would mean they could not do as much control. But it does not create an ongoing increase of the feral animal population. It might seem counterintuitive, but this is what happens.

Ms WARD — So has there been analysis of the goat shooting that you talk about in terms of wild dogs and other meat-eating animals, their habits, their practices or how they have worked with that goat cull?

Mr COX — I do not know enough. I would have to ask them about that. But across Australia this is what the pest management experts tell me — a short pulse does not lead to long-term increases in feral animal numbers.

Mr TILLEY — Just a couple of quick ones, Andrew. On this particular map, you mentioned earlier you did some work with the national parks association.

Mr COX — Yes, I worked on their nature conservation review, which looked at the 10-year priorities for Victoria and the conservation priorities.

Mr TILLEY — This map is specifically from the NPA. Is that not part of your work?

Mr COX — This is generated by the NPA. It is actually getting a bit dated. This is the frustrating thing: there is no research done on deer numbers in Victoria and there is no coordinated project like this. So it makes it really hard. This is the best we have got, and it is probably about 5 to 10 years old, this map.

Mr TILLEY — We will probably have to ask the NPA how they have gathered the data and the proliferation.

Mr COX — It came from government, I am pretty sure. I can double check that, if you like.

Mr TILLEY — Okay. Well, we will leave that one there. We are short on time, and no doubt we may need to correspond with you in the future, but I just noticed here in this document that you provided us with today in relation to the issues again — and we are going to have other submissions from other groups and everything — that you say ‘silenced’, but I will use the word ‘suppressed’, rifles that may also reduce animal disturbance and facilitate accurate shooting. So in principle are you supporting suppressed firearms for the purposes of eradicating feral pests?

Mr COX — I think this is probably something you might want to talk to the police about, because there are restrictions on using silencers and using rapid-fire ammunition, but some contract shooters do have access to that equipment.

Mr TILLEY — But in principle you do not have any adverse — —

Mr COX — Deer get very gun-shy very quickly, so it is actually an advantage to use a silencer.

Mr TILLEY — In closing, just quickly on poison for controlling pest species, specifically on the use of poisons, would you be able to provide the committee just some of your views in relation to the use of poisons, and particularly that which is significantly used in Victoria — 1080?

Mr COX — At the moment you are not allowed to use 1080 for deer control. There is no approved poison for deer control in New South Wales and Victoria. This is a problem because this could be the most effective way of controlling it. Part of the reason is because the research to get the approvals has not been done. 1080 is not the best poison you could use, but if you are trying to solve a problem — the out-competing of feed for prolific feeders and for native animals and some of the plants that are at threat of extinction from feral deer — we should be looking at that. We are not actively looking at that, and that should change.

Mr TILLEY — Particularly when New Zealand had a problem. What is the best poison?

Mr COX — There are other poisons around, but we have strong regulations in Australia.

Mr TILLEY — Putting aside regulations.

Mr COX — Well, we have to look at it. That is all about poisons. We have to be careful about that.

Mr TILLEY — What do you think is a better poison substance?

Mr COX — There is a new poison around at the moment called PAPP, which is a faster acting poison, which is going through the approval processes right now for cats and dogs and foxes, I think. So that would be a superior one.

Mr TILLEY — Specifically, what about if it is a bait, or what if it is the one used to a lesser extent that is deployed when the animal bites down on it?

Mr COX — These are the delivery mechanisms.

Mr TILLEY — The delivery methods, yes.

Mr COX — This is really important. The research is not happening. We need some research to actually trial these things. There are some trials along those lines being done in New South Wales, which are getting close to approval, about new delivery mechanisms for feral deer and goats. So if it was for any other feral animal, like the attention we give to wild dogs and, recently, feral cats, and if we applied that same research interest in feral deer, we would have more tools in the toolbox. At the moment the toolbox is quite constrained, and it is largely because of the politics.

Mr RAMSAY — Just a quick question on that. Who do you see as responsible for doing that research for using different forms of chemical eradication? Is it GMA, is it Parks or is it DELWP?

Mr COX — The Game Management Authority's purpose is to represent hunting interests around game, so I would see that those interests are not aligned with feral animal control. I think it should be done by either — I cannot remember what the names of the departments are now — the environment department or the primary industries department. The Game Management Authority do not have research capacity anyway, but I think we should be clear that the objectives should be around better tools for feral animal control, for reducing the agricultural, safety and environmental impacts of feral deer, if we are

focusing on feral deer. I notice this inquiry does look at other feral animals, too, but deer seems to be the main focus.

The CHAIR — Most of our submissions have been around deer.

Mr RICHARDSON — Thank you, Andrew, for popping in and submitting to us today. Just to our terms of reference and particularly the overarching question about community hunting, organisations and individuals, are they effective in their control of invasive species within Victoria? That is the overarching prism of our inquiry. Are they at the moment effective in managing invasive species?

Mr COX — If we are talking about the hunting programs, we exclude the Dandenongs, Yellingbo, Murray-Sunset and Wilsons Prom, the uncoordinated hunting, if you want to call it that, is not feral animal control. It is a recreational pastime to remove a small number of deer. The objectives are wrong, the way it is carried out is wrong, the pressure is in the wrong places. So again I do not regard it as having significant feral animal outcomes in Victoria.

Mr RICHARDSON — I know we have been dominated by conversations about deer, but what are the other invasive species that your council is most concerned about, what is the highest ranked concern and what should government be doing now in addition to existing practices to try to address some of those concerns?

Mr COX — Because we are focusing on the early stages of the invasion curve, there is a new invasive species in your electorate at Mordialloc — —

Mr RICHARDSON — Of politicians?

Mr COX — Have you heard of the smooth newt?

Mr RICHARDSON — No, I have not.

Mr COX — You should be eradicating that. There is a small population in your electorate.

Mr RICHARDSON — Really? I might have to take that on board.

Mr COX — It has been there only since 2011, so that is what I would make my no. 1 priority because you can actually make a difference.

Mr RICHARDSON — Yes.

Mr COX — But like I said, cats are widespread. You have got to focus on where they are causing the most damage. The emerging pests like sambar deer just got into Wilsons Prom in the last few months — well, only first found there. Parks Victoria are trying to get rid of it. It is a bigger deer than the hog deer that is already there. That would be a priority, because you can actually maybe eradicate sambar deer from Wilsons Prom because it is isolated. It has got a narrow peninsula. That is the way I would look at it, I guess. More broadly, with deer I would actually put a containment strategy in. The state does not have a containment strategy for deer — not as an overarching strategy. Where are the small, isolated populations that we can remove? Where is the edge of the deer? How are they going to stop them spreading?

Recreational hunting can continue. There will be more than enough deer for hunters for centuries to come. But if we are trying to keep areas deer free, we need a containment strategy and we need coordination from the state government. If the Game Management Authority is going to lead that strategy, it will not be in the interests of feral animal control; it will be in the interests of hunters, is my fear. I am not saying all hunters are not interested in feral animal control, but that is why the objectives are really important. We need to be clear that we are trying to reduce the impacts of deer — that is the overarching impact. Recreational hunters could play a role in that, but under that very tight set of conditions.

The CHAIR — Thank you for coming in today. If you do not mind, because we have had limited time and, of course, this is our first public hearing, there may be other questions that committee members have in their mind. Do you mind if we write to you, seeking further information if necessary? Is that okay?

Mr COX — Not at all; that is good. Can I just make one very short point: commercial solutions for deer control around the world are fraught. So maybe that is an alarm bell, if you like, just to provide more information about why that would actually have a perverse impact. We would be happy to provide information about that.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.

