

ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land

Melbourne — 5 September 2016

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Mr Jack Wegman, chief executive officer, and

Mr David Croft, training and programs coordinator, Sporting Shooters Association Australia (Victoria).

The CHAIR — Welcome Mr Wegman and Mr Croft to the hearing this afternoon. Just before we start, I will go through some of the formalities. I advise you that this public hearing is being recorded, and once the transcript is available you will be sent a copy to check for accuracies prior to it becoming publicly available. Also, the evidence you give today is the subject of parliamentary privilege. I just remind you, however, that that parliamentary privilege only is during the public hearing — not any views or comments made outside the public hearing.

I think the secretariat may have asked that you provide roughly a 10-minute presentation, and then committee members will ask you a series of questions. One thing we are finding today is of course that we never have enough time, so if there are additional questions that we have not had a chance to ask, we hope that it will be okay if we send them to you in writing, and perhaps you can respond to them in writing. So thank you for coming today, and I will be pass it over to you.

Mr WEGMAN — Thank you very much. I am Jack Wegman. I am the CEO of the SSAA Victoria. David is my training and programs coordinator. There is an old adage in training: tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, then tell what you told them. But listening to the presentation of Barry Howlett before and understanding where you are at with this inquiry, I will probably circumvent a lot of that and just focus in on some of the key issues, because I do not want to reinvent the wheel. I have not had all that much experience in hunting. I am the CEO. But David has had considerable experience, so I will defer to David with specific queries that you might have and questions.

Having said that, I would like to start with a couple of things that we do not want and we would not like to see as the SSAA Victoria. The first thing we would not be supportive of is the change in the categorisation of deer from a game species to a pest species. We do not think there is anything to be gained from that. We think it is counterproductive for a number of reasons, and we are happy to answer questions on that as we go through. But essentially it is about restricting hunting opportunities for our members.

The second thing that we really would not like to see come out of this inquiry is the introduction of monitored or supervised hunting of recreational hunters. We have had a lot of success with the programs that we have got, and I will talk about that in a moment. But we think that the unsupervised, unmonitored recreational hunting is a very valuable thing in deer control, and we would like to see that continue.

Having said that, let me turn, if I can, to the terms of reference, and specifically there were questions raised around the biodiversity outcomes, community safety and the limitations of the deer trial. As you will undoubtedly be aware, the SSAA Victoria is currently in a partnership with Parks Victoria to undertake a fairly substantial program of invasive species control. So it is not just about deer, but it is a number of animals, and again we are happy to talk in detail about that.

We think that there has been — and demonstrably so — some very positive outcomes of the program. We have just completed four years, and we have received funding from Parks Victoria. I am really pleased to say that the program will continue for another four years and we will actually receive increased funding to undertake the programs. So it is not just in our estimation that it has been a very successful initiative but also in that of the government and through Parks Victoria. There is widespread recognition that we are actually achieving something, and we are happy to take questions on the detail.

In relation to community safety, in the four years that we have been involved there have been no consequential injuries, accidents, incidents or what have you. So we really do not believe that there is an issue with community safety as such. We have some pretty stringent approaches. We have standing operating procedures. We have job safety analysis. We have meetings before and after. So it is very tightly controlled program, and it is subject to accreditation by our hunters before we engage them to go out and get involved in that program.

In relation to the limitations, I think in a sense the limitations are a direct result of the nature of the beast, and I say that advisedly. It is about deer, it is about their behaviour, it is about the biology and the populations. There is some conflict we see or some limitations in terms of the access that we can get. There is demand for public parks, and we need to balance that against having access for deer control. And there

are environmental, natural and human impact type factors, and again I am happy to expand on those as we go.

For deer in particular we have run a pretty successful program, but I just would remind the committee that the SSAA involvement is much wider than the deer program. We have undertaken this conservation pest management program. That has only been funded the last four years. It was started in 2003, and David has been with us all that time, so he is right across the detail. That program has targeted various animals: dogs, cats, pigs, goats, rabbits, hares, foxes. I will draw your attention to our submission, and there some appendices there that detail quite specifically the successes and outcomes and the sorts of programs that we have undertaken individually for the program. One of the things we have not yet included in that is the Wilsons Promontory trial that was undertaken last year. There was a further 44 hog deer that were taken there, and that is not reflected in that last appendix that we have got.

So that is kind of a very broadbrush description or addressing of the terms of reference, but in addition we have got some additional issues that we are concerned with as an association. I have got to say that we pretty well support everything that at least I heard Barry Howlett from the ADA say. There was nothing that I heard while I was here that I would disagree with. So at the risk of repeating some stuff, bear with me. In terms of research, if the ultimate objective is deer control, then we need to have knowledge about it. We think there is a dearth of worthwhile research and information about deer: the population density, biology and the behavioural drivers underlying their breeding and migration. So there is a lot more that we can learn in relation to deer specifically.

Access — again I heard that spoken about as an issue, and we think that is an issue. We do not think there is any logical or sensible reason why recreational hunters should not have access to greater Crown land and, further, that there are some limitations, which David can address, in relation to what can be hunted on some of that Crown land. We do not see any sense in restricting hunting to particular species. I am happy for David to expand. So there is an opportunity there.

The third thing I heard talked about, and again we would strongly support it as the association, is the use of sound moderators on Crown land by hunters. Again, I think what is at play here is more a public perception than the reality of the use of those moderators. For the reasons I heard Barry talk about, they really are a worthwhile addition to the armoury that hunters can have.

In summary we would like to see deer remain a game species. We would like greater access to Crown land. We would like to see the range of species permitted to be hunted on Crown land to be broadened. We would like to see better research into invasive animal species and natives as well. We would strongly recommend that the SSAA continue with Parks Victoria beyond the four years — we think there is a lot to be gained from that — and of course we would support the use of sound moderators for hunting and pest control on Crown land. That is my 10 minutes. I am not quite sure how long I went. I am happy to take questions.

The CHAIR — Perhaps if I just start, the first one is about the program that you have with Parks Victoria in terms of getting rid of invasive animals. You were saying that you do not support any sort of monitoring or supervision. Is that happening at the moment? In terms of that program, what part does Parks Victoria play in that or is it done by the association?

Mr WEGMAN — Broadly there is involvement by Parks Victoria, and we understand it and we do not have a problem with it, because that is part of a very specific initiative that we have as part of the funded program. I guess I was relating more to the unfunded part or the additional hunting opportunities.

The CHAIR — So you would not like to see it across the board but in particular areas for specific reasons?

Mr WEGMAN — The reality of what is happening — correct me if I am wrong, David — is that initially there was a very close involvement by Parks Victoria, but as they have gained confidence in our ability to handle the projects they have tended to pull back a little bit. So whilst they are still involved, it is not to the degree of supervision that they had originally.

The CHAIR — So your organisation oversees the program rather than Parks Victoria or other government bodies?

Mr CROFT — Yes. We had a situation where we provide a coordinator or supervisor. That person usually is on-site. Then we rely heavily on people who have been there before. So if I was introducing a couple of new people who had not been on site before, I would pair them with someone who had, and had hours of experience on, say, Werribee Mansion or Point Cook Coastal Park — things like that — for those programs.

Mr YOUNG — You just mentioned pairing up people with others who had been there before. I am assuming that is to draw on their experience and knowledge of particular areas that they may have hunted previously or having some knowledge of the specifics of those areas.

Mr CROFT — Certainly.

Mr YOUNG — How valuable is that kind of information for the hunting community, and do the departments and Parks Victoria possess any of that knowledge?

Mr CROFT — Yes. Basically what I do is try to prepare a roster. Because we have at both Werribee Mansion and Point Cook and within the Dandenongs, Warramate Hills and Yellingbo a number of people who are interested in participating, to give everyone a fair chance we prepare rosters for those programs and rotate people. It has an ongoing effect in that once people have been there — they have seen the area, they have seen certain allotments that we divide into — they become familiar with it and they become familiar with where the animals are, whether they be deer, goats, rabbits or foxes.

A classic for me is Point Cook Coastal Park. There is probably a 40 or 50-hectare paddock that has no rabbits in it. I cannot explain it, unless it is because it is very low lying, but there are rabbits all around it. So it is a mystery to me as to why there are no rabbits in this one paddock, but that was quickly identified and we only do a cursory look around those sorts of areas now.

But yes, the object is to pair people and give experienced people a chance to mentor and coach inexperienced people. Then we arrive at a situation where we have a greater pool of people whose services can be used in those areas.

Mr YOUNG — You spoke, Jack, about examples of areas where certain things can be hunted and others cannot and needing to look at what can be hunted in certain areas. Mr Tilley expressed earlier today that there are parts of national parks where you can go in and hunt deer but if you see a cat or a dog, you are not actually allowed to shoot it. You have to let it go. Is that what you mean by that as an example?

Mr WEGMAN — That is exactly the case. People are licensed. People have their permits. They are allowed one species, yet there are other opportunities and they are not allowed to. We cannot really make sense of that. I do not know whether you want to expand, David, but that is kind of it. There are clearly problems with dogs, cats, foxes and all the rest of it, and to be allowed to go after one species and not others in the same place at the same time with the right certification and licences we are at a bit of a loss to explain. I am sure it has been a historical development, but it does not mean it should not be reviewed now. You would be well-advised that it should be reviewed.

Mr YOUNG — Are you aware of the same restrictions around state game reserves, as far as they are open to game hunting for certain species at certain times of the year but not to other species of pests and invasive animals at other times?

Mr CROFT — Yes, most game reserves are typically wetlands and are restricted in their use for duck season. A number of them are landlocked, and the access to them is at the request of landholders who surround these wetlands.

Mr RAMSAY — I put on the record I am also a keen shooter. In fact my father bought a Merkel over-and-under shotgun the same day I was born, and the excitement was more for the gun than it was for me.

Mr YOUNG — I have heard you tell that story a few times.

Mr RAMSAY — I have told that story a few times.

Mr WEGMAN — And I doubt it, but it is a good story.

Mr RAMSAY — No, he was. He showed it to my mother in the hospital. I will never forget the day — as it was translated to me, I might add. I was only just born. I thought your recommendations sounded very sensible. The only thing I wish to perhaps ask of you is in relation to the need for more research and more data collection in relation to invasive species, whether it be deer or others. I was wondering at what agency you might see that work being done.

Mr WEGMAN — Good question. I will defer to David on this one, on the technicals, if you would not mind, David.

Mr CROFT — Probably the natural one would be the Arthur Rylah Institute. There are a number of good people that I have come into contact with over the years. I do not know if all of them are still there. They need to of course be deer focused, if you like, because a number of people have done research on ducks and quail and things like that, but deer, in my experience with them, are very elusive. It is very difficult to work out what they are doing and why. I suppose probably the key point to deer is that whilst we seem to spend an inordinate amount of time hunting them without success, that is due to their very nature and the fact that they have no natural predators in Victoria, whereas they come from Asiatic countries where tigers and leopards will hunt them ad hoc. They are very elusive and have a keen sense of smell, hearing and sight, and so we need to understand what they do and why they do it. I think that probably once we get that sort of knowledge, yes, it will turn the tables a little bit on the huntability of them. It will give us an insight into what they are doing and why.

Mr RAMSAY — Who were you referring to as doing some of that research with?

Mr CROFT — Most of my experience has been with Dr Kingsford, who counts the numbers at the end of the year prior to duck season.

Mr WEGMAN — Sorry, it is the Arthur Rylah Institute.

Ms WARD — We have heard today, but also in our submissions, discussion that the male deer are a higher priority or focus for hunters than female deer. Is this your experience? Do you think this is a reasonable conclusion to make?

Mr CROFT — Certainly with recreational hunters, yes. For the programs that we conducted, the conservation and pest management, no, we target every age group and every sex. That is probably a little bit of a problem in what we do in that we are taking people who are basically recreational hunters and we are trying to turn them into pest managers. That goes against the ethical and moral stance that a lot of hunters do have.

Ms WARD — Are there additions to your programs you think could be implemented to encourage shooters to target female deer?

Mr CROFT — I suppose the one that comes to mind fairly readily would be the situation in America. What happens in America is that you attain a game licence and you can only take a certain number of males and more females — with their ducks and geese. I have got no proof but I suspect that it is similar for the deer. In one respect we could re-educate recreational hunters by perhaps insisting that they only take one stag per season and two to three hinds. If you wish to reduce the female population against the male, that could be a solution to that sort of problem. The only problem I see with that would be the

monitoring of it. How do you know that I have taken my male without the monitoring? That becomes logistically and cost-wise probably a bit of an expense that may not be necessary or should not be.

Ms WARD — How much do either of you think wild dogs are a problem?

Mr CROFT — Huge problem. I have seen the results of dogs and foxes. If you see them go through a herd of sheep, you will not be impressed because, like foxes, they are killers; they roam in packs and they just kill. They do not eat it; they kill and they go on. It is a huge problem. I have heard about calves but I have never seen a calf killed by dogs. I have only ever seen sheep, and mostly ewes.

Ms WARD — Do you think there is connection between wild dogs and deer hunting? Are dogs left behind? Do deer carcasses attract wild dogs?

Mr CROFT — Not in my experience, no. A bit like Barry said before, they are killers; they are not carrion eaters. The carrion eaters are of course the crows, eagles and foxes. They tend to maraud in packs and just kill, and it seems to be almost a blood lust for them. They may come back and have a feed. I have seen whole heads of lambs missing, and I suspect that was a dog, but I have got no proof of that.

Ms WARD — We have heard submissions from people that hunters lose dogs or they leave dogs behind. Is this something you are familiar with?

Mr CROFT — I have heard that myself. My understanding is that they have introduced tracking and collars and that most hunters must retrieve their dogs — that is part of the hound hunting accreditation that they get — or make every reasonable effort to do that. Most of them have invested in tracking collars and programs on laptops and whatnot to keep track of where their dogs are at any given time.

Ms WARD — That is interesting. So that could also be a way of tracking where the deer are going, because your dog is following the deer. So it would give you an increased understanding of the habits of the deer as well?

Mr CROFT — Yes and no. Because of where deer come from — like I say, the Asiatic areas, where they are hunted by tigers and leopards — they are very astute at doubling back and hiding. I got within from me to you away from one before it decided that I was not to be trusted and it crashed away. But they will stand and watch you and if you do not anything threatening to them they will just stand there and watch you. It is quite an unbelievable thing when you are out there and you see it or it happens to you.

Mr TILLEY — I must disclose that I am actually a member of the SSAA — not an active member, but it gives me access to the ranges and things like that. Just for the purposes of the committee. It is good to see you, Jack and David.

Mr WEGMAN — Likewise.

Mr TILLEY — I will make my questions very quick and allow my colleagues to ask some questions. Are you familiar with Bob Gough's submission?

Mr WEGMAN — No. To be honest, I have not read it.

Mr CROFT — No. I have not read it.

Mr TILLEY — I will leave it at that. The submissions are on the web and it is a must read.

Mr WEGMAN — I did look at a number of the submissions but I did not get to Bob's. We are happy to go back. We are happy to look at it. If you have questions in relation to it, please submit them. We are happy to give you a written response in the next few days.

The CHAIR — I have just one quick question about the conservation and pest management program. How do you evaluate that? How do you determine that it is successful? I am not questioning it; I am just interested.

Mr WEGMAN — We have to report to Parks Victoria and we have been doing it semi-regularly over the last four years. There is a lot of data in our appendices which identifies where we are doing it, what we have done and how many animals have been taken. As I say, the Wilsons Promontory trial is not in there yet. We will update it. We do have a quantitative base for evaluating it.

The CHAIR — Is it based on number of animals killed?

Mr WEGMAN — That is one component, but observational, in terms of erosion and in terms of other species. It is a mix of both quantitative and qualitative. For example, on appendix B, the biodiversity outcomes, you can make judgements. So we would see, for example in the Dandenong Ranges, an improvement in the habitat for lyrebirds. Deer play havoc with that habitat. So it is demonstrable. We do not have the scale but you can certainly report on it and the numbers of animals taken in each of these projects. So it is really quite well reported on, if you like, and the outcomes are not just a matter of observation. We do have facts and figures to go with them and we do report to Parks Victoria regularly on that.

The CHAIR — Thank you. There are no further questions at the moment but thank you so much for coming in to present to us and providing such good information. If we have further questions, we will write to you.

Mr WEGMAN — It would be a pleasure to help and if you have any questions, please. Happy to do it.

Witnesses withdrew.