

ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land

Dunkeld — 30 November 2016

Members

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Staff

Executive officer: Dr Christopher Gribbin

Witnesses

Mr David Brennan, chief executive officer,

Mr Tony Baker, statutory and strategy manager, Wimmera Catchment Management Authority.

The ACTING CHAIR (Mr Young) — Welcome to the Environment, Natural Resources and Regional Development Committee inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land. We want you to remember that all evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Also any evidence you give today will be recorded. It will be provided to you in a proof transcript in the next week or so to make any changes that you may need to make, and that information will eventually be published on our website. You will have a bit of time to make your presentation and tell us what you need to tell us, and then we will follow up with some questions, so go for it.

Visual presentation.

Mr BRENNAN — Not a problem. I guess to give a little bit of background as well, my name is David Brennan, and I am the CEO of the Wimmera Catchment Management Authority. I have been there for five years. Listening to the previous presenter, I previously worked for the department and was one of the wildlife officers that used to issue authorities to control wildlife permits for both deer and kangaroos right throughout the Wimmera and Grampians area down here as well.

The ACTING CHAIR — Well, that is handy.

Mr BRENNAN — Yes. So just a little bit of background there. We are very familiar with invasive pest management.

We are here to talk about the CMA's role. First and foremost our role is to work with the community, and when we say 'work with the community', it is to deal with issues that are relevant and timely for all of our community, particularly in regional areas and with a strong focus on farmers. As part of that process, we have developed a range of strategies. The key outcome for the CMAs is to develop a regional catchment strategy that has priorities, risks, threats and a range of outcomes that are community driven. Then we have substrategies, and one of the ones we are talking about is that we have actually got an invasive plants and animals strategy that looks specifically at invasive plants and animals in the Wimmera and is based on community feedback, based on evidence and based on need. Then we work with both the state and Australian governments to get funding to address a lot of these concerns. In regard to invasive species management, we really believe that an integrated approach based on adaptive management and community involvement is front and centre.

To talk a little bit about hunting on Crown land, I guess in the Wimmera that has been occurring for many years. I have worked in NRM for many years, and during that time there has always been hunting by recreational shooters on Crown land and in national parks, and there have been processes where recreational shooters can apply for permits to shoot in designated areas, so it is well established. I guess we at the CMA think of it almost as a form of citizen science, so it is about the community being involved in identifying an issue and then actually doing something about it and bringing people along.

For a lot of the shooters that we deal with, particularly at the CMA, it is almost part of a Landcare philosophy of caring for the land and making sure we have got everything in balance, because the environment is not an exact system. There are winners and losers, and we think there is further opportunity for shooters to be involved, particularly with pigs, cats, dogs, foxes, rabbits and deer, and equally with overabundant wildlife — we have got kangaroos and corellas in the Wimmera. I guess what we are saying is that that sort of approach really needs to be supported by community education, a level of compliance, monitoring and a combination of scientific and local knowledge to make sure that the activities that we do are effective and supported by the wider community.

When we talk about integrated catchment management, we are really talking about regional planning and coordination — that is, bringing all the parties together and having a coordinated approach so that we are not getting conflicting messages from one organisation to another and so that everybody is clear on how an integrated approach can work. Really there needs to be a strong emphasis on a tenure-blind approach. The Grampians is an example where there is a national park and there are also game reserves and state parks within the wider Grampians, so the general community cannot really tell where they are at a given time,

unless they have got a GPS. Equally with private land, as we know, animals all intersect and they do not look at our maps.

We have always believed that the community has to be front and centre of any sort of project in regard to integrated catchment management, because we are dealing with people all the time — they own the land, they have the knowledge and they always have to be part of the solution. We always look at a range of control options. I guess the cliché is that there is no silver bullet, but with a multipronged approach we can end up with some good resources and outcomes.

I think one of the key things with integrated catchment management is preventing the introduction of a lot of invasive species, and I guess we have had it where there have been pigs deliberately released in the Grampians, in the Mount Cole area. I know myself from experience that when there have been droughts, farmers who have had red deer have literally opened the gates and let them go into the park, so there needs to be an emphasis on making sure that those sorts of activities do not occur. We all know the reports. In Tasmania people are continuously trying to introduce foxes there. I think there have been about 27 cases. So we still have to build community knowledge and education about, basically, the economic and environmental damage that invasive species can cause.

We have got a bit of an example here. When we are looking at integrated catchment management — you may have seen this with the rabbit population — quite often people talk about population explosions or boom and bust. There is some pretty good evidence in regard to rabbits. I guess the point here is that there have been some biological controls, particularly being myxomatosis and the calicivirus, the RHD, that have had a fairly good impact on managing invasive species. Whilst that is one tool, what we would be advocating for is that with any biological control it is followed up with ripping, shooting and a range of other activities to make sure that we manage these species when they are at a weak point.

Adaptive management. If we are looking at invasive species and controlling them, there really needs to be a strong consideration of seasonal conditions, whether that is drought or limiting water points or whether there has been a large bushfire that means that many populations are now on the verge of roadsides because there are green bits and those sorts of things. All that has to be considered in planning. Quite often there is no point rolling out a project that is going to be based on a financial year or a two or three-year block when the conditions are really not favourable to being successful.

A number of other examples are baiting, pest destruction and trapping, and I guess community engagement is one of the real keys to being successful with any adaptive approach. Equally there are a lot of new innovations that can be used and employed. Some of these are things like the pest ejector that happens in Victoria and some of the animal recognition technology, where you can basically open and close gates, you can shoot sprays onto cats and then they lick them and die, and there is a range of innovation that continues that can be very handy and useful in managing invasive pest species. They are the main points that we wanted to talk about, and I am happy to have any further questions.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thanks very much for that. You have given a brief overview of what needs to happen with interaction between other groups and bodies and that everyone has to be working towards it and also an integration of methods, but what is your actual involvement in pest management? What specific things does the CMA do? Are you actually performing control programs, or are you just coordinating them? Where do you actually fit in?

Mr BAKER — Probably a couple of ways. Through our invasive plant and animal management strategy that covers our region we have got a coordinating leadership role, I suppose, in bringing the stakeholders together to try and coordinate our efforts in getting the biggest bang for our buck. Beyond the planning, we run a number of programs ourselves. We work closely with Landcare groups and organisations like Parks Victoria and DELWP. For example, in Lake Albacutya, which is a Ramsar wetland in the north of our region, through Australian government funding we help Parks Victoria maintain rabbits below a certain threshold so that the ecosystems there are thriving. We also have Landcare grants programs, where we are funding directly to landholders or Landcare groups to do work that they have identified as important in their area.

The other way that I suppose we integrate some of our work is, if we are forming an agreement with a landholder — so it might be to protect the riparian area around a waterway or it might be to protect native vegetation — integrated into that is pest management as well. In general it is really around rabbit control in our region, for those types of projects, and from time to time we have helped with things like fox control programs as well, where they have been identified as an issue. But generally they are integrated through our programs. It is largely dependent on the funding that we get and the priorities of the investors that are investing in our region. The local community, particularly around the Landcare groups, identify their priority pest issues, and then we will help fund them through the Landcare programs.

The ACTING CHAIR — Do you do monitoring and follow-up on those programs and collate that data?

Mr BAKER — Yes, where we have agreements with Landcare groups and landholders, we will go back and do inspections to make sure they have done what they said they needed to do, and with our agreement with Parks Victoria — at Lake Albacutya, for example — they have got an ongoing monitoring program there to demonstrate how things are travelling. So if follow-up is required, then we help with that. With Parks Victoria the expectation is, we have given them help to get to a certain level, and then they are to maintain that beyond that, because it is their responsibility to manage that land. If they want to go to another level — so the rabbit numbers to drop even further — then the Australian government has been happy to fund that as well, and there has been some state funding around that as well.

The ACTING CHAIR — So in terms of funding can you give us an overview of your funding model for pests and, if you can, a breakdown on what you spend that on?

Mr BAKER — Yes, that is challenging. Because they are integrated within projects, it is very hard for us to come up with a split, but every project that we have with a landholder has the ability to deal with pest control. Our overall budget, Dave, is — —

Mr BRENNAN — Our annual budget is around \$7 million to \$9 million per year. Approximately \$4 million to \$5 million would go to landholders and community groups to do that work, so if we needed to do some further work, we could basically drill into how much is spent directly on managing invasive species, but we would be talking in the hundreds of thousands of dollars per year. So it is a significant part, because we know that if we do not deal with the foxes for eating brolga chicks or the rabbits for revegetation, the projects are not successful, so it is a key part of it.

That seasonality that I talked about before, there are some years when rabbits are not too much of a problem, so it backs off a little bit, but then there are other years, when there have been favourable breeding conditions, that it scales up. So there is often a fluctuation year to year, and that is when we talk about being adaptive, and so if we need to put more money into rabbits, we will put more money into rabbits; if it backs off, we will back off.

The ACTING CHAIR — To get an understanding of what you mean by ‘integrated with other projects’, you mentioned brolgas, so your project would be to rehabilitate certain habitats or wetland areas to promote the brolga growth, and then the fox control is a part of that. Is that what you mean by that?

Mr BRENNAN — Yes, that is correct. I guess we look at a whole-of-ecosystem approach. In the Wimmera we are all aware that these invasives are a risk to biodiversity but also from a productivity point of view as well, so it is about making sure that we get that mix right for the farmer. So we are not just talking about brolgas; we are talking about, ‘Hey, let’s improve your lambing yields as well’.

Mr BAKER — Where it has worked really well in the past has been where we have run an environmental program. So we may have run an environmental program in our upper catchment looking at ground cover and riparian protection, and behind that Agriculture Victoria has come in and run a compliance program as well to make sure that everyone — the landholders that we do not have agreements with — is doing what they need to do in terms of the rabbit control. That has been really successful in that regard, and it has happened in the north of our region as well. That sort of partnership has worked really well.

The ACTING CHAIR — What would you see as some of the challenges or difficulties in doing these kinds of projects? Are there legislative things that need to change or regulation stuff that needs to change, or do you just have certain issues with different land tenures? What are some of the things that are restricting the work you are doing?

Mr BAKER — There are probably a few things. In terms of our rabbit programs — and probably all pest programs in that regard — in some places we have got absentee landholders, and that is a challenge because they are not actually there physically managing their land on a day-to-day basis like a normal farmer would. There are challenges around, I suppose, some of the issues around cats, not being a listed species, and you could probably put deer in the same boat as that. There are challenges around cat control. Cats are becoming a bigger and bigger issue in our region, we believe. I think compliance is an ongoing challenge — as Dave said, people releasing animals into the wild — although, as I said, Ag Vic do a good job in terms of follow-up around our environmental programs.

Mr BRENNAN — I guess we have got one challenge facing us with invasives, and I am talking about the carp program, so that is going to be pending. It is a bit like the rabbit graph. It is going to knock the carp population, but then we need to make sure we have got native fish that we can reintroduce there, and then look at snags and then make sure there is electrofishing, so we get on top of these invasives when all the stars are aligning. I think sometimes there is room for improvement in that space to have a really coordinated effort. I guess Tony was talking about the cats, and certainly the Australian government is big on killing cats at the moment. They have got their target of 2 million cats, and they want everybody to tweet and send photos of dead cats, whereas in Victoria we are still not able to employ the technology like the box up there that identifies the cat and then puts the spray on the cat and the cat licks it and dies.

Ms WARD — We are not using that in Victoria?

Mr BRENNAN — No.

The ACTING CHAIR — Why? Is it simply because of the designation given to cats?

Mr BRENNAN — Yes.

The ACTING CHAIR — So what are you required to do with cat control?

Mr BRENNAN — I guess I am not an expert on cat control, but my understanding is that they would have to be captured and either given to the local government or a vet to be put down and tell whether it is a feral cat versus a domestic cat, whereas certainly in other states, in the middle of bush blocks — and, say, for example, in the Grampians — you would be able to employ this technology with a degree of confidence that it is highly unlikely that there is going to be somebody's pet cat walking around the bush.

The ACTING CHAIR — Or if it is, it is in the wrong spot anyway.

Mr BRENNAN — That is right.

The ACTING CHAIR — That is something that has come up quite a few times, and I am glad you mentioned it before I got to it in my list of questions that I was going to ask. This inquiry is more specifically to do with hunters and the use of hunters for pest management, so what involvement have you guys had with hunters? Have they been involved in certain projects you are doing? Can you just give a general idea of what that experience has been like?

Mr BRENNAN — Yes. We have actually run some projects with hunters, particularly around duck shooting and improving wetland areas, and that includes fox control and those sorts of things, so we have an active relationship with shooters. I guess there are a number of ad hoc shooters groups. We have got basically two or three in the Wimmera, where there are 30 or 40 people that go out and shoot different swamps and riparian areas and rivers and those sorts of things. We certainly have close contact with those people, and they provide input into our regional catchment strategy and help us identify areas where the fox numbers are the greatest. They actually provide the data on the number of foxes shot in different locations. They collate it and all those sorts of things. So, yes, we have an open working relationship the

same as with a range of community landowner groups, and we see them as an integral part of managing invasive species in the Wimmera.

Mr RAMSAY — I am trying to get an understanding. We have been told Parks Victoria has no money for any serious pest control work, local government tells us they have no money for serious pest control work — they are sort of given dibbles and dabbles — and you are telling me that the bulk of your strategy is really to use perhaps Landcare groups and like-minded groups to help with more baiting than anything else in relation to pest control. So here we have the three key stakeholders without any real money to do anything substantial in the control and, far less, eradication of some of these pests.

I note in your submission you talk about working with farmers in relation to native vegetation management, and you talk about your *Carbon Ready Plan*, and that is sort of bundled into the interface problems associated with pest control, yet the farmers do not have any money either to significantly draw money out of their business to control pests that invariably live in and are hosted in Crown land. To me, we have a predicament: no-one has any money to do anything in relation to pest control, yet the inquiry here is more about using free labour — volunteers — in our sporting associations to go out there and create mayhem in our Crown lands to try and reduce some of the breeding numbers of our sambar deer and foxes.

I am coming to a question. I am just trying to do a summation of really where we are up to, because unless governments see this as a priority, we are all going to be tinkering at the edges. The advice to us is that the population of sambar deer in Victoria is increasing at a significant rate, so much so that we are having this inquiry really just to see how we can arrest the problem. But then again, we have the traditional pests, like foxes and rabbits, increasing in numbers as well, and we have a new virus coming out, as we understand, that hopefully will perhaps, from a biological control perspective, help.

Where do you see the solution, then, given everything I have just said then in making some serious impact into pest control? We have had David Preece saying that he is somewhat hamstrung by the fact of regulatory requirements in relation to processing. There are the bounties you have indicated as being perhaps an incentive or a carrot for the shooters at least to get in there and have a crack. Can you perhaps provide some advice to this committee about where you might see the CMA and also the other stakeholder groups really having some significant role to play in pest control?

Mr BRENNEN — I will start off. I guess firstly that the CMA's role is around NRM leadership and working out the priorities at a strategic level, so to a degree we represent exactly what our constituents want — our landholders, our communities — and we put that directly into our strategies and we put funding accordingly into that. Each catchment strategy in Victoria — there are 10 CMAs — will be all different depending on what the community advocates and sees values and how they manage risk and the resources available as well.

What we do know is that in regional communities there is a lot of volunteerism. The Wimmera has some of the highest volunteer rates in Australia, and that is documented. I guess we all rely on people chipping in and giving their fair share, and that includes shooters, farmers and ourselves as distributors of government funding. We need to be supportive and accommodate answers. Sometimes that can be championing issues through our boards to the appropriate ministers, and our boards report directly back to the environmental minister.

I think that as long as we have got a process where the community can talk about issues and there is action and a strategy and a coordinated approach, then we can tackle some of these challenges. I think we have just got to keep on working together. With the people that have got diverse views or differing opinions about shooting or animal cruelty or whatever, it is about bringing them on the journey as well. It is just about us continuing to work together, acknowledging that there is a problem and then doing something about it. Certainly we as a CMA would support further advocating of shooting on Crown land and other ways that allow our community to be more effective in managing invasive species.

Mr BAKER — I will just add to that. I think it is worth looking at where things have worked well — the case studies where we have had good success. Our rabbit programs in the north of our region, and to the upper catchment as well in the south, have worked really well. That has been a combination of good planning both at the strategic level and at the grassroots level. The local Landcare groups identify where

they have got priority work that needs to happen and have a three-year plan, and then we marry it up with Landcare money. We are never going to have enough money to do every job every year, but the priorities are set and you can go and plug away and hit those priorities.

Landcare groups are volunteer based. The challenges are around ongoing monitoring and maintenance keeping going forward and security of funding that allows that. I am relatively optimistic that the way our program runs at the moment, particularly the state Landcare money — and our waterway money — is now secured over a longer period of time. The Landcare money has still got some work to do in terms of having security longer than one year, but our waterway program has security now for four years. That now allows us to plan well ahead, rather than planning from year to year to year.

I think looking at some of those good case studies where it has worked is a good idea in terms of being able to learn about other issues, like sambar deer. It is not always the same model that is going to provide the solution. There are models out there, but it does need the grassroots community saying, 'Yes, here's the priority area'. They are always balancing priorities about whether they want to go and do weed control or whether they want to do rabbit control or a mix of everything. The community knows where the issues are.

Mr BRENNAN — Yes. I will talk about a previous inquiry into corella control in Victoria. I was actually the state coordinator for the corella control program. That was very similar. It was identified that there was a problem with corellas — they were coming from the state park onto private land and causing a lot of damage. The government put in a lot of resources, particularly around trapping and gassing. There was a poisoning program, where farmers could go out and poison the corellas as well. There was a very coordinated approach across Victoria. In the end it resulted in a process where we were training and accrediting farmers and community groups to trap their own corellas.

We found that that was one of the most effective ways of dealing with corellas as well. It was about identifying a problem, looking at some of the behaviour and the science of the species, having that integrated approach, working with councils and the government — all the parties — and then we moved to a model where there was the community involvement, where the farmers, Landcare groups and community groups were trapping and gassing the corellas themselves in an effective way. So I guess there have been some pretty good case studies using this process where we have been able to address some of these issues as well.

Mr RAMSAY — I suppose the point of my question was that the CMAs and the boards themselves now are more interested in planting trees, native vegetation, biodiversity and water quality issues than they might well be in pest control. It is seen as pretty low on the priority totem pole for the CMAs. The fact that you are not even involved in the Parks Victoria sambar deer trial probably indicates that there is a disconnect, whether it is because of a geographical reason more so than anything else, which might be the case. Nevertheless I get the feeling from a funding point of view that there is a real reluctance to see pest control as being as important as maybe some of the biodiversity issues and environment issues that CMAs have traditionally been involved in. That is really just a statement. You can refute that or not.

We are charged with trying to find a way forward to control pests that are causing problems not only for farmers and their productivity but also for biosecurity on Crown land. There seems to be a reluctance by those key stakeholders and their representatives to allow shooters to go in and shoot cats without being restricted on Crown land, if they are not on private land, or to do some sort of indiscriminate shooting of some other feral animals.

Mr BRENNAN — I guess that is where each region is different and each regional catchment strategy that is driven by the community is different and has a different feel. Certainly our vision is for a sustainable and profitable community. You do not see too many other CMA vision statements with the word 'profitability' in them. We are very much connected to the rural landscape. We have a history of supporting and working with shooters, and we see them as an integral part of the integrated catchment management. We fully support your sentiments, and I guess it is a little bit disappointing to hear that in other parts of Victoria maybe there is not that relationship or that issues may be emerging and people only just starting to be aware of them now.

Mr BAKER — When we developed our last regional catchment strategy probably the no. 1 issue was pest plant and animal control in our region. Every time we went to the community, local government or any other organisation they spoke about weeds and pests. The challenge is that we do not have a bucket of money that deals directly with going out and controlling pests and weeds, so we do integrate those programs into our other programs, like our waterway programs and or native vegetation programs. I agree that if you polled the landholders in our region and asked them whether they would need more money to do it, in terms of NRM, it would be around pest and weed control.

Mr RAMSAY — It is bizarre that for a farmer to remove a tree in the middle of a paddock — and you would appreciate this, being Wimmera, the grain-growing country — he has to go through so many loops through the native vegetation strategy and guidelines, yet to get his neighbour to remove boxthorn, some noxious weed or blackberry, it is nearly as onerous. It just seems from a priority point of view quite bizarre that for productivity a farmer has to go through a lot of red tape for native vegetation offsets, yet we have significant problems with pest and weed issues on neighbouring properties that create productivity losses as well and are really as onerous to control. That is a statement, sorry. I am done with the questions.

Ms WARD — Before you finish up could you just talk me through the exclusion from water?

Mr BAKER — Yes, there has been a bit of work done in Queensland, I believe, where using animal recognition technology they have been able to exclude what is considered a pest animal from water and just allow domestic animals in. On the large properties in, say, central Queensland you might have a trough in a location, and it might be fenced. The animal recognition technology has the capability of allowing cattle through that gate but not a goat or a kangaroo or whatever.

Ms WARD — So this is an aspect for private property rather than for — —

Mr BAKER — Yes, that is right, and it only works in areas where water is delivered through mechanical means, but it is a way to manage large populations of animals like kangaroos or pigs and things like that. You exclude them from water, and obviously their populations are under stress when you do that. Again that helps productivity of large farms. It would be one of those things that could potentially work in the north-west of the state, where you have got large properties with long distances between water supplies, which are delivered through troughs and those types of things. There were some trials being done in Queensland a number of years ago. I am not 100 per cent sure about how they panned out. They are the types of technologies we think we should be looking at.

Ms WARD — Thank you.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thanks very much, guys, for coming in. It was really great. Just to let you know that we will have to get a copy of the PowerPoint presentation. I am sure the secretariat have already worked that out. If we do have any other follow-up questions, is it okay that we write to you and ask those afterwards?

Mr BRENNAN — Yes, sure.

The ACTING CHAIR — Excellent. Thanks very much for that.

Witnesses withdrew.