

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

Ms Vicki Ward

Mr Simon Ramsay

Mr Daniel Young

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Staff

Executive officer: Dr Christopher Gribbin

Witnesses

Mr Alex Green, chief executive officer, and

Ms Judy Dixon, acting tourism and economic development manager, Mansfield Shire Council.

The CHAIR — We will recommence the hearings. I acknowledge the local member of Parliament, Cindy McLeish, the member for Eildon, who is attending here today. I welcome our next witnesses and thank them for coming in a little bit early at short notice. Mr Alex Green, CEO of Mansfield Shire Council, and Ms Judy Dixon, thank you both for coming in. Before you start your presentation, I will go through a few formalities. First of all, all the evidence is being recorded, and you will be given a transcript to look at prior to it being made public, to check for accuracy. Also, whatever you say in the public hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, but once you are outside the hearings that parliamentary privilege may not apply. On that note, I think the secretariat would have spoken to you about providing a presentation for 5 to 10 minutes and then giving us a time to ask questions.

Mr GREEN — What I might do is read from a prepared additional statement to build on our previous submission. What I intend to do is give an insight particularly into the broader economic base tourism market in the Mansfield shire and contextualise where hunting fits within that. I will also talk to some concerns emerging from the community regarding feral animal management.

I will start with four key points that I might come back to at the end. Control of invasive animals on Crown land is necessary for the environmental, social and economic sustainability of Mansfield shire. Insufficient control leads to increased populations with associated degradation and movement of animals beyond Crown land onto private land, and with associated negative impacts. Control measures that include hunting and culling must take account of our high visitation patterns and work to reduce overall broader negative impacts on tourism. Our community is concerned at the range and number of invasive animals on Crown and private land as evidenced by submissions we received and attendance at a recent community forum, so it is a significant and emerging issue.

There are vast tracts of public land within the Mansfield shire, and we are obviously part of the High Country. It is very much part of the persona of what the Mansfield community is and what it identifies with. State forest reserve, alpine resort and Alpine National Park when combined with our lakes and rivers are at the heart of what makes Mansfield a special place to live and for people to visit. That includes visitors, residents and what we refer to as ‘non-resident ratepayers’. We have a very high proportion of people who own property in Mansfield but live in Melbourne or other metropolitan areas, and there are obviously many visiting friends and other relatives.

Tourism is the key economic driver of Mansfield shire. It generates 18 per cent of employment, 19 per cent of industry output and 52 per cent of the retail spend in the local economy, generating \$823 million. Typically Mount Buller is a key destination and driver in winter, and Lake Eildon and the surrounding High Country are the key destination drivers in summer. So we have this dynamic in Mansfield where the town is busy generally throughout the whole of the year, and that differs somewhat from a lot of rural communities.

We heard from Graeme Stoney and Charlie Lovick earlier. Brendan Mahoney is also here as are members of other families, and a lot of the identity of Mansfield is built around that High Country experience — horseriding, cattle and agriculture. It is still a very important part of our economy and of the identity of who we are. You will hear later from Michael Watson, who has one of the six horseriding businesses that contribute to a build on that identity and that are an important part of the tourism offer that is here.

What I wanted to do is give you a perspective on the broader tourism offer that is here and indeed a complete 21st century picture of what Mansfield is as a community. Whilst we have the commercial horseriding and that history that we build on and are very proud of, we have other elements that are emerging in the tourism market — bike riding, for example. There has been a significant increase in mountain biking and road riding in various areas — mountain biking at Mount Buller, which gives the off-season market, and you would have seen road riding in other areas around the state, but we see that emerging here.

We also have four-wheel driving and camping, which are really significant parts of the offer. So from this point in the year onwards right through summer you will see increasing numbers of families coming to camp, enjoy the bush and a wide range of camping opportunities in the shire. Vehicle touring is also

becoming increasingly important, so people coming in vehicles to tour with the increasing numbers of options they have — high country driving — culminating in things like the Targa event that is coming in November. Then there are the other traditional uses in the bush, walking, camping and fishing. They are all complemented by the wonderful retail, food and beverage offer at Mansfield and the various small communities. So it becomes a complete tourism package. We get about 1.2 million visitors over the calendar year, and obviously there are peaks and troughs, but we have worked very hard to try to spread that out to give sustainability to all of the tourism businesses in the shire. So where does hunting fit within this?

It is very much an important part of the tourism offer, and I think you asked the question earlier to Graeme Stoney and Charlie Lovick: is it an important part of tourism? It absolutely is. We believe that the contribution of hunting to the Mansfield shire is estimated at \$14.6 million per annum, as found by the Victorian government's estimate of the economic impact of hunting in Victoria in 2013. We think we have a total tourism take of around \$800 million, and hunting is around \$14 million, so it is really quite significant. It is a part of the broader offer. Indeed anecdotally we have arguably at least one business I can think of in the main street that is primarily based on hunting and fishing and camping, and hunting is an important part of their take, so it is quite important.

The sector is significant and it has the potential to grow; it is particularly well suited to areas less densely visited and populated. If you think about it, obviously we do not want to see hunting in the main street of Mansfield — it is a different offer in the main street of Mansfield — as opposed to Kevington or Woods Point or indeed Jamieson. And I acknowledge Cr Bate, ward councillor for Jamieson ward, but it is a really significant part of the southern part of the shire.

Care must be taken to ensure the development of this market, as allowed by regulation and policy, is not at the expense of the destination's core and mainstream markets. We have this wide range of people visiting, and in some ways we are a microcosm of what we are seeing across Australia, where you start to see conflicting uses, whether it be with families wanting to go bike riding on the rail trail, motorbikes wanting to come and enjoy enduro motorbiking opportunities, and vehicles and car touring conflicting with cyclists. Increasingly across Australia as our population grows we are starting to see these conflicting uses, so we just want to acknowledge that it needs careful management if we see an increase in hunting. We believe that it is an opportunity, but we need to do so in a way that is consistent and ensures that we meet everyone's needs.

In terms of invasive species — I will read from the notes again — programs to control the numbers of invasive species on public land in Mansfield shire must be developed in a strategic and coordinated way with input from all land managers and key stakeholders with a view to minimising the impacts on our mainstream tourism markets and lifestyle property owners, as well as the productive agricultural land and of course preserving the conservation effort in the public land.

A pest animal forum was recently held in Mansfield and attracted a healthy attendance of some 30 people. Speakers included representatives from DELWP, the Game Management Authority, the Australian Deer Association, a local district firearm officer, local farmers and Landcare groups, and the range of animals did include deer. Deer were obviously a key part of that discussion, but I will list off the other species that were also discussed: wild dogs, foxes, feral cats, rabbits, hares, pigs and a number of native animals as well that were acknowledged as problems, and they include kangaroos, wombats and cockatoos. Carp and European wasps were also included. So you start to get a sense of the range of issues, and I think we have all heard of this before, that land managers face and private landholders face in managing their lands.

Importantly concerns were received from residents, including a perceived rise in illegal hunting and increased risks of crashes from animals on the road, particularly deer. The use of the words 'perceived rise in illegal hunting' is quite important. Whether or not there is a rise in illegal hunting, I think we all acknowledge that none of us wants to see an increase in illegal hunting. There is definitely a perception among some in the community, and it might touch on some of the discussion that was had earlier by Graeme and Charlie, where culturally in Australia we have certain perspectives around gun ownership and gun use.

I think as the Mansfield shire we do acknowledge an appropriate use of firearms in the community to deal with things like feral deer. It is getting that balance right and understanding how we work with the community to educate and communicate what an appropriate use is. Equally the onus, I think, is on the associations representing the peak bodies representing hunting; that they also manage illegal activities in an appropriate way, and we would really encourage that further discussion around that.

In conclusion, Mansfield shire is keen to see the control of invasive animals on Crown land and to minimise their movement onto private land; that we see that as a really key outcome. We welcome the inquiry and thank you for accepting the invitation to come to Mansfield shire. We believe hunting has a role to play for its socio-economic contribution to our shire, and recreational hunting in association with professional programs around culls may definitely be a part of the solution that the committee may consider. Our key message to the inquiry is for control measures to be developed and executed in a destination cross-tenure approach, taking account of visitation and activity patterns as they exist in our shire and working to reduce any negative impacts it might have on tourism and other land management activities. I might leave it there and open for questions.

The CHAIR — Thanks for that. Could I ask in terms of local government, what contribution do you think local government can play in two areas. One is in the control of invasive species, and I know that council has some limited responsibilities, particularly based on land ownership and so on. The second question is around any ideas or suggestions in terms of that education and communication, where people are concerned about hunting, if that was one of the tools to control invasive animals.

Mr GREEN — I think you summed it up perfectly. I know exactly where I was going to go with an answer to that. We do have some limited responsibilities directly. Roadside is the classic discussion point with the community — and blackberries in particular from a pest plant perspective, and there are a range of other weeds that we see on roadsides. Equally I think there is a role for councils to work with state government, other government agencies and other peak associations in an educative role.

Hunting is an appropriate and important part of our community, but equally there are examples of hunting that we can all — I am not a hunter myself, but I can think of examples where there are individuals who practise hunting in a way that does not reflect well on hunting, and none of us, I think, would encourage that. Anecdotally I have seen, for example, carcasses on the back of four-wheel drives in the main street of Mansfield with blood dripping onto the road. So is it a reality of life? Hunting is absolutely a reality of life. Is it a right for people to do and a suitable? Absolutely. Is it appropriate to have a carcass in the main street in Mansfield? That is what causes some challenges for some in the community. That is the issue; it becomes part of the issue. So, yes, local government has a role to play in educating and working with all the bodies; in educating the community in understanding the realities of hunting and also working with those practising to ensure that they are doing it in a way is appropriate.

Ms WARD — We spoke earlier about the possible potential for tourism around hunting. One of the ideas that has been put forward to us is having hunting guides, people who can lead groups in and help manage the deer population but also help improve the economy locally too. Do you see a role in that — in leading groups into forests to help hunt?

Mr GREEN — Absolutely. The reason I would say that is I think that opportunity further expands the opportunity for individuals in the community to set up businesses and further grow and develop the industry, and that is the way in which the industry can actually grow. How those opportunities are actually realised I am unsure. At the moment individuals have got the ability. In fact the culture in Australia is to perhaps not use guides — is my sense. That is across a whole range of things, whether it be bike riding or fishing or hunting or walking. If you compare that to the likes of North America or Europe, where the market is perhaps more developed, the use of those guides is accepted and the costs associated with that are more accepted, people are willing to do it. So how you get to that, I think, is a broader conversation for all of us to work out, but we as a council would absolutely encourage that because it grows the economy around those elements.

Ms WARD — Do you also see that as a way of trying to help work with or reduce rogue hunters?

Mr GREEN — That is one way, yes, absolutely. It encourages appropriate hunting, as you would for, say, guided horseriding. Michael will talk later, I am sure — when Michael goes out with his horseriding groups it is done in an appropriate way that is well managed. My experience with guided tours is that it is in the interest of the individuals running those tours to do it in an appropriate manner, and so that tends to help manage those aspects of the less appropriate activity.

Ms WARD — Graeme and Charlie, just as you have, also mentioned the role that hunting groups and organisations can play in helping to work with rogue hunters and trying to reduce their behaviour as well. How do you see them playing that role? What would you like to see them do?

Mr GREEN — Again, it is an area that I do not think myself or council necessarily has a great deal of expertise in. All I have heard is that, for example, when you work with peak bodies — and I know there are examples in the Mallee where Parks Victoria has worked with peak hunting bodies, I think, on the control of goats — and when you get that dialogue happening between those peak bodies, that self-regulation becomes a very important part of the discussion. I am aware of examples where it has worked in Victoria and in other states, so, yes, I think it is an appropriate way to discuss and perhaps move forward.

Mr RAMSAY — Thank you both very much for making yourselves available this morning. I also want to acknowledge that the member for Eildon, Cindy McLeish, our parliamentary colleague, is here in the audience, so I welcome Cindy as well.

I am particularly homing in on funding this morning because we have heard a lot of evidence talking about control methods, and there seems to be consensus that hunting is perhaps the most desirable. Are you part of a stakeholder group that discusses the potential implications of funding for control of weeds and pests in state forests as opposed to national parks given that the government is indicating expansion of the great national park? I understand your minds and eyes are on the economic value for hunting in your particular local municipality, but at the same time you have responsibility in controlling feral pests and weeds within your municipality and bordering state forests and potentially an expansion of the national park. We have heard that there will be certain hunting conditions in state forests that will not be available in the great national park or in the national park as it is now. What is the discussion you are having with your stakeholder groups, CMAs, Parks Victoria and other key stakeholders about how you are actually going to work together to control the expansion of these pests we are hearing about, particularly sambar deer?

Mr GREEN — In terms of the costs with regard to a whole range of invasive animal and plant species, we all know, I think, across all sectors of governments and all agencies that it is a costly operation. I will talk specifically around council's experience and its limited role in managing safe roadside weeds. Effectively what we could do is drain our entire budget trying to control all of the expectations from the community on weeds just on roadsides that we are in charge of. I acknowledge the cost issue is significant. I do not have an easy answer about how we deal with the cost issue with this issue. Part of it is potentially to place a value on it and, for example, guided tours might be a solution to generate income that could then be put to helping further control aspects of the issue on public land. It is a real challenge. I do not have an easy answer for how we generate income or deal with the costs associated with a feral animal or invasive weed species.

Mr RAMSAY — Is there an amalgam of local councils that are interfaced with state and national parks that get together and talk about collective control methods for invasive pests?

Mr GREEN — Yes, to some degree. The example where invariably that has worked well in the past is Landcare. It is more around obviously private landholders coming together in a collective manner trying across a range of properties to manage in a collective and consistent manner. When we do particularly our weed management we make our best efforts to coordinate with DELWP on state forests and with Parks Victoria on national parks, but the funds we have to do that with are actually very limited and are becoming more limited as a council. We look very much to the state government to fund that on public land.

Ms DIXON — May I comment? Council has over a number of years run a destination sustainability program. It is a collaborative partnership approach around the land managers in our footprint area. Members of that are signed up to some collective principles. It meets irregularly, but it discusses a number of cross-tenure issues. Some of the discussions over the years have been about things like feral animals. For example, there was a lot of cooperative work done between the alpine resort areas, what is now DELWP and Parks Victoria, especially in the feral cats space. There was, as has already been alluded to, the problem that if one partner is not playing their part, you could remove the cats that were killing the pygmy possums from the resort area of Mount Buller, but they would just get replaced. There has been some good coordination work done over the years, and I think that sort of model is a good way to consider going forward.

Mr YOUNG — Thank you very much for coming in and giving us your time. It is fantastic to hear from another council. We have got a few different councils now that have presented to this, and there always seem to be similar answers, but in some cases there are unique answers that pertain to certain councils for various reasons. Just on what you mentioned before about the income derived from hunting for this council, you mentioned the figure of \$14.6 million, which came out of a government study. I just wanted to point out that that government study actually only looked at game hunting, so it did not include pest hunting. Many hunters do actually go out and hunt pests exclusively. All those associated costs were not even in that, so it is probably an underestimated figure. I just wanted to make you aware of that in case you were not.

You have talked a lot about tourism derived from hunting, and that is something that is a little bit unique to this council. Do you feel that Tourism Victoria has a role to play here? They seem to be oblivious to hunting as an environmental tourism factor.

Mr GREEN — Again, I am no expert in this, but my feeling of it is that the market is still very young for tourism-related hunting in Mansfield and possibly in Victoria — I do not really know; I am no expert in that. The fact that that market is young, the focus of something like Tourism Victoria is probably on other areas of the tourism market. We are seeing significant growth in international tourism from China and India, for example. You are probably well aware that the pillars within Tourism North East, of which we are a part, are fine dining — good food, good wine — cycling and other outdoor recreation pursuits, like camping and those sorts of things. To me it seems still a young market. It could develop, and as it develops I think then it starts to get greater traction. It may well also be a niche market at a state sense, where it pertains to certain areas of the state as opposed to a broad state strategy. I am not sure, but I would leave that to broader experts in the field.

Mr YOUNG — Given it may be a niche market, as you said — and obviously, with the regulations on how hunting actually occurs, we have the GMA statutory authority — as a niche market they are needed to regulate that and maintain it. But on the promotion side and the tourism side of things they do very little, and it is because of restrictive legislation that is in place as to how they are put together, as opposed to something like Fisheries Victoria, which is enacting government policy, which is fantastic at the moment. It is a fantastic government policy on fishing. You have got a fisheries department that is reflecting that policy, doing all of these great things and promoting and trying to encourage more people into fishing. Should the GMA probably be doing more in that space to mirror what is happening in fishing?

Mr GREEN — I am probably going to give you the same answer I think Graeme gave you, which is that the outcome we would encourage is for hunting to be part of the tourism mix. As to how a government would want to achieve that, I guess we would leave the mechanisms for the government to resolve. I think it is an important part of the mix, and we would encourage and support hunting continuing to be part of our tourism mix.

Ms DIXON — May I just comment on that? Yes, it is an important part of the mix, as Alex has identified, and it is an important niche market and a contributor. It is challenging around promoting it, because the vast bulk of the tourism dollars that we have that support our economy come from tourism areas that would not necessarily resonate with branding, imagery or marketing messages around hunting, so we would be very cautious in that space.

Mr YOUNG — Mr Ramsay touched on the Great Forest National Park proposal just before. Are you aware of the Great Forest National Park proposal and what it is and what the implications will be to your council?

Ms GREEN — We are. It was raised at council briefings. A council resolution was passed to write to the industry task force. Our understanding of the industry task force is that it included industry, conservation groups and unions.

Mr YOUNG — Correct.

Mr GREEN — We pointed out and wrote on behalf of north-east councils to say that community representation was lacking on that task force. We received a response six or seven months later to say that our letter had been noted and that findings from that task force would be forthcoming. So we are well aware of it. We are interested to have further conversations with that task force and engage in whatever consultation processes come forward. It is fair to say that the council is concerned because of the type of tourism activity that occurs in Mansfield shire. They are concerned because the past experience has been that these types of recreational activities have been somewhat curtailed in national parks. That is not to say that will necessarily be the case with any proposal for a new national park, but we absolutely are aware of it and want to be part of that conversation as a community.

Mr YOUNG — I will try and avoid dialogue about the Forest Industry Taskforce because I could probably fill up an hour or so talking about it, but it is very interesting that you have made that link straight to that task force after the Great Forest National Park was mentioned, because the two are sort of supposed to be independent ideas and independent thoughts, and that is the messaging we are getting. It is interesting that you have gone straight to the task force when talking about the Great Forest National Park.

Mr GREEN — I was not aware of that. I may have misunderstood. My understanding is that the task force was reviewing a range of issues, including the Great Forest National Park. In fact, if I think back now, my understanding is that it was looking at all Crown land pretty much east of the highway in the alpine areas. I will have to check my notes on that one.

Mr YOUNG — Thank you very much. Has the council done any work on what the actual impacts would be of much of that land being turned from state forest or state park to national park and specifically — I will just direct you to the core of this inquiry — the changes in the way pests are managed and the way hunters are allowed to actually partake in that?

Mr GREEN — No, we have not done any direct, specific studies. We are aware that a study along those lines has been done by Yarra Ranges council, and we have spoken about that review that was done within that council.

Mr YOUNG — Have you got any comments to add about that review, that assessment?

Mr GREEN — No, there has been no council resolution or council direction on that. So no, we have got no specific view. Again, we are not going to presuppose what the task force might find or indeed whether any proposal for any change in land tenure might come about. A key message is that if there is going to be a change in land tenure, or a discussion about it, we are very keen for our community to be represented and involved in that discussion to put forward views on the value of hunting, camping, fishing, four-wheel driving, motorbike riding, bushwalking and a whole range of activities that occur on our public lands. Any changes need to be discussed, I think, and the opportunity needs to be given to all communities to have discussions about that.

Mr TILLEY — I want to make this very quick. I certainly have no doubt that I cannot speak on behalf of my colleagues, but I am pretty confident that we would all agree that we would certainly want to protect your current visitation status of 1.2 million and hopefully see that you increase that into the future. With all these other activities you talk about — four-wheel driving, mountain biking, camping, walking and all those activities — I just want to pick up on one thing you said when it comes to hunting and you have a vehicle with a stag or a hind or something strapped to the bull bar off the back. It is part of the inquiry to

look at problems managing carcasses. Would the shire or the council be interested in developing some sort of aid — maybe a parking area way off the main street for those vehicles? Would there be a willingness to pay? Would the shire, in its planning, propose some sort of area where they could go? To some people it is unsightly; to others it is part of the tourism package.

Mr GREEN — I guess we had not put our minds to that. The discussion needs to be had around the perception and the image that the hunting community wants to portray. I think that is part of the discussion. The display, for example, of trophy heads is a really important part of the opportunity to go hunting. Some people are very keen and very proud of their hunting ability, and a trophy head — I am not quite sure what to call it — is an important part of the whole process. But it is about understanding the perception that the hunting community want to portray to the broader community and indeed generating support for the activity of hunting. I think that is really important to think about. I am not sure whether or not council needs to get involved. I am not sure how much of an issue it is, but there are times when you do see carcasses on the main street on the back of vehicles. There are people who think that is inappropriate. I have seen that a couple of times myself, and a range of people often discuss it with me, knowing my role in the community. They say, ‘What’s council going to do about it?’. I say, ‘At the moment they are quite entitled to do that’.

Mr TILLEY — One of the challenges in controlling invasive species is that we want them to take their catch. We do not want them to leave it there and exacerbate the problem.

Mr GREEN — Absolutely. I agree.

Mr TILLEY — Thank you, Alex and Judy, for your time.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for coming in, for your submission and for answering our questions.

Witnesses withdrew.