

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities

Melbourne—Wednesday, 4 December 2019

MEMBERS

Mr Darren Cheeseman—Chair

Mr David Morris—Deputy Chair

Mr Will Fowles

Ms Danielle Green

Mr Paul Hamer

Mr Tim McCurdy

Mr Tim Smith

WITNESSES

Ms Lisa Gervasoni, Senior Stakeholder Policy and Advocacy Advisor, Land Management and Planning, and
Mr Grady Powell, Policy and Advocacy Manager, Victorian Farmers Federation.

The CHAIR: Thank you, everyone, for joining us today. Apologies for the delay in getting the proceedings underway. We have been waiting to establish a quorum, which is a requirement for us to be able to take evidence. I do apologise for that.

Thank you for joining us today for the public hearing into the Inquiry into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities. On behalf of the Committee I acknowledge the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land upon which we are meeting. We pay our respects to them; their culture; their elders, past present and future; and elders from other communities who may be here today. I extend a welcome to any members of the public and the media that might be present today.

This is one of a number of public hearings that the Environment and Planning Committee is conducting in Melbourne and around Victoria to inform itself about the issues relevant to the Inquiry. I will run through some important formalities before we begin. All evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege. This means that you can speak freely, without fear of legal action, in relation to the evidence that you give. However, it is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to comments made outside of the hearing, even if you are restating what you have said during the hearing. You will receive a draft transcript of the evidence in the next week or so for you to check and approve. Corrected transcripts are published on the Committee's website and may be quoted from in our final report.

Thank you for making time to meet with the Committee today. Could each of you please state your full name and title before beginning your presentation?

Mr POWELL: Grady Powell, Policy and Advocacy Manager of the Victorian Farmers Federation.

The CHAIR: Welcome.

Ms GERVASONI: Lisa Gervasoni, Senior Stakeholder Policy and Advocacy Advisor, Land Management and Planning, at the Victorian Farmers Federation.

The CHAIR: Fantastic; thanks, Lisa.

Mr MORRIS: I would like to see your business card.

Ms GERVASONI: I know, and it is very hard to register. There is a lot of—

Mr POWELL: It comes in A3!

Ms GERVASONI: That is right. I beat the number of characters.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. As I said, I do apologise for the delay in getting the Inquiry underway. The floor is over to you.

Ms GERVASONI: Our submission pack is just being distributed at the moment.

The CHAIR: Fantastic.

Ms GERVASONI: Just in brief, we do welcome the opportunity to, I suppose, discuss our submissions and any questions that you have today. We have actually taken the opportunity to have a look at some of the transcripts of previous hearings and have pulled out a couple of examples of some of the questions and issues discussed.

As you are probably all aware, farmers have long been at the front line of feeling the impact of changing climate and weather events. Farmers are keen not only to have Government recognise the significant

investment the industry has made and continues to make in research and practice to reduce emissions and to increase food security but to discuss with Government how information provision, regulatory support and incentives can be utilised to support Australian agriculture in these roles.

I think our submission really pointed out some top, high-level issues based on the IPCC's August report into climate change and land: opportunities in soil health, opportunities in food waste across the complete chain and opportunities in coordinated programs and regulatory systems to actually make sure that there are not artificial barriers to reducing impact. The not-often-looked-at consequence, but it was in the IPCC report, was about pest management, so one of the impacts of climate change will be increasing pest problems. And again, there is competition for land use—so food and fibre production is critical, timber is critical and renewable energy is critical, but you actually need to look at what the balance is between those uses rather than compete for the same resource.

We will make references to the climate change and land use document from the IPCC, because it is important to understand the global challenges and how agriculture fits into that in regard to reducing impact but also opportunities for sequestration of greenhouse gases. Agriculture is actually quite key to this—and it is critical that Australian agriculture is involved in these processes, because it is leading through industry-funded research and development, and we do need wider community support and recognition of the opportunities but also some of the barriers within that. Carbon storage on agricultural land is one of the ways to deal with the existing greenhouse gases, and it really is something that is beyond what can be expected to be a private burden. When it is a community good, there will need to actually be recognition and income streams to help agriculture sequester beyond their impact.

Some of the key things we can see that Government can do to support agricultural industries and the community are to investigate the current situation in Victoria in regard to the IPCC report; to strengthen policy support for agriculture's role in emissions reduction, food security and the wider economy; to work with industry to understand where the regulatory barriers to utilising technology to lower emissions are—one of the things we have put in the pack is the NFF and Clean Energy Finance Corporation document, *Transforming Australian Agriculture with Clean Energy*, so that is a little bit of a road map that might assist—to work with industry to support research and development; to identify ways to turn climate change adaptation from a threat to an opportunity in agriculture; and to support agricultural industries in undertaking targeted research and development.

I think I have been reading from the wrong version, haven't I? Sorry. Grady should have smacked me by now.

Mr POWELL: You have done well though. I think you have covered the topic.

Ms GERVASONI: There we go—'hearing document'. Sorry for that.

I will now quickly go into a couple of the key issues that we saw coming through some of the previous submissions and questions in hearings. I suppose a lot of things in agriculture might seem quite different topics, but they are all interrelated in a strange, symbiotic relationship. The first one I am discussing is emergency management. We quite often hear from our members; a lot of them are actually CFA members and volunteers, and obviously everyone is concerned about predictions of more intense and long fire seasons. But that also has the potential for a real impact on our members, because there will be a greater impact on their farm businesses and a greater stress on them to be away from the farm more often. Quite often they are called out for a range of scenarios including keeping accident sites safe—sometimes 6, 7 hours. They will be less likely to do that, which would be a burden on the State as well.

They are also starting to feel a little bit less valued. We are hearing about people saying they might roll out to a local event but they are not going to join a strike team. Increasingly farmers might start to prioritise staying and defending their own property to actually performing a wider community benefit. Sometimes part of that is the system does not always understand what, if they were on their farm, they would actually be protecting. So when they are off interstate or in another part of the state it is important that the system has their back and understands what they would protect on their own farm. So there is an opportunity to actually work to improve that knowledge.

Quite often the councils and emergency management structures have quite an urban bias in their understanding of fire and impact, and it is critical to actually understand the wider range of issues impacting decisions in rural areas. I know in the council emergencies process there was a lot talking about, 'Let's make sure that people can bring their pets', but there is nothing about people bringing key breeding stock to a showground to actually try and maintain that critical part of the economy. So I suppose it is just making sure that if we are increasing the threat on regional economies, we are also increasing the understanding by all parties on how we can best avoid and minimise the impact for those communities.

Then the flip side on sequestration and revegetation: many environmental groups are focusing on reducing emissions, and I think Ross Garnaut recently was at a Grampians energy forum, talking about how one of the only options to deal with existing emissions is through agriculture. Again, quite often people will look to agriculture to provide that benefit, but there need to be proper systems in place to actually make sure it is accounted for, that there are income streams and that there are community contributions to that role.

The VFF was one of the founding partners of Landcare, and I know there has been discussion about Landcare in some of the hearings. That was a successful model because it was: 'What can you do what is good for the environment and good for your farm?'. It was done in partnership. I think over the decades the funding model and the range of programs have probably gone more towards revegetation than some of the pest and soil programs. I suppose, again, we have seen less attention by Government to managing fuel risk and pest plant and animal predation, which has a biodiversity impact but also is a threat to agricultural production and a threat to actually doing some of that revegetation, because we have had long-term land carers that are actually talking about increased land loss, for example, because it provides shelter for foxes.

Mr MORRIS: Lisa, can you unpack that a little bit?

Ms GERVASONI: Yes. I suppose agriculture was one of the key leaders of that program, and all of the decisions and the funding was more looking at how you can actually support farmers to work out what is the best they can do on their farm to help the environment but also to help their bottom line, because if you are profitable, you can then invest in improving your soil carbon and in doing some biodiversity planting, doing some agroforestry. But if you are not profitable, you are not going to be able to do any of that, and potentially the land will be—

The CHAIR: Degraded?

Ms GERVASONI: Degraded, for lack of a better word. So I think sometimes the success of that program has actually taken it away from that more bottom-up, organic, 'What is the best thing you can do in the specific parcel of land?'. It is something we did point out in the 30th anniversary a few years ago—that I think both state and federally there probably needs to be a little bit more attention back to the agricultural stream and how farmers and groups of farmers can actually work out what is best in their area but also that is then supported by government coordination and management on Crown land.

I think it is actually CMAs that have some of the pest plant and animal responsibilities. They were meant to have a five-year plan and priorities, which ran out five years ago, and I do not think any of them have reviewed those five-year plans, because they are not getting the budget to actually implement them. So you are not getting the coordinated, cross-tenure impacts. So if you are spending money on fox predation but none of your neighbours, including the Crown, are, you are not necessarily going to see the benefit of those actions. So it is not always the type of issues that people get really excited about, but they are really quite critical issues both from the economic side but also for biodiversity. We are going to have to start tackling them because it is a growing issue and it is also recognised in Biodiversity 2037—the key role that pest plants and animals have in achieving that outcome. Did that help you, Mr Morris?

Mr MORRIS: Yes, that is good. Thank you.

Ms GERVASONI: I think I have already referenced *Transforming Australian Agriculture*. There is also in your pack one page from the NFF's *2030 Roadmap*, the growing sustainable agriculture. Again, that talks about some of the types of schemes and projects you can do—

The CHAIR: That one?

Ms GERVASONI: Yes. I think even in some of the Victorian information one of our members, Mark Wootton at Jigsaw Farms, is quite often used as an example of how you can sequester on site. I am sure if you took the time to speak to him, he would talk about the complexity of the different schemes and the reporting requirements. I think quite often that level of complexity makes it very hard for the average farmer to access those schemes, so that is one of the things why we call for quite a simple and enticing package, so you do not have to hire specialist accountants and whatever else to be able to utilise those schemes.

Mr HAMER: Sorry, can I ask: where is his farm located?

Ms GERVASONI: He is in south-west Victoria, sort of around Hamilton. Again, even different areas will actually have different production systems, different climates and different options for how you can do that with your farm business. That is not always understood in the wider community—so actually making sure that there is I suppose a standard process but also simple reporting package so you can actually just input key data into it and that generates those reports for you.

We have highlighted the Victorian native vegetation regulations, which are actually just a particular provision in the planning scheme. That is a statewide provision, but in the context of decisions the *Planning and Environment Act* does require a balanced social, economic and environmental output, but quite often when you sort of have very specific provisions you get very one-piece-of-the-jigsaw decision-making. To reduce your stubble burning, for example, you basically need your GPS-enabled agriculture, but to be able to use GPS-enabled agriculture you need a strong GPS signal. I do not know if you have any of these recording devices, but when you are in tree covers the maps tend to go a little bit off-beam. So for most of our members, when they are applying to remove a small percentage of trees on their farm it is so they can actually use the type of technology that reduces your emissions. Yet the system does not necessarily take that into account in the balanced outcome, so it is going to be critical that we are actually a bit smarter and we look at the total environmental outcome. So we are not saying that we should not have native vegetation regulations or offsets, but you do need to actually take a more holistic view of that.

Mr MORRIS: Can I just ask you there? And sorry I keep interrupting.

Ms GERVASONI: That is okay.

Mr MORRIS: In most cases it is going to be a council that is making the decision on this sort of stuff. If they have got to take the other factors—that seem entirely reasonable to me—but if they have got to take those factors into account, are they going to have the capacity to be able to do that and do it transparently?

Ms GERVASONI: Thank you for that question. I am a planner, so I will start to rave here. But I suppose it is a State-based control, and DELWP is one of the key referral authorities. You will get a referral response from the native veg team; you will not get a whole DELWP referral response. There are systems to support councils in making that decision, but it tends to be that where we see some of the problems is when it potentially gets to something like VCAT, when you have had DELWP support an application and council support an application and it is challenged.

Mr MORRIS: An objection or—

Ms GERVASONI: Correct. Quite often it might be challenged on the native veg regs, but that is not the driving issue behind that challenge. It becomes a very technical sort of weighing-up policy, and agricultural policy in our state, in our planning policy framework—it used to be the state planning policy framework—is actually really weak. It is one of the weakest elements. So VFF has long called for actually strengthening policy about agriculture.

The CHAIR: Can I just pick up here? You would not have had the opportunity to hear this evidence, but we visited an agroforestry property a couple of weeks ago in the Otways part of the world. A particular person involved in that network some 30 years ago made substantial planning across his property—a whole diversity of different tree crops, some indigenous, some native, some introduced, depending on the particular challenge he was looking to respond to and the sorts of timbers he wanted to produce. He got caught up for a little period in his particular shire indicating that he could not remove some of the vegetation. He was ultimately able to persuade them that he actually planted it and looked after it for 30 years for the purposes of timber, and they

backed down. But it just occurs to me that today with our modern satellite technology we should be able to take a snapshot of the vegetation, farm by farm. If farmers wish to increase the vegetation on their properties, I think that is a good thing for a whole raft of different challenges, including obviously climate change, but there are a lot of things that come into it, including good farming systems from that potentially. But there should be an opportunity for a farmer to have a satellite photo to say, 'Well, this is the baseline. This is the stuff I've done on top of that, and I'm happy to maintain a higher percentage than the baseline, but give me the capacity to be able to manage my property appropriately'. What is your view? Because that seemed to me to be a hurdle for farmers increasing the vegetation on their properties. The Otway Agroforestry Network, and the area that they represent, through growing trees have moved from, I think, 5 per cent up to now 18 or 22 per cent—or something like that—which is a great outcome. It is great for locking up carbon, but we do not want to see public policy challenges put in the way for that. So what is your view around regulations and—

Ms GERVASONI: And it is a wicked problem that we have been trying to discuss for quite some time. One of the things we called for in the review of native vegetation regulations was a recognition that agriculture is probably one of the few areas that, through Landcare and even *Salt Action: Joint Action* before that and the farm tree association, has been voluntarily getting to net gain and quite often not with a lot of support.

Potentially some of those schemes, say *Salt Action: Joint Action*, where you actually planted trees to actually help lower your water table, and similar with sequestration, are most efficient in their peak growing periods. So the best thing is to actually, after 20 or 30 years, harvest that and then potentially regrow again. But even though that was the intention of the schemes, native veg regulations ended up blocking, unless you had a plantation notice, your ability to actually harvest what you planted for a specific reason.

They would say, 'Work with agriculture'. You have designed a regulation, let us be honest, basically around urban development and large-scale development, and that has a negative vegetation precinct plan that is prepared through planning scheme amendments and detailed studies. But in an agricultural sense, the only reason you need a permit is that trigger; you have got your existing use rights, which is the purpose for which the land is zoned, and the system does not quite seem to take that into account.

We have said, 'Why not have a slightly simplified system, where you get the farmers in a region together'. Let us pick on the land south of Horsham. You have got the Grampians and you have got, say, Little Desert; there is a landscape you might want to link. You have got some existing pockets of vegetation that you might want to mark as key areas to build into your linkage, and you have potentially got some isolated paddock trees or things that just are not quite in the right spot, that you might need to remove over time. As a farmer, say you have a plan that says, 'Okay, I'm going to do this vegetation link in a way that suits my farm business but also meets that landscape-level approach'. Then once I have established that, I expect a simple process to remove, you know, these five trees, recognising that you are going to end up with a much healthier landscape over time, because at the moment all we are doing is keeping old trees alive, and you will never get to net gain unless you actually have some reason to offset.

That is why it is the wicked problem, but let us actually think about it across a landscape. And if you have demonstrated you have done your bit, then you should actually have a fairly simple process to remove X number of trees because you have already established 30 times more—so, looking at a little bit of government investment in becoming more strategic and then basing a streamlined system on compliance with that strategy.

The CHAIR: Just working my way through the example you have used there, in a practical way how might that actually look? Would that be a bunch of farmers in that corridor getting together with their Landcare network or their CMA, or whatever it might be, to negotiate, collectively, a plan for what each farm will do and the purposes for the vegetation? It might be simple things like windbreaks, or it might be an agroforestry purpose or whatever, but sorting that out—

Ms GERVASONI: A bit of a biolink—

The CHAIR: Yes—sorting that out, making sure that there is a snapshot taken of the landscape from a satellite perspective, so that is your sort of base, and then getting some sort of an agreement that that planting will take place. But it will not then be subject to native veg regulations down the track—it is a part of the farming system.

Ms GERVASONI: It would still be subject to native veg regulations, but it might be that that is seen as a native veg precinct plan that is approved.

So at the moment obviously in urban development, when they are doing their rezonings they are making a profit to fund that; they are able to fund those documents. These days a group of farmers, if they were not getting government assistance, might have to spend \$100 000 on the ecologists' assistance, then have to seek a planning scheme amendment through their local council, which again might cost them \$30 000 to \$50 000 in statutory fees. It becomes something that they are going to resist doing, because they are not getting a rezoning, they are not getting any sort of change to their land.

So there actually needs to be government leadership about how we can actually drive that process, and the department does internal amendments quite often, so there should be a process to actually show if we have actually done proper engagement with landholders and with the wider community about, 'This is the outcome we're going to achieve'. It should be, I suppose, a government process to drive that outcome, because that is where you really are going to get, I suppose, wide-scale change. How many VEAC and other reports have there been about some of the key gaps? The key gaps in, I suppose, cover are not areas where there is urban development and then money for offsets. So it is another part of that wicked problem.

Mr POWELL: There are examples as well on this in other jurisdictions. A lot of the other states have provisions in their native veg legislation that will allow you the flexibility to plant native veg on your property, and there are clauses in that legislation that within a 20-year period you have the ability to, I guess, harvest or what have you.

The CHAIR: Harvest and then replant or whatever, yes.

Mr POWELL: Whereas the legislation in Victoria at this moment is quite rigid: once it is planted, it is kind of set and forget, and it does not allow that flexibility on farm.

Ms GERVASONI: Ten years, which is uncommercial.

The CHAIR: Yes, and then it gets caught up in native vegetation regulations and the purpose of the planning is lost, and farmers have therefore lost—

Ms GERVASONI: Faith. Look, we have got some of the early Landcare groups—you know, people who were involved from the start—saying they are now planting introduced species, because sometimes, you know, it was a dangerous tree or something and it became too hard for them to actually negotiate the approvals process. So that is probably a small percentage of the issues, but the more you can actually streamline and support probably an industry that has actually shown some leadership and shown willingness to do revegetation—

And quite often agriculture is always a story of gloom about how much has been lost. It was in my lifetime that really when you were granted land you did not have to clear it or cede it back to the Government. So it was actually government policy that led to widespread clearing. Most of the vegetation that is on farms now is because farmers actually revegetated. And again it is always—and I can understand why—a negative spin because it helps the community understand the seriousness of the issue, but if you have had 30 or 40 years of your life spent really trying to do the hard yards on Landcare and you saw how often and whatever else, and all you ever hear is the negative, it does not bolster you to keep doing the hard yards. So there needs to be some recognition and some support of what industry has been achieving.

The CHAIR: In a collaborative context, would it be worth the Committee making a recommendation to the Parliament, and effectively the Government, around finding a willing farming community that lives within a sort of a landscape where it would be an intense process where the Government would work really closely with the landowners, the VFF and maybe some environmental groups to negotiate a landscape perspective about what we will do, kind of as a bit of an example about what could be done, with the idea then of using that example to help shape future public policy? Would that sort of collaborative approach, where we bring people together in a partnership-type way, be something that might be of some benefit?

Ms GERVASONI: Yes, and there is an outstanding promise to actually do some of that work, and for a range of reasons it has been stalling. Some of it is budgetary within DELWP but, yes, we would value anything that actually helps progress that project.

The CHAIR: And it might—well, I am just thinking out loud, but it might be that example that you have highlighted in that Horsham part of the world.

Ms GERVASONI: Because it is about: how can you actually make it and, I suppose, harness it so you are getting the best overall outcome and you actually have people engaging with the system rather than being scared of the system? To actually do what you need to do in this is going to have regulatory and especially planning scheme impact, and we have been calling for better guidance on agriculture. The average planner does not understand what goes on on a farm, and the most commonly applied zone in the state is the farm zone, yet you go looking for a decent practice note on how you make a decision in farming areas and you will find nothing, and you will find very little support in the scheme. There might be some decision requirements but not: how do you actually unpack and understand that? So the more we can actually help upskill the planners and the referral bodies but also seek to simplify the system so you are actually understanding what you are trying to achieve, you can actually see what that means in different geographic areas.

Mr HAMER: Can I just ask a couple of questions? When we were on a couple of our site visits, we did visit a few farms that have taken quite a lot of steps in terms of sequestration and the like. One of the challenges I think was about getting some of that information out of some of the practices that they were doing and sharing that, and many of them were involved in their local Landcare community, but I was wondering if you might have any ideas more broadly about how some of those practices could be disseminated in a way that the farming community would actually take on board. Because I sort of fear if it is just directed from Government, you may not get the reception that you would get from other farmers talking to farmers?

Ms GERVASONI: We quite often use the term ‘industry input’, because the agricultural industry sector does have a range of players, including research bodies. Obviously most of our members probably would give more credence to something that came from one of their industry research bodies, for example, because they know where it has come from and that they understand the issues. I was at one of the Grampians energy forums. Was it the energy forum or on climate change? One of them. I was on a table with quite a few small regenerative agriculture people, and I can remember asking them, ‘That’s nice, how big was their production system?’, and then I said, ‘Okay, how do you scale that up?’. None of them could actually answer the question about how you scale it up. So I suppose that is part of the problem.

Traditionally that is what agriculture was—you used some of those technologies but to meet the level of production that is required to literally feed the world. Sometimes you do actually have to have a scalability these days, so we do need to actually be able to scale up those systems; otherwise you will not be able to necessarily adopt them widespread. I think sometimes you also have to understand that there are different ways to look at production systems. With what might seem to have—and does have—a good carbon footprint, you also need to look at, ‘Okay, what is that footprint per kilogram of protein?’, for example, because sometimes the systems that have had a lot of research put into them are highly efficient, so even though they are using certain chemicals and whatever else, their total footprint actually is at a similar level because of, I suppose, the efficiencies within those systems. So if we also need the wider community to be able to afford to eat, we have to recognise that there does need to be scalability in production systems.

The CHAIR: Certainly if you look at the average-size farm today in comparison to 50 years ago, I suspect it is two or three times the size. One would imagine the economics of that will continue, which means farms are getting bigger, which in a sense might mean, potentially, that there are less people controlling the landscape. That might mean putting in place some sensible reform on farm to make the farming system more productive and better from a climate perspective. It might make it easier. Is that how you would see it as well?

Ms GERVASONI: Yes, it is about looking at the total system. I think if you look globally, the IPCC reports will be global averages, but Australia has different regulatory frameworks from a lot of places and quite often different production systems. Sometimes those production systems we have have a lower water use or carbon use footprint than the global average. We are competing in a wider market, and I think one of the things the Government can do is actually basically say, ‘We’re a highly regulated system, whether it’s environmental

controls, whether it's animal welfare or whether it's food safety, so if it's Australian produce, you can probably bet that it's got a certain level of credential'. People need to, I suppose, understand and support that and help the industries that are actually investing in reducing their footprint.

The CHAIR: Certainly most of Victoria, I think, can be described as a very old landscape where we have very degraded soils. That is not because of farming practice; that is because we are geologically a very old continent.

Ms GERVASONI: We are not New Zealand.

The CHAIR: We are not New Zealand with great big 30- or 40-metre volcanic soils, which means, I think, the opportunities that are opened up by soil carbon are much greater. The agricultural benefit is going to be greater here than in New Zealand, where you do have very rich soils. What advice do you have for our Committee about how the Victorian Government and the Parliament might support soil carbon without a price on carbon, which makes things difficult?

Ms GERVASONI: Without a price on carbon, which is always challenging. I might be slightly dodging the question here, but something we were quite interested in with the *State of the Environment* report was that probably the area where there was the least amount of data was soils. We used to have a Soil Conservation Authority; we might never have that again, but we used to have a fairly decent understanding of our soils and baselines, and that seems to have been lost in my working life. I suppose it is a matter of: how do we actually get better recognition of how important soils are and that agriculture is soil dependent and therefore the industry is actually looking to do everything it can do not to degrade its soils but to improve its soils? So again it is a story of—how do you actually work with and how do you actually support that, whether it is a little bit of government research or a little bit of assisting in getting some of that soil mapping baseline back so you can actually improve? But also, with some of the schemes that are around, Victoria is quite often difficult, because most private schemes like things at a scale, and even a large-scale Victorian farm is actually quite small-scale on the Australian average. So it is: how do you actually make sure that some of those schemes are applicable to the average Victorian—

The CHAIR: I have just got one last question. The department of agriculture or DPI or whatever its various names over the last 30 or 40 years, used to have a significant presence on farms. They used to have extension officers and research officers who would come out and talk to the farmer and discuss how things might be done differently and more efficiently and effectively to generate a better outcome for the farmer and the like. It seems to me, certainly from the evidence we have heard today, that there is not anywhere near as many extension officers in the system. Is that true? Were those extension officers productive and helpful? Did they lead to better outcomes, or have progressive governments over a significant period of time, made the right decision to get out of extension?

Mr POWELL: I can start. Victoria is not alone in their reduction of extension officers; that has been countrywide. I think agriculture is a very commercial space where you have got people pushing chemicals, fertiliser and the like on you. So they certainly had value, because it was independent advice. I think at that time they had a relationship with the farmer and they were trusted to try and cut through that commercial noise. I think we have moved past that a little bit as an industry now, where we do have reliance on our RDCs, and we rely on them for that advice. But also I think that, I guess, transition away from those extension officers has also galvanised relationships between farmers and their agronomists as well. So now it is a bit of a patchwork of trying to find the best advice and applying that to your own farming system.

The CHAIR: With big economic interests, people are trying to sell you a lot of fertiliser!

Mr POWELL: That is right.

Ms GERVASONI: Yes, and one of the suggestions we have made on other regulatory programs is that sometimes the education probably needs to be rolled out to agronomists as well, or accountants, because sometimes they are the ones that our members are going to, not the extension officer that does not exist anymore. So you actually need to make sure that the people providing advice understand those systems.

Mr FOWLES: So do you have a sense of who the—good morning, by the way; sorry I am late—trusted advisors are? Have you done any surveying of your members to determine what order of priority accountants, agronomists or other advisors are given, and to whom they sort of turn to? There is also a public perception that farmers are a stubborn lot. I know it is not universally true. It is probably true in some respects, but I wonder—

The CHAIR: So are politicians, Will.

Mr FOWLES: Yes, I know—true, granted. But I wonder whether, in trying to educate even about some soil techniques and stuff, there are better approaches or whether the VFF has formed a view about approaches that might work better.

Mr POWELL: In terms of a survey, we have not done one. But I guess it does come back down to your levy body being your first and foremost, and then secondary is going to be agricultural groups, potentially like us and others, that would try and legitimise that feedback. It still comes through. It is trying to cut through the middle and find something that works for you. I know, without those extension officers, that the agronomist is a really valuable asset to a modern-day farm.

Ms GERVASONI: And I suppose there are options within the actual networks as well, because most farmers—yes, they are competing private interests, but they are also more likely to adopt something if they have seen it work at, you know, Fred or Joe or Mary's.

The CHAIR: So Landcare networks therefore perhaps should be strengthened because it is a farmer-on-farmer thing; it is a farming community working together.

Ms GERVASONI: And that type of model—about actually cooperation and sharing knowledge. We have quite a few members that are probably at the cutting edge of technology and the use of it, so how do you actually get that message through? But also they are some of the ones that have been frustrated by the existing approval systems. So they are champing at the bit to actually reduce their carbon footprint, yet they are being blocked from doing it.

The CHAIR: Okay. Well, I have certainly run out of questions. Colleagues?

Mr MORRIS: I am mindful of the time, but I want to come back to the issue of the CMAs. We have talked a bit about soil health, but particularly pests, particularly animal management—is there a gap in the current funding? If there is a gap, what size plug do you need to fill the gap?

Ms GERVASONI: I can only, I suppose, speak from anecdotal experience. Our members would love us to actually know exactly how the CMAs are funded but we do not have oversight of that.

Mr MORRIS: Neither do we.

Ms GERVASONI: But it does seem to be, even if you look at the reports, there is a focus a lot on, I suppose, the floodway, the waterway management, some of the native veg activity. So you can guess that where they are most active is where they are getting the funding for, so you infer that where they are least active is where there is not the income. So I think a lot of the CMAs that are active in the soil space have probably got it through national Landcare funding rather than from government sponsorship of that. So it is always a challenge because CMAs probably are where some of that soil knowledge is meant to be sitting now and definitely where some of the on-the-ground coordination of pest, plant and animal management is, but it is not necessarily something that they have got a lot of resources to be able to deal with.

The CHAIR: I am out of questions. Terrific. If you wish to make a few parting comments, you are most welcome to do so.

Mr POWELL: No, I think Lisa has done well.

The CHAIR: Thank you for a very detailed presentation. We do appreciate it.

Witnesses withdrew.