

ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land

Mansfield — 20 October 2016

Members

Ms Bronwyn Halfpenny — Chair

Mr Bill Tilley

Mr Tim McCurdy — Deputy Chair

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Mr Simon Ramsay

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Executive officer: Dr Christopher Gribbin

Witnesses

Mr Charlie Lovick, president, and

Mr Graeme Stoney, executive officer, Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria.

The CHAIR — I welcome our first witnesses and those here in the public gallery to hear evidence in Mansfield regarding the Environment, Natural Resources and Regional Development Committee inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land. Firstly, there are a few formalities to go through. I welcome Charlie Lovick, president, and Graeme Stoney, executive officer, Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria. The evidence that you give today is being recorded, and you will be given proofs of the transcript prior to them becoming publicly available so you can check for accuracy. Anything you say here today within these public hearings is covered by parliamentary privilege, but that same parliamentary privilege does not necessarily cover you for comments made outside the public hearings. With that, I will hand over to you. I understand that you are going to give us a 5 to 10 minute presentation, and then that gives us time to ask you questions.

Mr LOVICK — I would like to break our talk in half so Graeme has an opportunity to talk on a particular subject and give an overall view as well. You know who I am, you know who Graeme is. Between us we probably have in our extended families more knowledge of the High Country than pretty much anybody. So our opinions here are intergenerational and based on personal knowledge of the problems we face.

It is an understatement to say that the mountains and the forests in particular are facing crisis. They are well in crisis. I do not think you can take one of the invasive species by itself. It is all interlocked. I have had opportunity to sit on roundtable discussion groups for the government on the wild horse problem. By Parks Victoria's own admission, the wild horse problem really exploded in 2005, and it is undeniable knowledge that that is when the mountain cattle and the mountain cattlemen were removed from the High Country. At the very same time mountain brumby running was made illegal. That is the catalyst for where we are now. We took any management that was involved away and replaced it with nothing.

Since then our mega-fires have grown, with a huge amount of fuel and scrub in the alpine environment where the horses roam. The horses like open plains country, thinly wooded country, with an escape route into the heavier, big timber below. The fires have now removed that because it is that scrubbed up they cannot get down. So what has happened is we have congregated the horses, with larger numbers in smaller areas. That is a good thing and it is a bad thing. It is a bad thing because of the damage they are doing to the environment with overpopulation and to themselves. It is a good thing that they are much more easily managed now than they were before.

The brumby is an icon of the High Country. We want him managed so he has a regular safe place in the High Country for everybody to enjoy, and believe me, the general public do enjoy the brumby. I would suggest that there is enough knowledge and expertise in the mountain towns and the mountain cattlemen that that should be included in the management of those horses and to bring back the old style of management. In our submission we have noted what we say is effective and what should be replaced. That is one of the main things.

But the elephant in the room, so to speak, is the deer. The horses cannot really keep exploding in numbers because they have got nowhere to go. They cannot get to new country because it is all scrubbed up. The deer love it. Who knows, but our local deer shooting groups estimate that there might be up to half a million deer. I do not think that is true; I think it is probably in the hundreds of thousands. But the deer can have three young in two years. Unless you work out how many you need to get rid of, the number is going to keep exploding, and Graeme will talk about that at length.

We know there are other invasive species out there. There is the dog. One thing that has not really been identified across Victoria is our wild goat and wild pig problems coming in especially from the New South Wales side — and, believe me, we will face the same problem that we are facing with deer now unless we get on it early. I work hand in hand with Parks Victoria. I do not believe their methods are anywhere near good enough to manage the country. You cannot just take it and lock it up. You have to have management skills. Unless we can convince governments to change the management style certainly of national parks and our state forest, we are going to keep getting these infiltrations of new species that will replace the ones we get rid of — and that is without going into the problem we have with blackberry. Invasive weeds are a terrible thing, and blackberry is the problem. So that is where we stand. We would honestly want to

be involved with government not only with education but we want to be involved physically in helping these problems. That is from my side. I would like to hand over to Graeme.

Mr STONEY — Thanks, Charlie. My name is Graeme Stoney. I am a mountain cattleman and a former state member of Parliament, and I would really like to thank the committee for coming to Mansfield to take evidence. I sat on that side of the table for 14 years, including on this committee that you are on. I know exactly how hard it is to sort out fact from opinion, which is really important in something like this.

I am sure you also know that public land management attracts strong passions and conflicting evidence. Unfortunately some opinions put forward on fuel reduction national park management and feral animal control sometime include other agendas rather than what really must be done in a practical manner. To make that point, I draw the committee's attention to an article that appeared in last week's *Weekly Times*, where the ADA considered hound hunting a very effective method of deer control, but the VNPA's Phil Ingamells said:

Recreational hunting (for deer) of any sort has never reduced numbers and it never will.

I looked at this and I started to think back over what is going on with public land management and the input of various groups. When you look at Ingamells' comments they look plausible, and it is just another point of view. But when you drill down into those, it is rhetoric, it has got no basis in fact, and it is plainly ridiculous and plainly wrong. So it is important to understand that a comment like that of Mr Ingamells — just an innocent comment on that and an opinion — is actually part of a long-term pattern, and that pattern is affecting how the high country is being managed.

We believe, and our members believe — and our submission that you have was compiled with a lot of input from members around the High Country, not just Charlie Lovick and me — that the VNPA is engaged in clever mischief to assist a deeper VNPA agenda and that the VNPA opinion on how land is managed is philosophy masked as concern for the environment, and often not in the best interests of the Australian bush. I want to expand on this because it is central to the considerations of feral animals.

Mr Ingamells has represented the VNPA on many committees connected to the High Country, two previous alpine advisory committees, the fire management roundtable, and the brumby management task force and others. It is very instructive that these committees over the years have never really ever been able to reach any sort of consensus because the VNPA have had a different view to that of the majority.

It has been reported to us over the years that the contributions of the VNPA deliberately cloud and confuse the difficult and practical realities facing the authorities. It is very hard for the authorities charged with looking after public land, and when they get conflicting views, very little gets done. For example, with the fire management roundtable just recently, the eminent fire scientist David Packham resigned, saying he had better things to do.

Chair, deer are the biggest environmental threat facing Victorian public land, and the facts are these. Deer do not have any natural predators in Australia. Hunting is the only effective method of control. Hunting with hounds is vital; stalking only partly does the job. Many deer hunters are very professional, highly skilled, follow the regulations, but there is no doubt that some need to be banned forever from the High Country especially. Sambar deer are very elusive. They are mostly solitary, very, very hard to hunt and you do require a great deal of experience to hunt sambar deer. Just because you happen to be a professional shooter does not mean to say you will ever get to shoot a deer. You have to be experienced in actually hunting the deer. There is no doubt in my mind that the hunting that is going on at present is sort of holding the numbers, but it is not good enough.

I would just like to quickly give you an example of the Lovick and Stoney farms in the middle of the state forest out at Howqua Hills. The Stoneys allow two hunting teams on our property, reliable teams. They get a lot of deer, and the dogs have got trackers on them. We know exactly where the deer run. The deer run from 15 kilometres from our farm one way, through our farm and into the national park where they have security and cannot be hunted. That national park and the adjoining alpine resort at Buller is a breeding

ground for deer, and as soon as you shoot some deer on our farm, some more come in and fill up the vacuum. Without the shooting that goes on at our place, we would have to sell our cattle. We also have some environmental damage, but you could wear it if it stayed at this level. We fear that it will not stay at these levels.

We do know what the dogs do, we do know what the deer do. We know the deer range over a large area, and we know that hunting is the only thing that can do it. Really the key is that the national park keeps breeding more deer. So we need to look at the boundaries and the management in total, not just national park management there and state forest there.

To conclude, I just want to make the following points on our submission, which you have. Hunting is the only effective method of controlling deer, and especially hunting with hounds. Most groups are professionally experienced, and that asset must be harnessed and expanded. Accreditation to ban rogue hunters is really, really important. Our members have had issues with rogue hunters on their state forest licences, and that must be addressed, and special accreditation for deer hunting on public land could solve that, so you ban the rogue hunters and some of the stupid people that go with that.

We are suggesting that incentives to hunters, including commercialisation of carcasses and perhaps hunting tourism, should be expanded. There probably should be some sort of budget for that. I mentioned before about having tenure-blind management, where you have the same in national parks as you do in state forests, which means you have to take your dogs into national parks. I do not see any problem with that, because the bigger problem is the deer, which is going to destroy the environment forever.

This whole thing will have to be explained to the public. We will have to explain to the public that we have to actually develop — horror, horror! — a hunting culture, which will be a much preferable option to the environmental disaster that is looming for us. The public are going to have to come to terms with hunting going on where they are walking, just as it does in many other countries in the world. The culture to that extent will have to change. If we do not take those very strong actions, the environment of public land here in Victoria, and especially in the High Country, will change forever. Chairman, that is the stark reality we have and we are facing at the moment.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Perhaps I will start off with a few quick questions. In terms of controlling deer and shooting, and based on the evidence we have received, is there any other effective way at the moment? Are you saying that deer can be controlled just by shooting? I guess one of the other arguments is research to try to look at other methods, whether it is baiting or other things that are not there at the moment.

Mr STONEY — Yes. We have to look at here and now. The only thing to control deer is hunting, and the only effective method of hunting is with hounds that bail them up so you can actually get at them, because the sambar are very, very elusive. I know there has been a suggestion that you do not have hunters and you have professional shooters that go in, but you have got professional shooters already with your hunting groups. They are very, very good at it. They are much better than I would be at that. We could hunt on our land. We let the groups in because they know what they are doing, they get the deer and they take them home to eat. They are very good at it, and the reliable ones you just would not get any better anywhere in the world — and they are good shots.

The CHAIR — On the wild horses, which we have heard are problems, your submission suggests capturing them and then rehoming them. How many do you think could be rehomed? How effective would that be at reducing them? I am assuming that we are not talking about shooting them or whatever because of community perceptions as opposed to whether it is a necessary thing or not?

Mr LOVICK — And inhumanity too. Suggesting they could be shot out of helicopters in that country is not viable. It never will be, and you will end up with a mare being shot in the belly and crawling away to die, and what happens to her foal? It just wanders around till its dead. It just does not effectively work that way, whereas people on horses with ropes have been catching these horses for 100 years, and they would not be still doing it if it was not practical and actually quite viable financially, apart from it is a sport as

well, and that is how some of our greatest horsemen have developed. Legendary horsemen have developed chasing wild horses.

Most of them caught are young horses, yearlings. People say, 'You're taking the foal off its mother'. Every horse that has ever been born has to be weaned at some stage, so that is just another furphy. There are people out there with the wrong attitude to identifying what the problem is and how you make the hard decisions to get the numbers down. Now we would not be involved in this as mountain cattlemen unless we were guaranteed that the horse numbers would be managed down to a level where they could remain in the alps, because they are a great source of entertainment and passion for people that walk, ride, drive through the bush to see a brumby or two. It is fantastic.

Let us go back a little bit on that. If there were 40 mountain cattlemen's families in the great eastern alps, we will call them — behind Benambra and through to the Bogongs, and not so many this side; we never had a horse situation — but if there were 40 families, if they caught 20, 30, 40 or 50 a year, they might have shot 10, 20, 30, 40 older horses, crippled horses, rogue horses, they managed so that the horse could exist where they lived. They did that, and it was very, very effective. That has all been removed, and what happens? I keep saying it — the numbers explode.

The government has to get real on removing the obstacles to managing the problem. At the moment, as Graeme said, with the likes of Phil Ingamells I have sat on many boards — and I have walked out at times because you come up with a general consensus of what will work and Phil will say, 'Yeah, it would be great, but you cannot because the triple-barbed bandicoot lives there and you might damage him'. I mean, we all love our animals, but he has always got an excuse why you cannot. At some stage this government is going to have to say, 'Yes, we can', and we as mountain cattlemen as a group, and all mountain families will come on board with them, will help manage the situation.

Mr STONEY — Can I just add to that. I think in our report we do say that we are supporting yarding and either trucking out or shooting, which means you can be accurate. We do not support shooting out of helicopters because of what Charlie said — you will shoot the mare in the guts and she will drag herself across the plain and the foal will die.

Mr LOVICK — And it is going to feed every wild dog that lives out there.

Mr STONEY — I understand also that when they tried yarding in the past they had to pull up the yards each time. Instead of having set yards and then having a program to go around and yard, they had to take the yards away, which meant there were a lot more logistics and it did not really work. So there needs to be a set-up where there are permanent yards and monitoring, and you muster or you trap them in there and you trap them over here in a sort of a program. Is that how?

Mr LOVICK — Yes, that is pretty much how it works.

Mr STONEY — But parks insisted on the yards being taken down, and the logistics were too difficult. I think that needs to be all revisited.

The CHAIR — We heard from the catchment management authority in hearings yesterday, and they were saying that they are bringing all parties in for consultation. Are you part of that? You have been talking about coming across a lot of brick walls.

Mr LOVICK — We have not heard of that.

The CHAIR — So you have not been involved?

Mr LOVICK — No. We have not been invited or involved. Look, I do not want to harp on about this, but we have a cocky sitting on our shoulders because we are mountain cattlemen. Every other group in the green movement have damned us, and therefore they have damned our knowledge as well. You cannot live in this country for seven generations and not know about it and not love it and not have a great responsibility to it.

The CHAIR — You should certainly be involved and be part of the consultation process.

Mr LOVICK — Yes.

Mr TILLEY — It is great to see you, gentlemen. You were just getting to that little bit there where I think you were starting to understate your stewardship of our estate, our public lands, and getting to the point that generationally mountain cattlemen have done an extraordinary job in the management of our public estate. I thank you, and do not ever give that fight up. But on that, there are a few things I would like to add just as recent observations particularly around your patch. By way of commentary, around Sheepyard and up to Upper Jamieson via the Lickhole Creek Track there is significant deer proliferation around that particular area. There are large numbers of wild dogs around Burry Creek, also exacerbated by black wattle choking up waterways. Around Mount Howitt, which was a pretty easy ride generally, taking just a 4-hour short ride, we found significant mobs of horses up there — about three or four mobs there — in a very short period of time. That is out the back of Butcher Country Track. Of course you are very familiar with all of that area. I probably passed your place.

Mr LOVICK — You would have.

Mr TILLEY — But based on the observations, I want to just talk a little bit about the interbreeding and what we traditionally saw as the iconic Australian brumby — there was a Waler type, with feathers around the hoofs, low to the ground, stocky — turning into thoroughbred, wiry rubbish out there. Is there a way of selectively ensuring that in those numbers of brumby you are not getting interbreeding and those sorts of things, so as to maintain that iconic good quality that was once there in our High Country? Do you have some commentary on that sort of ideology?

Mr LOVICK — My view is that if you condense the numbers and put them in the position they are in now, you will have the wrong inbreeding happening. But while they are isolated in small family mobs, and that is how they like to live — a stallion will get his little group, he will kick all these young colts out, and they will go and wait to develop their own mob — those horses over time will hunt their old mares out and those young blokes will go and pick them up and start a new group. That is pretty much how they kept their breed clean. It is very static at the moment. You do not find misshapen, crippled horses out there as much at all. It is pretty good. It is only this congregation of numbers that will actually bugger that up, to coin a phrase.

Mr TILLEY — Would it be reasonable to say that gentlemen like yourself and those families that are familiar with and know the High Country would be the people best positioned to be able to identify them and make sure that the integrity of those mobs remains?

Mr LOVICK — Without doubt. They are the only people with the knowledge. For most of those legendary figures, and we will name some of them, like the Kenny Connleys of this world, that is their life of living in the bush, on their horse. In the back of Ken's country over many, many hectares, he and people like him would know each group of horses. He would know the stallion. He would know the mares. If he came across a young colt out there with an old mare, he would know where that mare had come from. That is the knowledge they have. They get out there and they live with the horses. They follow the horses around and they get to know how they run and where they run, and that is why they are so effective in catching the horses.

But having said that, and going back to your question before, there are hundreds of horses that can be rehomed every year. I do not think there are thousands — that would be ridiculous — but the horse, as we manage horse numbers downward, should be utilised, and if that means he goes out to abattoirs, that is what he does. If they have to be shot on site for any reason, we believe that carcass should be taken out; it should not be shot and left there. We know there are going to be hard times ahead to get these numbers down, but we have to get the numbers down, and not do it by helicopter.

Mr TILLEY — That is where I go to some of the regulation we are seeing, particularly with the strategies and the methods used by way of regulation. We are seeing how the statutes and regulations dealing with roping and those sorts of methods used for capturing horses — even where those practised

horsemen are now in events such as brumby catching, where roping is seen as a rodeo effect, by way of example — impact on the actual practice of capturing horses. Have you got some ideas on how parliaments and governments can ensure that regulation does not minimise the safe methods used and dispel some of the perceptions about how we capture them safely, using good animal husbandry and safe practices?

Mr STONEY — Could I just make a comment on the animal welfare? I do notice that some evidence has been given to you that chasing horses with other horses and horsemen is stressful on the horses that are being chased. If any of you have ever seen a mob of horses when a helicopter comes and they know that something is going to happen, those horses will be at full gallop — 40 or 50 kilometres an hour — bashing through the trees, panic stricken; and every time the helicopter comes around after the first couple are shot they will take off at full gallop, and those horses will be stressed for weeks. With any helicopter, they will know within two runs that this is going on, and they will just be galloping through the bush, flat out, hitting trees, breaking legs and panic stricken because of the helicopter.

Mr LOVICK — Sorry, but just to follow on from that, if you get to know the horses you are chasing on horseback, they will not run. They will trot off a bit and stop, and the stallion will look back to see what is going on. If you come up too close, he will come out as if to tell you to stop back. He will turn around, and his old mare, the lead mare, will take the horses with her way to the back to keep you away, but it is not stressful. It is a horse. He is just seeing it as, ‘I am not going to let you into my group’. You can actually get quite chummy with the group. You know how they run and where they live. There is no stress until the last second — bang, you are in, you have caught your horse and you go.

Mr TILLEY — Just on that, you can gain their trust, I suppose, by use of molasses, cutting out timber and getting them settled in and getting them used to you before you actually get them into pens and those sorts of things. Does that practice work to any extent?

Mr LOVICK — If somebody wants to get to know their group of horses — and you should get to know your group of horses before you go out and try to just will-nilly say, ‘There’s a mob of brumbies. Let’s chase them’ — that is not how these blokes catch their horses. They are a lot smarter.

Mr STONEY — But the trapping works really well if they are allowed to do a full gamut of having yards set up, free feeding them for a week beforehand and luring them to the yards so the animals are not stressed once they are in the yard — things like that. It will work very well.

Mr LOVICK — You could look on it as a proper business, a business model.

Mr TILLEY — I have just one more question before I have to pass on to someone else. Just to help the committee, generally what is a mob size? What are the numbers you get in a group?

Mr LOVICK — You will often find a young stallion and maybe one or two mares, but a good size is probably less than 20. It is more like 8 to 14 or 15, somewhere around that, from my experience anyway; and yet I have not been involved in the bigger numbers out in the eastern alps, because that is where the problem is. The problem is not on the Bogong High Plains. That has been recognised as running a mob of somewhere between 30 and 70 for many, many years. You can go in and you can manage that number by catching your 8 or 10 or 15 or whatever you decide each year. They are safe, and they are the iconic brumby that everybody — the walkers, the riders — go out to see. The elephant in the room is in the eastern alps, where there are hundreds congregating into mobs at times onto Cowombat Flats, and they have been fed back from the New South Wales side. You cannot just treat this as, ‘Oh, look, we’ll do it for a year or two and see how it goes’. I mean, the government has to get real, because this is a very, very serious problem — very serious.

Ms WARD — I was just writing down some notes on what you just said. I want to talk to you about the hunting tourism potential. You alluded to it in talking to us and also within your submission. What barriers do you see that currently exist around preventing an increase in tourism around hunting?

Mr LOVICK — The reality is the way the national park is zoned and the way parks manage it has to be brought into the future, because there is no doubt that tourism hunting goes on all over the world. Certainly let us talk about North America, where you might pay \$5000 or \$10 000 to go out and shoot a big head. It might even be more. That has the potential to work here as well. So it is another way of incentivising — if that is a word — the groups to go out there and get more deer. The zoning of the management of the national park does not work. There are some places in the national park where you can go in and hunt, but you are not allowed into the wilderness area to hunt. So where do you think the deer are breeding? What you are doing is creating the vacuum to bring more out. There has to be a completely new look at how you do that. Tourism is obviously one way to incentivise groups to do it more — and as Graeme said, commercial meat, the whole thing.

Ms WARD — The interesting thing that we are hearing about hound hunters is that it is indiscriminate about what deer they get, generally. The dogs do not care whether it is a big stag, they do not care whether it is a doe; they will round up any deer. Do you think there is a stronger role to play within tourism to focus more on hound hunting or hunting overall? Because we have also heard that when you go after primarily stags, which a lot of stalkers do, that that does not actually change the population at all, because you have still got plenty of breeders.

Mr LOVICK — Yes. So there really are two ways of looking at what is happening to the deer at the moment. The hound hunter takes everything that the dogs bail up and that is just the way it is. They take everything. So that is actually making inroads. I know plenty of stalkers. Both my sons and my daughter, they do both. If you want a head to put on your wall and there is a 32-incher standing in the gully beside you but you know there is a 36-incher there somewhere, you are not going to ruin your chance of getting the big bloke by letting him go. So the headhunting is a tourism side thing, but the hound and all those other hunting practices are the way you get rid of your numbers.

Ms WARD — With the horseriding business that you have got, are you concerned about having hunters working in parallel with your business and how that would affect your business, or do you see them working quite harmoniously?

Mr LOVICK — We work harmoniously. You get to know your hunters and you have got to have the dialogue with them. You do get people coming in who are new to the area. and I suppose you hear a gunshot or whatever and then it is up to you to go and find where the camp is and notify them that there are going to be horses here, there or wherever. But we have not had a major problem with that at all and we are in the alps pretty much all the time.

Mr STONEY — I think hunting is misunderstood by the general public. Overseas bushwalkers and hunters coexist all the time, and it is an accepted practice. I think the latest bushfire scare, if you like, where as soon as it is a hot day everyone leaves the bush, is the same sort of thing. The public are a couple of generations away from understanding the land and a couple of generations away from understanding hunting, and the firearm issue is totally misunderstood. So you have this sort of nervousness from the public. I think probably if what we are suggesting, where hunting is encouraged and developed simply to save the environment, then the authorities — the government and parks and DELWP — will just have to embark on an enormous education program to explain to the public that you either have hunting or you are going to lose your environment. The public and the community are going to have to make a decision about what they want. And it will need to be explained, because most hunters are very good at it; they are very responsible; and they just coexist throughout the world. They should be able to do it here in Victoria.

Mr LOVICK — I think we have got to get rid of the problem that has preceded this with rogue hunters and rogue spotlighters who have created a really bad image of the proper hunter. That is where there is going to be a little bit of heartache and a bit of bleeding, to make sure we get over that. The reality is that spotlighting is the most humane way of shooting any game. Blokes out there in the bush with the night light walking through the bush will take out hundreds of deer because the deer is a dumb animal in a spotlight. So every opportunity to take deer out has to be put on the table. Let us argue about them all, but they have to be put on the table to have any chance of getting on top of this problem.

Ms WARD — Is there much deer tourism locally, hunting or — —

Mr LOVICK — There is plenty of hunting, but not on the tourism side.

Ms WARD — Do you see a role for increased sales in deer meat that people do procure in their hunting?

Mr STONEY — I would say absolutely. It is still exotic. Wendy, my wife, does high-end dinners at our place, and one of the courses — —

Ms WARD — Did we get an invitation?

Mr STONEY — One of the courses is venison, and it is exotic. People just say, ‘Oh, venison’. It is really special. That could well be on the menus of restaurants in Melbourne as a special thing, Victorian High Country venison, and I am sure it would create a lot of interest.

Mr LOVICK — And there is a huge Asian market, absolutely. That has been identified.

Ms WARD — We have seen that with New Zealand.

Mr STONEY — Yes, absolutely.

Mr RAMSAY — Thank you both very much for your time this morning. I want to direct a question to Graeme, given he has been part of the political machinery in the past. It is about funding. The funds allocated for control of invasive pests by the state government are really a pittance to what is needed. In fact the *Weekly Times* this week reported that there is only a one-year funding commitment for on-site biosecurity inspections. The view I have taken is that we need a national approach to invasive pest control based on biosecurity. We heard in evidence yesterday about potentially the spread of disease, whether it is through wild pigs, goats or deer and whether it is foot-and-mouth — we are very familiar with that disease, given we have been overseas and experienced that — John’s or other things.

I am interested to know, Graeme, about providing some real continuity of priority funding to deal with these issues. It is not about just deer and brumbies. We have heard about pigs, cats, dogs, European wasps and corellas — the list went on. Yesterday we covered just about every animal on earth that was seen as a pest at some point. Until we actually get governments, both state and federal, to prioritise the control of these pests, our biosecurity in food production is threatened. What would you see as the best way to provide continuity of funding, taking a national approach to control some of these cross-border invasive pests?

Mr STONEY — As a farmer, my biggest concern is if foot-and-mouth got into the deer population. That would be ‘Good night, nurse’ for the Australian beef industry, absolutely, because you would never get rid of it out there in the High Country. You would have to get rid of every deer to be able to prove that Australia is free of foot-and-mouth. So that is a huge concern. If you consider some of the proposals to get rid of the horses, which include helicopters, and if you consider the damage that cats are doing to our smaller mammals throughout Australia, you would think there would be a watertight case for a huge federal budget, because it needs to be right across Australia for feral animals and plants. State governments can only do so much, and the state government budget for the last 20 years, even before I came into Parliament, was pitiful really, and it has got worse over the years. Parks, in some years towards the end of the budget, can hardly run their vehicles let alone go out and get some contractors to spray some blackberries. The budget is just pitiful and there needs to be a whole new approach to it all. Perhaps your committee could make that one of the recommendations.

Mr RAMSAY — I have just one more question if I may. Given what you have said about hunting and the use of hounds, I must say that is not a consensus view across all the testimony we have heard. Some people are for hounds, some are not.

Mr STONEY — I understand that.

Mr RAMSAY — Even within the recreational shooting fraternity some are supportive of using hounds and some are not.

Mr STONEY — But you have to drill down and look at what is the agenda behind it, you see. That is why I raised that earlier. There are agendas running right through, and I like to think the cattlemen do not have an agenda on this; we really care about the best way to fix some of these problems.

Mr RAMSAY — That is right. Sometimes it is a mix between control and pleasure. I get that. As far as funding goes though, if we take it that hunting is perhaps the best control method for deer control, how do we appropriate the appropriate funding, if you like, to support our hunters, whether they be recreational or professional, in that control method?

Mr STONEY — Well, it has got to be a government thing. Governments have got to make that decision to allocate sufficient funds to incentivise — Charlie's word — the hunters that go out there and get them. They have to compare that with what is going to happen to the environment. I am sure you have had evidence about what is going on on the high plains, which is not what I spoke about today. I only spoke about state forests. But on the high plains, 25 years ago one of the cattlemen took us up and showed us — when I say 'us', all the cattlemen — a big deer wallow up on the Bennison. At the time we tried to involve the VNPA and other environmental groups in a joint effort to go to the government of the day and say, 'We've got a looming disaster on our hands'. The VNPA would not deal because they thought that if they supported us on this, they would be supporting alpine grazing, which is totally wrong. It was not until 2005 that the VNPA suddenly discovered deer and started to push it, which was far too late. You have to have a will by government, state and federal, to find a really big budget for feral animals and plants.

Mr RAMSAY — The point being that it will not just be the financial value of a carcass if in fact we change the legislation to allow rendering or human consumption of game meats. It will not be sufficient. It will require additional support.

Mr STONEY — Yes, it will. Because you will have to have accreditation, you will have to have people checking on the deer groups, the deer hunters, and you will have to have people who can kick rogue groups out and tell them never to come back. So there will be some financial input into this.

Mr RAMSAY — Can you tell us what VNPA stands for?

Mr STONEY — Victorian National Parks Association Inc.

Mr LOVICK — I honestly think you are right, that it has to be a national approach to get the funding. I think it has to be a national approach, and the reality is that you will not control horses or deer if one state has a different agenda to the next state. These animals are tenure blind, so you could be doing what you like here in Victoria and eradicating everything, and out of the national park in New South Wales it is all just coming in. It is a national concern and a national approach has to be taken.

Mr YOUNG — I just a couple of quick questions. We are pushing time, which is unfortunate given some of the evidence that you guys have presented. It has been fantastic listening to you. Off the back of what Mr Ramsay was talking about, as far as money to incentivise and things like that to get more people hunting, we have already got a statutory authority in the GMA, but there are some inherent problems with the way they were set up and the legislation that restricts them to only doing compliance and that sort of thing. Do you think there should be changes to the way that is structured to not only use government funds to funnel into the promotion of hunting but also allow them to be involved in what you were talking about earlier — tourism-based hunting?

Mr STONEY — I am not sure if it is the GMA or parks. I am not sure. You would have to look at where you wanted to get to and then work out who does it, I would imagine.

Mr YOUNG — The GMA is the one responsible for regulating hunting.

Mr STONEY — Yes, but then they are not responsible for rules in national parks and the boundary limits of what you can do here and there, so really that would have to be worked out. You would have to work out where you going to get to and then work out how you going to do it, which authority has jurisdiction, who is supervising accreditation and how officers get out and control some of the groups, because there are issues with some of the hunting groups. Our members have had intimidation on their grazing runs. There have been deliberate shots fired when they have been taking cattle past because of the attitude of the hunters. All that has to go. There are some very, very professional hunters out there that understand all that and understand the bush. They are the ones we need to foster and encourage.

Mr YOUNG — We have a game licence administered by the GMA, which is what allows you to hunt deer, not just a firearms licence. Do you think the GMA should be enforcing that a little bit and starting to strip people of game licences to remove those ratbags?

Mr STONEY — If they are the ones that do it, that would be — but then where does Parks Victoria come into it? The Parks Victoria rules about hunting in parks have to be changed. There is no doubt about that. So there has got to be some sort of consensus on how it is done and who does it. But that is something really for the government of the day to work out.

Mr LOVICK — I honestly think that this problem is so big and it is going to get bigger and bigger that half of the problem are these overlapping authorities. You can do one here and not there. It is just not working. I think we probably have to look at some overriding authority to manage this problem and take it out of the hands of parks and GMA and whatever else. The problem is that big. I really believe that.

Mr YOUNG — So you would agree that any areas in national parks where there is no good reason to not be hunting in there should be changed to allow it?

Mr LOVICK — No, that is exactly right.

Mr STONEY — You would have to if you are going to save the environment. I am not sure if I finished, but up on the high plains — 25 years ago it was starting — the sphagnum bogs up on the Bogongs and the Bennison and the Snowy and Howitt are becoming deer wallows. Absolutely. There was an incident with Tony Burke, the federal environment minister, and the cattlemen about a little frog, and he came down from Canberra to inspect a grazing trail. There were thousands of these frogs in a lovely little pond, with reeds and clear water and so forth. There were some cattle nearby, and he said, ‘The cattle must go. This is ridiculous. These frogs are threatened’. But the little pond was a deer wallow, which had been disused and had grown over, and the reeds had grown up. It was a beautiful little spot. The frogs were all over your boots and climbing up your legs. The cattle had not damaged it at all. The pond was created from an old deer wallow, but just up the creek there was a huge current deer wallow, which would cover the size of these desks and was about a metre deep, and they were having a lovely time. That muddy water was just washing downstream, towards the frogs.

Mr YOUNG — And that is a great example of the environmental advocacy rhetoric that we see that informs a lot of this stuff, and I am glad you brought it up today. Just one other question: we have had evidence given to the committee to suggest that the use of suppressors would be a good tool to aid in taking more deer, and some of our laws at the moment are prohibiting everyday hunters from having access to them. Is that something you think might be a good idea or should be looked into?

Mr LOVICK — Silencers?

Mr YOUNG — Yes.

Mr LOVICK — Yes, absolutely. I keep saying, and Graeme will agree, that we need to put everything on the table. If you are fair dinkum about holding or trying to eradicate the problem, everything has to be on the table.

Mr TILLEY — Just one final question. I just want to clarify that.

The CHAIR — We are not trying to wind you up early, it is just that we have got other witnesses and we want to make sure everyone gets their time.

Mr STONEY — We understand that. We actually have something else to do.

The CHAIR — If we do have other questions or if we want to explore some things further, do you mind if we write to you or whatever through the secretariat?

Mr LOVICK — Absolutely.

Mr STONEY — Of course not. We are happy to come to Melbourne if there is something else to clarify.

The CHAIR — Maybe we could do that.

Mr STONEY — We could do that. We could come to Melbourne if something needs clarification and you are sitting in Melbourne.

The CHAIR — Thanks. That is a very generous offer.

Mr TILLEY — Just off the back of a question my colleague asked you about wallowing, the committee has received evidence from parks, and I would like to pass up an image here which demonstrates a stag wallowing. In your experience — —

Mr STONEY — That is snowgrass there, isn't it?

Mr TILLEY — Yes, snowgrass. In your entire experience have you ever seen cattle wallow?

Mr LOVICK — Buffalo do; cattle do not.

Mr STONEY — Cattle do not wallow. Cattle try to keep out of bogs whenever they can.

Mr LOVICK — A horse will get in and roll. He loves a bit of a wet, but he does not roll to get mud over himself. He likes to have a bit of a swim. These blokes, when they wallow, need to cover themselves with mud so they actually prepare their wallow so they can get the mud over themselves.

Mr TILLEY — So cattle have been unfairly criticised over these last — —

Mr LOVICK — It is ridiculous. There is always a furphy; there is always something.

The CHAIR — That is not quite within the committee's terms of reference, unless you are saying cattle are invasive animals. Thanks very much for coming today. Thanks also for your submission and what you have told us.

Witnesses withdrew.