

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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Witness

Mr James Findlay.

The CHAIR — I welcome our next witness, Mr James Findlay. Thank you for coming today to give evidence. There are just a few formalities to go through before we hand over to you. The evidence given before this public hearing is being recorded. You will get a copy of the transcript to have a look at prior to it being made public, just to check for accuracy, but Hansard is very accurate, so I am sure there will not be any problems. Also the evidence you give today at the hearing is subject to parliamentary privilege; however, that may not be the case for comments made outside the public hearing.

I will now hand over to you. I understand you have got a presentation and you will talk to us for 5 minutes or so and then give us the opportunity to ask you questions. A little bit of background about yourself would be good too.

Visual presentation.

Mr FINDLAY — Firstly, thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to you. I suppose I offer you the perspective of a landowner who adjoins public land, and that is where I am coming at it from. I was listening to the radio a while back and I heard that \$480 million from deer hunting is going into the Victorian economy from 60 000 deer shot annually. So I did some sums and I thought, that is \$8000 a deer. I do not see that money in my community. I do not see that coming to my community, but it also led me to look at it and go, ‘All right, what does one deer cost me as a farmer?’. I am only a small farmer. There are lots of other people in my area who also farm and adjoin public land, so I sort of take it from that angle.

This is my place. I have got 320 acres. I lease another 70 acres up the road, and you can see I am pretty well surrounded by public land on three sides. I run first-cross ewes for prime lamb production. I am jumping the gun there, but over the past few years I have had to deal with foxes eating my lambs, wild dogs killing my sheep, now it is sambar competing with my pastures. There is a big impact.

I can go down the paddock, and count mobs. When I say ‘mobs’, you see a mob of sheep — you do not think of a mob of deer. When you see a mob of deer in your paddocks, on your pastures, on your crops, it is a big impact — and it was a shock. Up until two years ago I had never shot a deer, but when I saw that I thought, ‘I’ve got to start doing something. This is ridiculous’.

There have been programs for foxes. There have been programs for dogs, and I acknowledge those and appreciate that help. It has been there in the past. Sambar deer — I suppose I have chosen to focus on sambar deer. We have seen a big increase in their numbers over the last 20 years in my area. If I did not say it earlier, I am in the King Valley, at Cheshunt. Once upon a time if someone was driving down the road at night and they saw a deer, the whole town knew about it. Everyone knew there was a deer there. Now if you drive down the road at night and you do not see one, it is worth spreading that word around town.

It is really hard to say, but I estimate I have got anywhere from 20 to 50 coming and going off my place. I have based some figures on that. Other damage that they do is to fences, other than competition with pastures. This is my neighbour’s fence. There was no stock in that paddock for six weeks. That is the inside of the fence. That is a lot of traffic. That is all deer.

I started looking at economic impacts. These are my assumptions. This is me sitting down, working it out and going, ‘Righto, what does one deer cost me?’. It is somewhere around \$300 to \$400 per deer. If I have 20 to 50 deer, I am looking at a loss of \$6000 to \$19 000 per year in competition with those deer. What if I want to sow a paddock? I have a small block. It was run down when I got it, but I aim to grow grass like that on the right. I try to do 4 hectares a year, and that is getting it right up to scratch. If I lose it to the deer, which I have, that is a \$3000-plus loss. Ecological damage is, I think, pretty well documented, and you have had plenty of that presented to you. This is a deer wallow 200 metres outside my boundary. That deer was shot six weeks ago, back legs chopped off, left in the wallow.

A bigger part of what I wanted to talk about was I suppose the associated social impact of deer. When you have deer, yes, you have hunters. I am not here to bash hunters. I have talked to a lot of people around my area who are hunters and also farmers. We do have problem hunters. Most are fine. There is a percentage

that cause trouble. I did give an extra set of notes to the committee — I do not know whether that came through — and they list incidents that I have experienced.

Dealing with these issues and the few problem hunters creates a lot of stress on landowners. It creates a lot of stress on a family. On a Saturday morning I want to be sitting there on my veranda enjoying a cup of coffee, not having to worry, 'Are those hounds coming into my place today?'; or psyching myself up to go and have a chat. I am not going to have a confrontation, but I want them to know, 'I live here. This is my home. You are 200 metres from my place. Do you know I am there?'. They might say, 'Oh, sorry, mate'. I will tell them, 'We are just having a chat. I just want you to know I live there. This is my place as well'. Those sorts of things bugger up your weekend a bit, and certainly it is stressful. We do not need that. I am just one person amongst a group in my valley who feel the same way.

Safety on roads is becoming a big issue. We are seeing more and more near misses, and more and more accidents. I have suggested that you have a chat to the insurance companies and get figures from them, because I think that would be enlightening.

Colesy, that is his car, the HiLux. He was lucky to walk away from that. There are three cars, and I heard of a fourth just the other day, just in the local area that have all been written off. So it is becoming a bigger problem. I have taken a bit of time to ring around and chat to some people in the area who I know have a problem with deer and have been shooting them themselves. I am keeping an ear to the ground for what the local hound hunters are getting.

Out of 8 landowners out of a population of nearly 700 in the King Valley, between them they have shot 336 deer this season. There is one farmer there who has shot, in the last two months, 80 on his own. He does not think he is having an impact. He really does not. His is like my property, except his is four sides Crown. The other thing about that is while the landowners are having those issues, ironically they do not want to talk about it. They do not want people to know they are having trouble with deer. That is something I struggle with.

Deer themselves — and you have probably heard plenty of evidence on it — are pretty elusive during the day, but at night they are a completely different animal. They are an easy target. The most effective and humane way of reducing deer numbers for landowners is with the aid of a spotlight. Most of the deer up there, from those landowners, were shot with a single shot to the head. Also, most of the deer there were dragged off and put in pits to rot. Very little of them was used. Some might be used for dog tucker. If you like venison, then a bit would hit the table. It does not in our household because I cannot convince my wife, and I am not going to argue with her on that.

We estimate — and it is probably a pretty accurate estimation — that there would be another 520 from the three dog crews that work our area. They take some of the meat. They certainly do not take all of the carcass. They will chop the back legs off, cut the backstraps out and leave the rest. Those carcasses are left in the bush just outside my property. Those carcasses feed foxes; they feed dogs. I have seen a carcass cleaned up within three to five days. You go back to the spot and you look at it and you go, 'Where is it?'. It is a little pile of fur; it is like it has melted. It is gone; everything is eaten. They are feeding the other pests out there. One thing shocked me. When I started working through, I thought, 'Okay, so we have got about 850-odd deer shot locally'. But most of that meat is wasted. That is 75 to 100 tonnes of deer meat wasted just from our little area. Spread that figure across the mountains.

I feel that the Game Management Authority has managed sambar deer. Sorry, they have managed it as a protected game species, and they have a responsibility to manage the impact of the deer on landowners and the park.

Spotlighting is a very effective and a pretty humane way to get rid of deer. To landowners deer are a feral pest. They are troublesome, they are destructive and they cost us economically. If calling a deer a pest helps support landowners in dealing with the problem, then I encourage that, but I would still like to see the regulation on hunters. It still has to be regulated and controlled. Investigate options for legal processing. Brendan, before me, highlighted that there is an industry out there, and I believe there is. I really struggle

with that waste. Again, it would need regulating. I suspect there is a pretty good black market going on out there at the moment.

Continue your research and your studies into the management of how to control deer and the impacts they are having on the parks. You should investigate biological control because I think one day you may need it. Assist landowners in research on exclusion fences and subsidies towards them. A subsidy will do me no good because I will have built mine by then. It will help me, but it will not stop the deer in the park, and it will not stop the problem of the damage in the park. I have thrown in there biosecurity because if you get a pretty major infectious disease outbreak in the deer population that is transmissible between cows and sheep, how is that going to affect our agricultural industry? If you had been to England when foot-and-mouth was on — it is disastrous, it really is. Deer, like foxes, are here to stay, but we need to manage them, and we need your support in managing them both on public land and on private land. Thank you for your time.

The CHAIR — Thank you. That was a really good presentation. Your submission and what you set up there, it is good to see the tangible figures in terms of your calculations on loss. That really brings it home. I have just got one question. One of our terms of reference is deer and how to control them. I think there has been talk about different methods of trying to, but they have not actually really eventuated yet. It seems that shooting is the only way at the moment to control them. What do you think of the view of having recreational hunters being involved in the control of deer as opposed to, I guess, paid organisations or both together?

Mr FINDLAY — I think it is a tool to use in reducing numbers. I accept for some people it is recreation, but it is potentially also a business. You have got to look at the tools you have available to bring numbers down. Biological control is controversial. Obviously we hear about the importance of the potential for deer hunting as tourism, but it is also conflicting with landowners and the impact that deer have on us. Shooting, I think, is an effective way, and involving recreational hunters is probably pretty important, but they need controlling.

The CHAIR — What are some of the problems that you see or you have seen or have experienced with hunters?

Mr FINDLAY — Just personally?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Mr FINDLAY — In our area last year someone just shot one of our neighbour's cows for no reason — out in the paddock, a car drove up, bang, gone, driven off — and whether that was retribution for speaking out or something, we do not know. I personally have been threatened with reprisal if I was to shoot a dog that was on my place. As a farmer, if you have an animal — —

The CHAIR — Sorry, that was a hound, a hunting dog?

Mr FINDLAY — A hound, yes. You get hounds. I lay it down pretty straight. I say, 'Listen, if your dog is on my place, that is the deal'. Whether it is your dog or someone else's dog, if I do not know the dog, that is the deal as a farmer. Everyone is pretty clear on that. But to be threatened with reprisals is unsettling. You think, 'I should not have to put up with this. I am running a business, you are out there for recreation'. Some of these guys are builders — if I walked onto their building site and started going through their tools or interfering with their tools, they would make a pretty big fuss about it, I am sure. Anyway, side tracking.

The CHAIR — No, that is good.

Mr TILLEY — I think you have covered it really well, and you highlight certainly public awareness. Just in relation to the issues of education and self-education, I think there needs to be some sort of awareness program and education program. Certainly I feel for your losses. Thank you for doing your

analysis on the cost to your business, because we have not had necessarily a lot of that at this stage, of quantifying exactly the losses.

Mr FINDLAY — And those are just my calculations, where I go, ‘Righto, I reckon that is what it has cost me’.

Mr TILLEY — No, it should not be a cost to business. Thanks, James.

Ms WARD — Do you feel that you have enough input or conversation around how invasive animals can be controlled considering your proximity? You have got three sides of your property surrounded by Crown land.

Mr FINDLAY — When I look at things like the dogs, we have got the Cheshunt Wild Dog Destruction League. It is a very antiquated group name, but that is what they are. That is a fairly active group, so there is input into that. We report once a year, we have a meeting. I suppose this is my way of having input into that now. I do not make a habit of standing up and talking about things like this. When I heard that \$480 million and 60 000 shot, I thought, ‘Where is the money?’. It does not come into my community.

Ms WARD — I think that is a really strong point.

Mr FINDLAY — We are talking now, which is good.

Ms WARD — Good. Earlier today and in previous hearings we have discussed this idea of not only having government regulation over hunters going onto land but also a hunting organisation policing hunters as well or helping to be a part of monitoring hunters and ensuring correct behaviours. Do you see a role there or do you see how that could work?

Mr FINDLAY — There has to be. People like to be able to do their own thing, but you only need to have one threat — I only need to have one person out the back of my place at night with night vision on, and that is one too many.

Ms WARD — Do they come onto your land, or are they always — —

Mr FINDLAY — Yes, I have had them on my land. Nothing all that recently, but again it is unsettling to have a spotlight 200 metres from your house — and you can see where my place was. I think we do hear that there are only a few bad apples; I think there are more than a few. It is not just one or two; there are more than a few bad apples in amongst the crew. When you get a gang of people together in a going-out-on-the-town kind of thing, they rev each other up.

Ms WARD — Would many of these people be from the King Valley or from surrounding areas, or would they be from — —

Mr FINDLAY — Some are. I tried to build a relationship with one particular crew, because I suppose as a landowner what we are asking — my neighbour as well — is that we just want some respect. ‘You are here for recreation, we have businesses; we would like some respect for our businesses’. One crew is very good, and you can talk to them. If they get too close, I will go up and see who it is and say, ‘All right, okay, it is you guys — just so long as you know’, and they apologise because the dog has strayed. Some are locals. I see people from all over the country — from Sydney. Some are stalkers. Stalkers keep to themselves very much. Occasionally you hear a big bang out the back, but they are not creating much trouble.

Ms WARD — Do you think there is enough conversation publicly around how hunters should behave?

Mr FINDLAY — You hear it. It is probably more whingeing, which is not always constructive. I think there needs to be more conversation, and I think there needs to be a really hard coming down on those that are not.

Ms WARD — So could that tie into a conversation around the value of hunting and that there is some value in hunting and what it can bring?

Mr FINDLAY — I think we are obviously seeing that there is a value in hunting, and people have a right to — I do not question that at all — but there needs to be more conversation around it and there needs to be more respect for the other people out there. I was chatting to another fella who is a local who rides his bike. He is a local who shoots. He is a local who hunts. He rides mountain bikes — he has got a trail bike — and he has been going out the back, where he has got a loop he has ridden. He has lived in the area for 40 years and he has ridden this track for years and years. He said this year he has been pulled up on three separate occasions by hunters and told, ‘Bugger off, you are spoiling our hunt. You are scaring the deer away’. There is that stuff going on and clashes out there between two different groups of people.

Mr RAMSAY — Thanks, James. It is actually refreshing to hear a farmer’s perspective. We have not had a lot of them at this inquiry, particularly in relation to the business. We have heard a lot about recreation, but the fact is we have two stakeholders: public landholders and private. Public have responsibility under Parks Victoria to control pests, and farmers need to have the ability also to stop invasive pests entering their property. That was my point. If you go to a pest species, we have been told that then there is the obligation of farmers to rid their private property of pests. Under the game species act at the moment the requirement is a bit different. So there is some impact from moving to pest species. In fact, as I understand, there are implications under current legislation in relation to the native forest in relation to control if it was a pest species. There is bit of work for us to do in that regard.

Mr FINDLAY — Yes, and again chatting to deer hunters, I am saying, ‘What’s the problem with calling it a pest species?’. To me, that is what it is. As a landowner, that is what it is. I have had some good discussions with people over that to try to get their perspective; ‘Well, no, we don’t want it, because it becomes a free-for-all if it is’ — that is their feeling. I would like to find out more about that, put it that way.

Mr RAMSAY — Watch for our report, because we will weigh up the pros and cons of that through the inquiry. Thank you, it is great to have problems and solutions identified in a submission.

Mr FINDLAY — No good having a whinge unless you are prepared to have some input.

Mr YOUNG — Cheers for that. I was going to touch on the same point as Mr Ramsay about the pest-versus-game debate, because there have been many opinions about it, but that is fine. I think we have heard enough, and thank you very much for your submission.

Mr FINDLAY — No worries. Thanks for listening.

The CHAIR — Thank you for your time. I know it is valuable, so thanks for coming in and, yes, a very good presentation with lots of good information for us to look at. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.