

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **2021–22 Budget Estimates**

Melbourne—Thursday, 17 June 2021

### **MEMBERS**

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr James Newbury

Mr Danny O’Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

**WITNESSES**

Ms Lily D'Ambrosio, MP, Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change,

Mr John Bradley, Secretary,

Ms Carolyn Jackson, Acting Deputy Secretary, Environment and Climate Change,

Ms Anthea Harris, Deputy Secretary, Energy,

Ms Christine Ferguson, Deputy Secretary, Forest, Fire and Regions,

Mr Xavier Hinckson, Chief Financial Officer,

Mr Chris Hardman, Chief Fire Officer, and

Ms Kate Gavens, Chief Conservation Regulator, Department of Environment, Land Water and Planning;

Mr Lee Miezis, Chief Executive Officer, Environment Protection Authority Victoria; and

Mr Matthew Jackson, Chief Executive Officer, Parks Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2021–22 Budget Estimates. Its aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

Please note that witnesses and members may remove their masks when speaking to the committee but must replace them afterwards.

Mobile telephones and computers should be turned to silent.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

We welcome Minister D'Ambrosio, in the first instance for your energy, environment and climate change portfolio, and officials from your department. We invite you to make a 10-minute opening statement, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you.

**Visual presentation.**

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Thank you very much, Chair. I am very, very pleased to be here, and thank you for the opportunity. Certainly of course I have slides here that will help to illustrate my introductory comments, and certainly I will try to keep that as efficient as possible in terms of the delivery of the information. So of course with this budget we have delivered an additional investment of \$984 million in new funding approved. This results in a total of \$5.4 billion since the 2015–16 budget.

A significant part of this investment supports our ambitious climate change strategy, and that is about positioning our state as a leader in tackling climate change and creating new jobs in industries of the future. At the heart of the plan are our very, very ambitious targets to reduce emissions, and they are of course reducing emissions by between 28 and 33 per cent by 2025 and between 45 and 50 per cent by 2030, and this puts Victoria the forefront of Australia's climate change action. The recent launch of Victoria's zero-emissions vehicle road map and this budget demonstrate our continued commitment to emissions reduction and that real plan to take us where we need to go to in terms of net-zero emissions by 2050.

The next slide, Chair, talks about some of the highlights of the budget, and it gives a snapshot of the \$954 million allocated in the budget. The government has provided another significant allocation to ensure

local communities stay safe during bushfire seasons and backs our emergency services workers with the support that they need. And people will know that we have a variety of first responders that deal with bushfires in particular, and there is a large cohort of first responders that fall within my portfolio area. So this includes \$517 million to fund the upgrade to the vital communication technologies that our emergency services need and to reduce the impact of bushfires on Victorian communities, the economy and of course the environment; \$340 million has been provided in this budget to protect our environment and create more opportunities for Victorians to enjoy nature; and there is \$110 million that has been invested to maintain essential energy functions and support zero-emissions vehicles, and I will discuss some of these investments in more detail in the upcoming slide.

So the next one, which is already up there of course, is \$517 million for bushfire response and preparedness, and that includes \$133.5 million for enhanced communication during emergencies. That will deliver the transition to the digital regional mobile radio network. People will know that there has been a round of funds over a period of time to upgrade the communication during emergencies, and I am really pleased to see that Forest Fire Management Victoria are now going to be receiving the funding to support the transition to the digital radio network. \$383.6 million of funding will go to reducing bushfire risk in a rapidly changing environment, and that includes support for the *Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy*, establishing the Office of Bushfire Risk Management and continuing the actions that we have initiated under the Safer Together framework and reducing bushfire risk programs. This will include continued delivery of the expanded fuel management program.

If we go to the next slide, Chair, \$15.6 million of the \$383.6 million funding in the reducing bushfire risk allocation has been provided for increased mechanical and non-burn fuel treatments to reduce the fuel load in high-risk and long-untreated areas. Obviously we always need to be very mindful of the fact that when we are talking about reducing bushfire risk on public land it is not just about reducing it through planned burning but a really important component of reducing risk of course is in non-burn fuel treatments, and this allocation goes to that very point, because collectively it is about us mitigating risk and reducing our bushfire risk to the levels that we have committed to as a government. These areas are difficult to treat using traditional methods such as burning due to steep slopes, heavy fuels and proximity to people and assets. This will help ensure that our fuel management can be delivered even when it is not safe to burn, and this is really critical for us to reflect on. For example, up close to communities or where weather conditions do not allow for planned burning, non-burning treatments play a really vital role, and treatment can occur over a larger part of the year than fuel-reduction burns. It is about being nimble and agile and understanding that weather conditions often can prevent planned burns from continuing, so we need to make sure that we are agile enough to turn to non-planned-burn solutions for reducing our bushfire risk, and this is exactly what this item goes to.

The addition of \$15.6 million over four years will see the risk-targeted program increase to 170 hectares in 2021–22 and 210 hectares ongoing. The funding supports a key recommendation from IGEM's—the inspector-general for emergency management—inquiry into the 2019–20 Victorian fire season. People will recall that the IGEM had an inquiry over two phases. This came from phase 1 of that inquiry. Obviously it was serious enough for the IGEM to comment on non-planned-burning solutions, and we are absolutely responding to that through this investment.

\$340 million has also been allocated to the environment, and this includes more than \$90 million to the EPA, including \$47.6 million to perform the regulatory functions under the new legislation that is starting on 1 July this year. So \$15 million will deliver core services to protect Victoria's environment and health from pollution and waste. There is \$13.8 million for the officers for the protection of the local environment program, as well as funding for the clean-up of two dangerous waste sites. These are legacy sites that have been sitting around for many, many years that we are absolutely committed to removing as a risk to communities—high-risk sites. \$31.7 million has been provided to Parks Victoria to continue the park ranger program, and that retains 57 park ranger and support staff roles and delivers a real comprehensive and contemporary master plan for Wattle Park in Burwood. \$37.9 million will assist the delivery of Victoria's regional forest agreement commitments that will support the transition of Victoria's state forest over and beyond the next decade, and that is certainly an evolution of a commitment that has got very broad support across the community. \$39.1 million has been allocated to bushfire recovery projects, and that is about fast-tracking Victoria's recovery from the 2019–20 bushfires—devastating bushfires by all accounts. This includes \$22 million over four years to continue opening roads impacted—that is, roads within the public land estate—and cut off during bushfires and to manage the ongoing safety risks of hazardous trees along these fire-affected roads. So this will ensure continued safe access

to and through public land, and the reality is that the safety of some of these areas is still a particular focus because with trees that may have been impacted, some of them were impacted and demonstrated to be immediately impacted in terms of many of them collapsing over a period of days during the bushfires or shortly after. But then there is always that long tail of impact, which this sum absolutely goes to.

We are also investing just over \$14 million to continue to reinstate business sites across fire-affected public land, supporting Parks Victoria to employ dedicated recovery works crews to restore visitor sites and assets, to continue important safety works across parks and visitor sites and absolutely to make sure that these beautiful sites across Victoria are welcoming visitors back to these fire-affected areas, and we know how important it is to support those communities. Two million dollars will go towards our one-year effort to provide direct support to traditional owners for reading and healing of country activities, including application of cultural knowledge and practice and restoration of culturally significant species. There is a million dollars there to improve wildlife welfare outcomes during future emergencies and purchase equipment. We know how invaluable working with those welfare organisations is, but we need to of course make sure that there are the new training programs available for the rehabilitators and veterinarians that will strengthen our response activities across all of the authorities that come together to achieve these outcomes.

The budget also invests in—

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, Minister. We might stop you there. The time for the presentation has expired. Hopefully we can explore the further issues during questions, and I will pass to the Deputy Chair.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Thanks, Chair. Welcome, Minister. My first question deals with the \$250 power saving bonus. Can you tell us whether there was a new funding provided this year for that? I refer to page 185 of budget paper 3.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Okay. Thank you for that. Well, certainly last year's, the 2020–21 budget, provided—

**Mr RIORDAN:** Take your mask off. Sorry.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Sorry. I apologise. Thank you. We have just got to get into the habit of it. The last budget certainly provided funding to deliver this power saving bonus, and as the committee members will be aware, it is a one-year program. So it was launched on 1 February this year and is due to expire at the end of January next year. So there are sufficient funds there to cover all of the demand—

**Mr RIORDAN:** So it was not funded for two years?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** No, it is a one-year program.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Right. Okay. In a media release dated February this year, Minister, you stated that more than 900 000 households would be eligible for the payment. Do you agree that the total allocated funding of \$131.6 million is insufficient to cover a \$250 payment for 900 000 households?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Sure. Certainly this is a question that I have been asked in the past, but I can assure you—all members here—and every one of those 900-odd thousand Victorians that if they are eligible and they apply between now and the end of January, that application, providing that they are eligible, will be absolutely honoured. The Treasurer has certainly assured me on that point.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Okay. So was it a deliberate strategy by your department or the government generally to make it quite inaccessible for people—particularly elderly people, people without internet? I mean, it could only be applied for online. What was the reason for that?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** That is not quite right. I mean, the reason why we encouraged people to apply online is that it is actually much easier for people—most people—to apply online and it is quicker for them to actually get the payment.

**Mr RIORDAN:** But it was the only way you could apply.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** No, that is not the case. There are opportunities for people to apply manually, and certainly we have also funded a number of community organisations to be able to provide that really important service for people who may not feel comfortable in providing—

**Mr RIORDAN:** Did you know that those services were inundated and actually took their call centres offline?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Well, that is what you assert, but what I would say to you is that—

**Mr RIORDAN:** Well—

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Well, I will answer the question absolutely and fully. So since the launch of the program, commencing from 1 February this year, we have received more than 225 000 applications. More than 210 000 applications have been approved for payment. More than 185 000 applications have actually received the payment and more than 13 000 applications have been submitted over the phone or in person through a number of community organisations that really have that grassroots presence: the Brotherhood of St Laurence, more than 4500 applications over the phone; Consumer Policy Research Centre, 2300 applications over the phone; Victorian Energy Compare helpline, because we have got a dedicated helpline for people to ring in, 4800 applications over the phone. So we have had many opportunities for those people who have not been—

**Mr RIORDAN:** Do you think it was a good way to do it?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** I am sorry?

**Mr RIORDAN:** Do you think it was a good way to do it?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** I think it was the appropriate way in terms of getting money in people's pockets and in their bank accounts really quickly, but also allowing for those people who were not able necessarily to access a computer. Can I just say that the funding that we have provided to community organisations includes the neighbourhood house association. There are more than 300 neighbourhood houses right across Victoria and each and every one of them now has funding support to help those communities, and we know how invaluable neighbourhood houses are right across Victoria to provide that really important touchstone for so many community members, including those that are most vulnerable or in need.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So moving on, Minister, the next question is: I want to deal with budget paper 5, page 212, about contaminated soil. Minister, in budget paper 5 reference is made to 'certain other properties' and sites as having been identified as being potentially contaminated and requiring remediation. Can you provide a list, and I am happy to take it on notice, of the properties that that refers to?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Sorry, which budget paper?

**Mr RIORDAN:** It was budget paper 5, page 212: 'certain other properties' and sites that you have identified as being potentially contaminated.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** All right, so page 37, was it?

**Mr RIORDAN:** No, page 212.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** 212, okay, thank you.

**Mr RIORDAN:** It was remediation for environmental concerns.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Oh yes, okay. Well, look, there certainly has been quite a bit of public attention in terms of some of the legacy sites that are high risk that the EPA has identified. As a government that is absolutely committed to protecting communities we have been very determined to enable the EPA to be able to step in in the appropriate fashion—

**Mr RIORDAN:** But can you provide to the committee that list of properties?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** You would like a list of some?

**Mr RIORDAN:** Yes, is that possible?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Look, I am happy to seek that information. The only caveat I would put on that is that the EPA is an independent regulator. If there are matters that may inhibit their regulatory functions then that is the only caveat I would put on that, but if it is able to be provided and released publicly, I am happy to do that.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Okay. Thank you. Are any of the listed properties or sites part of or related to any of the projects under the Big Build program?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** In terms of the high-risk sites?

**Mr RIORDAN:** The high-risk identified contaminated sites.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Look, not that I am aware of. I think you will find that much of this particular item is related to legacy sites that have been with us for a number of years where high risk is a strong consideration, so that is what I would say to you on that front.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Okay, so could you take that on notice just to clarify that none of the sites—

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Well, I think I can say to you now that that is the case, so there is no need to take it on notice.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Okay, thank you. How much have you estimated may be incurred to remediate these properties to an acceptable environmental standard in the event of a contamination risk?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Which sites in particular?

**Mr RIORDAN:** The ones—once again, have you made an actual dollar allocation?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Sorry?

**Mr RIORDAN:** Have you actually made a dollar allocation for those sites?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Well, I think as it is described in the budget papers is the information that we are providing, but what I would say to you is that a number of sites certainly have been publicly in the media and certainly local communities have identified a number of sites. Perhaps I can give you a flavour of the type of sites that have been subject to remediation and investment by the EPA. For example, we know of course that at Lemons Springs, which is a township near Kaniva, there has been a lot of illegally buried hazardous waste, and there is work there underway. There is also the former Bradbury Industrial Services site in Campbellfield, where as committee members will be aware there was a large industrial fire that occurred in April 2019, and that company has since gone into liquidation. So these are the types of sites that do cause considerable community anxiety. On the assessment of the EPA—and we take their assessment and advice very seriously—any financial support that goes towards remediation is very much within the frame of that understanding and advice.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Okay. Thanks, Minister. Now, moving on, in last year's budget you had allocated \$7 million for contractors on the major projects like Melbourne Metro and the West Gate Tunnel to remediate their toxic soil. Is that \$7 million still available or has it been spent?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Sorry, can you just refer to the item in which budget paper?

**Mr RIORDAN:** In last year's budget you had allocated \$7 million. You had allocated it for this financial year and that was for the major projects—for remediation on the Metro and West Gate Tunnel projects to remediate their toxic soil. What I am wanting to know is: is that \$7 million still available or has it been withdrawn?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Let me have a look into that, if I may. Just in terms of consulting some of my notes on this matter, certainly you are correct that in the last budget, 2020–21, there was an allocation of \$10 million over two years. Certainly that money is available over a two-year period.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Has it been spent?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Has it been spent? Let me inquire into that, and I am happy to—

**Mr RIORDAN:** You will let us know?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** I am happy to come back to you on that.

**Mr RIORDAN:** All right. Is that money being funded out of the landfill levy?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Let me have a look into that—

**Mr RIORDAN:** You will let us know on that, take that on notice?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** and I will give you that information, hopefully in a few minutes.

**Mr RIORDAN:** The EPA CEO—

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Lee Miezis.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Lee Miezis, just a question for him: budget paper 3, page 181, refers to statutory activities and environmental protection and lists performance measures. One performance measure refers to quality relating to successful EPA prosecutions. Do these performance measures include the legal action taken by the Moorabool Environment Group at Bacchus Marsh Grammar?

**Mr MIEZIS:** That measure would refer to prosecution action taken by the EPA.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Right. With Bacchus Marsh Grammar, it was found that the EPA had acted unlawfully in approving environmental management plans to dump toxic soil in these communities. So you have had no expense to do with that case?

**Mr MIEZIS:** Sorry, the case ultimately did not go ahead. The environmental management plan was rescinded.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So there were no costs expended?

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, Mr Riordan, your time has expired.

**Mr MIEZIS:** I am happy to take it on notice.

**Mr RIORDAN:** You will take it on notice. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** I will pass the call to Mr Maas.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Minister, and thank you, departmental team, for your appearance this evening. Minister, if I could take you to the topic of enhanced communications during emergencies, and budget paper 3, pages 36 and 41, makes reference to the government's investment in that. Would you be able to explain for us why the government is doing this?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Thank you. This is a serious investment because of course it is a serious matter—that is, in terms of community safety certainly against our bushfire risk. The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning is the largest land manager in the state and it has got a key responsibility to reduce the risk and impacts of bushfire on public land. History will tell you and is littered by many examples of all of the serious and not-so-serious bushfires that typically do occur on public land, and there is a whole range of reasons why that happens. So the importance of resourcing the capability and the capacity of our public land managers is absolutely fundamental to reducing the impacts of bushfires on communities. Our commitment is of course always about, first and foremost, protecting lives.

The funding here is the next phase of our ongoing commitment to bushfire preparedness and response, including the investment last year of \$18.2 million into bushfire preparedness, and being able to communicate effectively and from more parts of our vast public land estate is absolutely essential. It is essential not just for the safety of the firefighting crews that deal with bushfires on public land but also in being able to better send a message out in terms of first responders identifying any risk for fire starts or fire starts when they are at their

smallest level and puts us in the strongest position possible for keeping those fire starts at very, very small sizes, if you like. The quicker we can respond to fire starts—and that relies on quick communications, agile communications, digital communications that can deal with blackspot issues, for example—the better chance we have got of actually maintaining and reducing bushfire risk to communities. That is absolutely fundamental, so I am really happy that we are going to be rolling this out.

Certainly it falls within the broader remit of the *Victorian Emergency Management Strategic Action Plan*. Forest Fire Management Victoria is, I suppose, the next cab off the rank in terms of the upgrades to these sophisticated digital communications appliances, if you like, and systems.

**Mr MAAS:** Thanks very much, Minister. You would presume that implementing a radio transition of that size would be quite a large undertaking. I was hoping you would be able to take us through what the emergency management operational communications program is and when that will be implemented.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Well, this is an important point of course—it is when and how we do this. It is a very large task to implement the radio transition, but it is something that is absolutely vital. We are in the final stage of completing the strategic emergency management operational communications program, and that program will provide emergency response agencies and departments with a statewide current technology, standards-based digital radio communications network. These are not things that you just take off the shelf and then just put into place. It has got to be fully integrated and interoperable with all of the other communications systems that have been rolled out.

DELWP, the department, does play a critical role in contributing to the realisation of that strategy. We will be moving to the digital regional mobile radio network by 30 June 2023, and that will replace the old analogue state mobile radio network. These are very large undertakings. They need to be done and done well, so that is why we have the date that we have there. The funds are there, and we want to make sure that there is sufficient time for it to be fully interoperable with all of the other digital radio communications systems that are in place or being rolled out right across all of our first responder agencies.

**Mr MAAS:** Thanks, Minister. We know that FFM Vic's workforce is significant, which is essential to ensuring Victoria continues to prepare for and respond to bushfires. How many additional jobs will the implementation of the new communications system create?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Look, the funding will provide, certainly, employment opportunities. We know that for a fact. With these very sophisticated technological solutions there are opportunities for the deployment of those, of course, but also not just the deployment but the implementation and ensuring that there is that interoperability that I spoke about. So certainly there will be job opportunities. In terms of a quantum, number, that will be known as we commence the process of rolling out that program. But certainly our aim is to ensure that there are as many opportunities as possible, especially in regional Victoria where we see a lot of these blackspots in terms of digital communications, and they are exactly where we want to make sure that that big uplift in the communications capability is. Many of those areas, as I said, are across regional Victoria, so we anticipate that there will be some really good job opportunities there for regional Victorians.

**Mr MAAS:** Thanks, Minister. If I could take you to reducing bushfire risk in a rapidly changing climate—and I would take you to budget paper 3, pages 36 and 41—if you could explain how reducing bushfire risk in a changing environment will address the impact of bushfires on Victorians.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Well, 'in a rapidly changing environment' is really where the hub of that question begs the answer. We know—and we have known this for a long time and it has been the case for a long time—that Victoria is one of the most bushfire-prone regions anywhere in the world; I think it ranks probably third in terms of regions. We need to recognise of course that with the last significant bushfires that we had that were experienced across multiple states, the impact of that was deeply felt amongst Victorians. In that truly challenging bushfire season we saw that 1.5 million hectares were burnt. Now, when you consider the compact nature of our state in terms of land mass, that is absolutely significant. 1.2 million hours were spent on firefighting efforts in Victoria. Everyone worked, we know, incredibly hard to protect our communities and the environment, and for that we know that each and every one of us—no less so myself—remain eternally grateful for Victorians' efforts. But it has also elevated community expectations regarding bushfire risk management. As we are aware of course the personal and economic recovery for communities affected by that bushfire alone

has been very significant, and it has been exacerbated by COVID—we know that. So there is the double hit there, absolutely.

We know that the threat of bushfires posed to communities and the environment is escalating as climate change drives more frequent and more dangerous fires. That is a reality, and I do not think you will find anyone arguing with that point at all. That is why we need to understand that and be more vigilant than we have ever been. That is why our funding—\$384 million in this budget—goes to matters that really are in response to that reality, and that reality is not going to shift any time soon. It is the largest ever government investment in forest and fire management, and I am very confident that it will have a positive impact on Victorians. The investment will build on what is already a very highly effective approach by the Forest Fire Management Victoria team to continue the reducing bushfire risk program and the Safer Together strategy, and they aim to reduce the impact of bushfires on Victorian communities, the economy and the environment. It is one thing to go through bushfires; it is another thing to then recover, and then it is another thing to only find that there is another threat before us. So together, across those programs and that strategic funding, a lot of the money goes towards fuel management activities—maintenance of and increasing that—and maintenance of the public land, road and bridge networks, because we know the consequences of fires in terms of the rebuild that needs to happen on public land and being able to get Victorians back onto public land and the tourists back in there to get that economic revitalisation happening. The role the public land plays in the recovery of bushfire-affected communities is absolutely paramount and is absolutely an integral part of recovery. So—

**The CHAIR:** Sorry to cut you off there, Minister, but the member's time has expired. I will pass you to Mr Hibbins.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Thank you.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thanks, Chair. Thank you, Minister and your team, for appearing this evening. I want to ask firstly about biodiversity and biodiversity funding. You would be aware that there is an inquiry into ecosystem decline currently occurring at the moment, and there has been a lot of evidence stating that the level of funding for biodiversity for land restoration for threatened species is just inadequate. Whilst the goals of the biodiversity strategy are good, they actually will not be achieved without a significant increase in funding, so can I ask: what is the funding in the budget item 'Unique biodiversity protection through community-driven action' actually for, and do you believe that the funding allocated—around \$13 million a year—is actually sufficient?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Thank you very much for that question. Sorry, the item you were referring to was about communities, was it?

**Mr HIBBINS:** Budget paper 3, page 36.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Yes. I have got it. Thank you so much. Thank you. Now, in terms of what is sufficient, we know, and no-one can deny—and I certainly first and foremost never deny—the fact that the challenge that we have got in terms of our biodiversity is unprecedented, both in terms of the sheer weight and pressures on biodiversity and what we have actually lost over many, many years, but also the rapid decline of biodiversity is absolutely not lost on me. It is an important question, and I really do thank you for asking it. I would like to think that we could say that these are the solutions that will immediately arrest the decline, because at the moment we are actually seeing a continuing decline. Arresting it is one thing; rebuilding the biodiversity so that we may be able to enhance the longevity and the opportunities for biodiversity to be able to rebound and thrive in a sustainable way is another part of the equation.

And you referred to the *Biodiversity 2037* strategy, and you may certainly say, and I imagine you would say, that it is not sufficient, but we have put in record investment in the delivery of some of the key milestones or targets that we have set for ourselves in *Biodiversity 2037*—more than any other government has ever invested. Some of those outcomes have been I think really salutary, because we have had to be very considerate. Given the state of the decline, the rapidness of that and the escalation of that, we have had to be very strategic in the types of programs that that investment money has gone into. So, for example, just over the past four years that has included some of the successes, if you like, and certainly I hope that we can have more successes into the future. But we have actually increased the population size of the helmeted honeyeaters and the identification and protection of new populations of highland Leadbeater's Possum colonies through the faunal emblems

program. These are two species—and they are only two species, yes—but the solutions that you put in place actually benefit multiple species, not just these.

Our response to the 2019–20 bushfires included funds to continue, for example, aerial shooting operations for feral animals. And I know, and I have seen firsthand, the damage that those large, heavy creatures actually have on our natural environment. I know that there are some people in Victoria who feel very strongly emotionally about this type of action, but absolutely it is action that has to be taken to give our biodiversity a fighting chance to hopefully recover—to actually survive the bushfires but also then recover. So that program on feral animals, in particular the deer and the expansion of our on-ground efforts through the Southern Ark predator control and threatened species program in East Gippsland—that program of works—has thus far resulted in 450 000 hectares of herbivore control and 120 000 hectares of pest predator control that is assisting right now native flora and fauna species and their habitat recovery post fires. There are a number of other items, certainly, that I can go to, but I can see that you are probably wanting to ask another question, so I will allow you to do that.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Yes. Can we get to just specifically the unique biodiversity projections through community-driven action?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** So, through community—

**Mr HIBBINS:** It is that specific budget line item.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Community actions, yes. Thank you so much. Okay. We understand that it is not just about the authorised agencies and their really critical role in protecting our biodiversity, but we know communities are absolutely passionate and have a lot of the on-ground knowledge that is an integral part of an overarching strategy to protect biodiversity.

As a budget initiative, this funding—I think \$51.935 million over four years and \$5.36 million ongoing—has been allocated in this budget for those particular unique biodiversity protection programs through community-driven action. On that community-driven action, we are obviously developing up the community environment grants that we will make available to those communities. Certainly I am looking forward to making some announcements in this vein as soon as possible because we know that communities have really fantastic insight into local needs and the actions that can actually make a really big difference.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thank you. You can provide this on notice, but you have indicated that you need to be strategic around the funding. Can you—take this on notice if you will—outline the funding that has been made available and the future funding and relate that specifically back to the goals and priorities of the biodiversity strategy?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Yes. Look, I am happy to take that on notice, but I will say as a general statement all of the funding that we make available from budget year to budget year absolutely aligns with the targets that we have set ourselves in that *Biodiversity 2037* plan. I think what you are asking is if we can just identify how each item aligns with the particular targets in that plan. I am happy to do that.

The other thing that it is important for us to note is that the *Biodiversity 2037* plan cannot just be something that is set in stone and immovable; it obviously needs to be refreshed from time to time as our environment changes and the challenges change. So that refresh—and there are funds for the refresh—will enable Victoria's primary biodiversity policy to articulate better traditional owner self-determination and align Victoria's primary biodiversity policy with the latest thinking on climate change adaptation. Not long ago we released some of our policy directions, if you like, in terms of adaptation and to ensure that the government's legislation obligations, such as, for example, under the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act* and the native vegetation regulations are considered. So we are making sure that we update that. It is a 20-year plan and we need to make sure that the investments are always strategically aligned with the changing dynamic situations year to year.

**Mr HIBBINS:** I think you mentioned pest control of invasive species. Again, I just ask about the size of the funding there. I understand there is \$1.3 million per year allocated in the budget for pest invasive species and weed management. I just ask: given the scale of the problem we are seeing with invasive species, where you have got deer, horses, weeds, rabbits, cats, foxes and more, do you actually believe that that funding is adequate to address the problem?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Absolutely. I will just get to my notes, but this is something that we have certainly increased funding for. Looking at any particular items in the budget, but collectively understanding that we have allocated \$5 million over four years, and there is \$1.25 million ongoing, that has been allocated just in this budget alone for pest and weed management. I will just get this confirmed, but that is separate to the investment for our feral pest deer strategy—our deer strategy. So when you consider that, the actual amount of money has grown considerably to meet the challenge that we have actually got in front of us in terms of pest control. The item that you are looking at is more akin to the business-as-usual weed control/management, but if you have a look at the deer control strategy, that is \$18.2 million over four years. That is more than any money that has ever been put aside for controlling feral animals, especially—not just, but in particular—with a target on interface communities. But of course the effort is not just around the peri-urban but certainly across Victoria, in a strategic way of course, to get the best outcomes in terms of biodiversity.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Alright, thanks, Minister. I am just about out of time. Thanks, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Hibbins. I will pass the call to Mr O'Brien.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Chair. Minister, I have got some more questions for Mr Miezis. While he is coming up to the table I might just ask a couple of other quick ones. The reference is budget paper 3, 185, which refers to reliable and affordable energy supplies. I just want to ask a bit about the events of the last week—obviously people without power for a week, now people without power for a month. Under the *Electricity Industry Act* transmission companies need to be licensed, and I just want to know whether there are any conditions on those licences to give a basic minimum service standard that would avoid this happening again. This is obviously a very widespread and serious issue and difficult for them to deal with, but is there something that you could have been doing with AusNet and the others to get power back on more quickly?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Yes, certainly that is an important question, because we need to reflect on the fact—and I think everyone has accepted this and understands this, not least the actual people who experienced the traumatic events of a few days back—that it has been very much an unprecedented event. In terms of the minimum standards that you refer to, there are condition codes and a whole range of other instruments of government in terms of requirements and conditions of licensing and the rest. I think it is important for us to reflect on the fact that it is very much an unprecedented event, and what is really critical here is that—

I have spoken directly with them, myself, and I will continue to do that. I have spoken with them directly myself, with AusNet services, and that is the area that remains the most heavily impacted and certainly has the long tail of significant impact for the next three weeks.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** So I guess I am asking: is there anything that you can enforce?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Oh, I see what you are saying. Yes. Well, look, I mean—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Will there be penalties for their inability to get people back online?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Oh, I see—yes, sure. Can I say to you that in terms of reliability performance of the energy distribution businesses, they are overseen by the Australian Energy Regulator. So in the system that we have got, that performance is overseen by them. So what I am expecting—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** What about their licence conditions with the ESC, though?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Yes. So what I am expecting to see is that the AER will undertake some type of review at the appropriate time, and I certainly will be seeking that to get a proper investigation, if you like, into the reliability performance of that distribution—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Well, I was going to ask the same question: will we do a review?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** In terms of the licence conditions—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Will you do a review at the state level of the framework we have?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Well, look, certainly my intention as the energy minister is to always look to these unprecedented events and any other events that happen in between as an opportunity for us to better attune

where it is appropriate to do so—and it is important to attune—any of the existing regulatory standards or minimum standard requirements that we have in place that we have authority over. So absolutely, and that is something that I am looking into as we speak, because it is really important that we remain agile and always learn from what has been right now a very unprecedented event.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Thank you. Mr Miezis, the minister I think may have said she did investigate the question before about contaminated soil and land remediation, which is referenced on page 212 of budget paper 5 in contingent liabilities, and it refers to a list of identified sites. Do you have a list of those sites? Does the EPA control that?

**Mr MIEZIS:** I suspect those sites may be references to sites—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Sorry, just take your mask off, Mr Miezis.

**Mr MIEZIS:** Sorry. I do not have the budget paper reference in front of me, but I suspect those sites may be references to sites on public land. They would be known to the EPA and some of them would be subject to notices issued by the EPA.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. So the question I think to the minister is: can we get it on notice, if you have got access to it?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** I think, if I may, just to your question, for the answer, I think it is a whole-of-government—I think there may be some commentary that is appropriately provided by Xavier. If I may, Xavier?

**Mr HINCKSON:** Thanks, Minister. Thanks, Mr O'Brien. So you know the disclosure is a whole-of-government disclosure for the budget papers; it is not specific to the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning or any of the portfolio agencies. So that information could be held by any of the agencies across the general government sector.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Well, I guess the question though is—and I appreciate it is whole of government, but it is land remediation environmental concerns; it is pretty clearly going to be DELWP at some point or EPA—can you provide us with a list of those sites? And the second part of the question is: obviously it is listed in contingent liabilities; do you know what the potential cost of that remediation is?

**Mr HINCKSON:** If I may, the liability rests with the controlling entity for those particular buildings, which would not necessarily be DELWP or the EPA—the EPA being the enforcement agency. But the liability would rest with the entity that controls. So it could be in transport or any other—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** I understand that. We do not know who to ask if we do not know what the sites are. Are we able to get the lists? That is what I am firstly asking.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Well, what I would say is, if it is appropriate, I would need to certainly consult with whichever of the relevant authorities are with respect to this—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. So it is not held essentially by the EPA? That is the main question.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** No, it is not. No.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. Just continuing on the EPA again, Mr Miezis, just following up Mr Riordan's question, he asked about the Moorabool Environment Group and Bacchus Marsh legal actions. You said that did not go ahead. Did the EPA pay any of the costs of those two entities legalwise?

**Mr MIEZIS:** I would have to take that one on notice.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. And likewise did the EPA have any legal costs, and how much were they?

**Mr MIEZIS:** Again, I would have to take that one on notice.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. I am happy for you to take that on notice. That would be great. Thank you.

Minister, moving on, budget paper 3, on page 174, indicates a \$6 million cut to the 'Management of Public Land and Forests' output. What programs or services are being cut to achieve this reduction?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Let us have a look at that. I will just have a look to see. This is budget paper—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Three, 174.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** If I may, I will ask Christine Ferguson, the Deputy Secretary responsible for this area.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Yes.

**Ms FERGUSON:** Would you mind, sorry, just giving me that reference again?

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** It is BP3, page 174. It is the 'Management of Public Land and Forests'. It is a 1.9 per cent cut to that budget. It is actually a \$7.8 million cut this year. I am just wanting to know—happy for you to take it on notice—how that cut will be achieved, what programs and services will be cut?

**Ms FERGUSON:** I may need to take that on notice, I am sorry, but am very happy to get the information for you.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Thank you. Minister, continuing on the same theme, BP3 has a performance measure for 'Crown land licenses directly managed by the Department', and you will be aware of the concern over the issue of camping on Crown land licences. Has there been any funding provided in the budget to support farmers who may face additional costs, in particular insurance for their Crown land licences, given that there is now going to be an increased level of risk?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Well, look, certainly that has not been a matter that has been raised with me as a matter of concern. I am not suggesting that it is not a matter of concern. But I can say to you that I am not aware that it has been raised directly with me. It may have been raised with other relevant ministers perhaps, but what I can say to you is that we have gone through a very significant consultation process. I think this is important, because the concerns that you have raised would be certainly flushed out through that consultation process. So the department—my department, because obviously I am the responsible minister for this area, Crown land, public land—received more than 1200 submissions, which was quite a significant number. So the department is currently reviewing those and analysing those, and certainly I anticipate that very soon the department will be reporting to me on what the consultations indicate.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** I understand all that—

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** And if that is a matter that comes through that consultation, certainly I will be in a better position to be able to provide some consideration.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Short follow-up: have there been any additional resources provided to DELWP for the enforcement of the new regulations that are coming?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** I am happy to consider this in some detail, but we understand that once the regulations come into place we anticipate that within our normal operations of compliance we would be able to manage that quite sufficiently within the existing budget that is available for such activities.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. Just continuing on leases, there is another performance measure relating to Crown land leases managed by the department. How many of these leases are pending renewal, and can you provide a list of those that are pending? And likewise, why has the government refused to renew the lease for the Cape Otway lighthouse and the Lorne Pier restaurant?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** I thought you might ask this one.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** I bet you did not think I would ask it, but anyway.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Oh, no, no, but that is fine—absolutely. And I know that this has been a subject of public commentary now for some time, perhaps not from you but certainly from a number of people, but what I

will assure you of is that the department has been very clear with the current manager of the facility. I will just go to my notes so I can give you the full answer.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** I am going to run out of time, Minister. Are you happy to take those two questions on notice?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Look, you know what I might do? How about if I ask Matt Jackson to give you that direct answer given that Parks Victoria is—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Yes, but I do not think you can do it in 3 seconds, so are you happy to provide that on notice?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Well, you should have given yourself a bit more time for the answer, but anyway.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Are you happy to provide it on notice?

**Mr JACKSON:** Absolutely.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Thank you.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** He is here to provide it, but if you want it on notice, that is fine.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** It is not my call, Minister, that I do not get to extend the time—we have tried that.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** I understand. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr O'Brien, for your understanding on this occasion. I appreciate your understanding, Mr O'Brien, and I will pass the call to Ms Richards.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thank you, Minister and officials, for appearing this evening. I am going to pursue some of the questions a little bit deeper that Mr Maas was pursuing earlier about bushfire risk. I will refer you to budget paper 3, pages 36 and 46, and I am interested in understanding a little bit more about the inspector-general for emergency management's—the IGEM's—phase 1 inquiry into the 2019–20 bushfire season, which I understand was an important and a comprehensive review. In what ways does this funding align to the IGEM inquiry?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Yes, certainly. So as a consequence of the bushfires that we had in 2019–20, we understand that the IGEM undertook two separate phases of a review. One was completed last year—I think it was last year—phase 1, and that is where most of the recommendations were relevant to the portfolio that I am responsible for, and of course there is one that is underway at the moment. Now, we as a government accepted every single recommendation of IGEM. The independence of IGEM and the respect that IGEM has certainly we are always very respectful of, because when we talk about bushfire risk and saving lives, it is one thing that we absolutely agree with. Therefore the recommendations that came out of IGEM—the budget allocations that we have made here in this budget absolutely align with the recommendations and go to the very heart of the recommendations that the IGEM put to government and that we accepted.

So in relation to those that are relevant to the land and fire management recommendations, the funding does align with those, and I will just give you some examples of that: delivering on an expanded Safer Together program—we know that Safer Together is a very strongly supported one amongst communities—including increased involvement for Emergency Management Victoria, the CFA, the Department of Transport and local government; funding that goes towards increased investment in the construction and maintenance of public land, roads and bridges; establishing a 365-day, year-round fuel management program to respond to earlier and longer bushfire seasons is really critical here, and that is about enhancing our ability to respond, the first attack capacity, including personnel, plant and equipment; and developing a community engagement process that builds understanding of fuel management targets and supports transparency and shared responsibility, and we know communities want more information, and that is absolutely something that we are absolutely committed to continuing to do.

Supporting traditional owners is really critical to lead implementation of *The Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy*. And there is the establishment of a single body—again, another recommendation of the

IGEM—or entity to lead and coordinate fuel management policy, practice and assurance and reporting on both public and private land. I often hear our chief fire officer and all of his crew say, ‘We are seamless. We are one team right across all of the first responders’, and in reality on the ground that is what you get. So we are looking to enhance further the sharing of information, the coordination of the work and the reporting of activities across both public and private land. This takes that to the next level, so the funding is there for us to establish it.

There is \$21 million to establish the Office of Bushfire Risk Management, and that is being established within DELWP. That will lead and coordinate the implementation of evidence-based—really, really critical—fuel management policy, practice, assurance and reporting across all land in Victoria. That is absolute, because at the end of the day bushfires know no boundaries—they do not know if it is a road reserve, they do not know if it just happens to fall on one side or if embers fall on the side of a private farm from a bushfire on public land—so we need to act that way too in terms of our response and preparedness.

So that is all going to go to that very heart of that. I am absolutely confident that the funds and the way that we have responded in a practical sense in terms of the establishment of that office will enable that critical work to prepare and protect Victorian communities and their environment from bushfires.

**Ms RICHARDS:** I heard you just then mention traditional owners, and I think there is a really strong acknowledgement that traditional owners are essential stakeholders in the bushfire space and across all environmental and land management elements. Can you explain how this investment supports self-determination for Aboriginal Victorians?

**Ms D’AMBROSIO:** Thank you. What I want to say from the outset is that these are not mutually exclusive aspirations—self-determination and reducing bushfire risk. We have a lot to learn from traditional owners’ practice and culture of the past and even what has continued today in terms of our own bushfire risk mitigation and activities. That is why we are providing the strongest investment that we have ever seen—\$22.5 million plus \$6.3 million ongoing—to enable the Victorian Aboriginal affairs framework and implementing that traditional owner cultural fire strategy that was released back in May last year. That strategy was authored by the traditional owners themselves in partnership with the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations.

There is not one, single fix for bushfire risk mitigation, preparedness and response; there are multiple. And when we bring the multiple responses and approaches together we enhance our ability to be able to reduce risk even further. That is why this is such a critical element of our ongoing aspirations to continue to improve our ability, capability and capacity to do ongoing improvements in terms of risk mitigation. The beauty of course in this is that it is an absolutely important and fundamental part of self-determination. The relationship of traditional owners with land—public land; all land, but public land—is fundamental to fulfilling, ultimately, the aspirations of traditional owners in Victoria.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thanks, Minister. I have still got over 3 minutes left, so I am going to change tack for a moment. I refer you to budget paper 3, page 36 and the table there, 1.10, and there is an item which is ‘EcoCentre redevelopment’. I am wondering if you could explain a little bit more about that item, about the funding for the ecocentre—‘e-co’ or ‘eco’? I do not know. I call it ‘e-co’.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** E-co.

**Ms RICHARDS:** You say ‘e-co’, I say ‘eco’.

**Ms D’AMBROSIO:** It depends which side of the river you come from, I suppose. Look, I am from the northern side of the river, so I say ‘e-co’ centre, but anyway. Nina may differ.

*Members interjecting.*

**Ms RICHARDS:** Somewhere in between.

**Ms D’AMBROSIO:** ‘E-co’, okay. There you go. But anyway, getting to the question—thank you—look, the ecocentre has a really important and we know well-appreciated role within that local community not just for what it does locally but for the significance of it in a broader sense. It is community based. It is community managed, located on public land that is near the St Kilda Botanical Gardens, so it is really well situated for

growing, for people to become aware of its importance and engage and volunteer and be involved in the work that they do. It does provide a base for many affiliate groups involved in activities that promote biodiversity, environmental sustainability and community action. So it is a real hub, and it is an organisation that, as I said, has a lot of buy-in from many organisations and communities. The current building is quite dilapidated. We know that there has been long-term support and demand for the services, and so we need to uplift, we need to be able to support a not-for-profit community-managed organisation to be able to continue and go to the next level in terms of the support that it provides. We are really pleased. We know that there has been some really strong work. The City of Port Phillip's final detailed design report and strategic business case that need to be submitted are an important part of this, because this is always about due diligence with public funds, but we have been very pleased to be able to commit to that because we know that governments cannot do what we need to do in terms of biodiversity, environmental protection and sustainability on our own. Any government that thinks they can are fools, and we are no fools. We know that there is so much more value that can come from backing community organisations that are doing wonderful things, so I am very pleased that we have been able to provide them support for this.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thanks, Minister. Thank you, Chair. I will leave it there.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Ms Richards. I will pass the call to Mr Hibbins again.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thank you, Chair. Can I ask about the budget line item on budget paper 3, page 36, the initiative 'Maintaining essential energy functions', which is around \$16 million a year. What is that money actually for, and will any of it be provided to the Yallourn coal power station operator, EnergyAustralia?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Now, I think the question was to unpack some of what this means, so thank you for that. I may have heard the word 'Yallourn' in there, or 'EnergyAustralia', so—

**Mr HIBBINS:** Is any of the money going towards—

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Oh, okay. No, I can say to you quite clearly this has got nothing to do with an agreement that was entered into with EnergyAustralia regarding Yallourn. The essential energy functions, some people would say, are the boring parts of what we do, but they are absolutely essential. They are to continue and enhance the work that is undertaken across a national sphere, if you like, in terms of the rules around the National Energy Market, gas work and matters that go to the department undertaking some of those really important, critical works that underpin key policies. When you have a look at the government's energy fairness plan and the work around our embedded networks in new Victorian apartment developments, these are key policy commitments that have been made by government. The funds from this item go to some of those really critical works that the department needs to do to bring to fruition the policies that we have articulated. It does support the ability and the capacity to respond to incidents—for example, we know that we had that very serious storm event of a few days ago, so it enables our department to move nimbly and with agility to deal with those types of matters.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thank you, Minister. What are the terms of the deal between the government and EnergyAustralia?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Well, as you will be aware, EnergyAustralia made a decision to bring forward the closure of the Yallourn power station by four years. As a state government that has its interest in energy security, reliability—

You will not be surprised that there are elements of your question that I am not able to answer, because they are commercial in confidence, but I can assure every Victorian that EnergyAustralia's aim, which we support, is to avoid a repeat of the closure of the Hazelwood power station and mine in 2017, which left people with almost no notice, really, at all to adjust.

So when people talk about a 'just transition'—and everyone uses that phrase now; it is the catchphrase—what does it actually mean in reality? Well, it does not mean giving people six months notice that you are going to close down, or three months or nine months. 'Just transition' means a well-planned opportunity of time to enable not just the workforce to adjust but communities to adjust and, importantly, to enable the market, because we have an energy market, to respond with replacement power supply. And this is exactly what the critical elements are of our agreement with EnergyAustralia. It is as simple as that.

Part of that of course is about delivering a very large battery storage facility. In terms of the magnitude, the scale of this, in today's terms it will be amongst the biggest in the world. And that battery will have to be in place. It will be delivering a capacity of about 350 megawatts, 4 hours duration. It will have to be in place certainly before the closure of Yallourn, which is in June 2028, and I think the date is 2026. The end of 2026, that battery will need to be in place to ensure that we have got that reliability and security of supply that is dispatchable.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Is it true that without government support Yallourn would actually be closing earlier?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Well, that seems to be a speculation that is thrown out there, but there is absolutely no proof or evidence that that is the case. So for people to speculate that is being quite mischievous, absolutely mischievous.

EnergyAustralia have been absolutely clear with me that their closure date was 2032, and they have made a decision for their own reasons to bring that forward to 2028. The agreement that has been entered into by our government was at their request, and the elements of the agreement have been an important feature of enabling EnergyAustralia to actually bring forward the closure of Yallourn.

**Mr HIBBINS:** So I guess we are still trying to unpack just exactly what the agreement is and what it is for. Is it for the battery or is it, for example, an arrangement to ensure that Yallourn stays open during certain times, during peak hours?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Well, you know, I can say to you that it is about providing seven years notice to the market so that we have ample opportunity for the market to respond with investment to create new power generation. It is about avoiding a repeat of what happened with Hazelwood. No-one benefited from that in terms of the immediacy of the decision and announcement. Victorians—

**Mr HIBBINS:** But do you also accept that was an issue because you actually left it up to a private operator?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Victorians expect of us that the transition that is with us and we have embraced wholeheartedly as a government—in fact we are leading the country in this—is done in a smooth way that takes communities with us, and I put that down as a non-negotiable element of everything we do in this government.

**Mr HIBBINS:** But what is the funding for, for EnergyAustralia?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** I have said to you there is a contribution towards, of course, ensuring that there is that large-scale battery in place. There are other matters which are commercial in confidence, and I will not attempt to say more than that, but I can assure Victorians that this is about a well-planned, smooth transition with a system that we no longer own.

**Mr HIBBINS:** I guess the commercial in confidence invites speculation.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** The Victorian government is committed to developing a dedicated Yallourn workers transition support service to expand the current functions provided by the Latrobe Valley Authority. That means having sufficient time to consult with impacted workers, relevant unions and the local community and to develop the necessary, if you like, nuts and bolts of what a just transition actually looks like, and not what some people think you can plonk on the table with one month's notice or six months notice.

**Mr HIBBINS:** The current energy emergency happening in Yallourn—the flood that is happening in Yallourn—is the third flood that has now occurred I think in the last 15 years at Yallourn. Does that raise questions about the actual reliability of the Yallourn coal-fired power station?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Well, the impact of the recent storm and flooding events is on the mine and not the power station, so I think that is an important distinction to understand.

**Mr HIBBINS:** The mine is flooded. Does that raise issues in regard to the reliability?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** In terms of reliability and the security of our power supply? Well, I can say to you categorically that the Australian Energy Market Operator has been really clear that there is more than sufficient power generation available to us to meet our needs.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Okay. So the mine is flooded—we have made that distinction. Now this is the third time in 14 years or what have you. Doesn't that raise issues around the reliability of the power station itself and the actual—

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Well, it raises questions about the impacts of a natural disaster like a flood or indeed even bushfires or a massive storm event that is unprecedented. That could happen to any type of technology anywhere. I think we have just got to be honest about this. Massive storm events could take out any type of energy infrastructure, so let us not mix the politics of climate change with what has been a very tragic event. The storm has not picked on coal-fired power stations. It does not pick on wind towers when we have extreme events in that regard. I think we just need to see this for what it is in reality.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Okay. All right. Thank you, Minister.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Hibbins. Ms Taylor.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Minister and department officials, I would like to move on to the Port Phillip Bay Fund. Could you explain how the continuation of this fund—and I will refer you to pages 36 and 39 of budget paper 3—will support *Biodiversity 2037*, which really is about our government's long-term plan to stop the decline of our native plants and animals and to improve our natural environment?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** I know you are a great fan of all of this. The Port Phillip Bay Fund has proven to be very, very popular amongst so many communities that are involved in our coastal communities across Port Phillip Bay and of course into Corio and the like. So just going to this question of how it supports the 2037 biodiversity plan—people will be familiar with this—the plan articulated the important role of a variety of agencies, and I include communities as an agency or multiple agencies in this. The role of communities is absolutely an essential part of *Biodiversity 2037*, and that sets that framework for managing biodiversity.

We know that Victorians, especially those that live around coastal areas, are absolutely passionate and have got fantastic ideas. They know their communities, they know the areas and they know the types of solutions that will be appropriate for improving the biodiversity of their local environment. When you look at that and consider that collectively—taking that all together—you can just understand how much of an uplift biodiversity around our coastal communities can have and how it can be absolutely enhanced with some assistance by way of funding from this. The fund provides grants to a range of groups—traditional owners; community groups; not-for-profits; local government also, importantly; and other agencies—whose efforts are about restoring the bay area and enhancing the marine environment.

In terms of the aims of this, I think I articulated that, but just unpacking it a little bit more: conserving and restoring the habitat and marine life and enhancing the marine environment—we know that these areas have been very much stressed by the types of growth of population and behaviour, if you like, of large populations that live around coastal areas; enhancing waterways, significant wetlands, through revegetation; soil erosion control; and encouraging strong partnerships. And partnerships are a really important element here because we know that we can leverage greater outcomes when we encourage partnerships across a range of interested groups—so including traditional owners, councils—that all have part of the answer. If you bring them together, it gives you that much bigger effort and outcome. Also going towards improving the appreciation and understanding of the bay's cultural and environment values through on-ground actions and engaging, we cannot presume that everyone has the same level of knowledge of the particular distinctive nature of local environments, and so that education piece is really important, and also building up that interest and engagement of future generations is a really important part of that but also always grounded in real, tangible actions through grants. So I think that probably gives you a really good sense of the flavour of this. And it has been very successful—that is why we have been very keen to continue to support this fund.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Great, and thinking about what you have said about connecting urban communities et cetera to nature, how does the Port Phillip Bay Fund help connect Victorians to nature and encourage volunteering?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Well, we know that, especially in the last 18 months, being in nature has become so much more appreciated by every single one of us in Victoria and globally. The value of it—just being able to get outside and hear the birds and see the wind through the leaves, just seeing small animals engage with their own environment—has been so much part of our own healing. I think that is something that will stay with us for many decades—and I think in a good way, in a positive way. I think this has meant that people have grown in their deeper appreciation of the value of protecting and enhancing our environment. So getting communities on the ground in urban areas is really critical, and we know that Victorians are more ready now than they have ever been to get out there, work together and just improve the quality of the environment for its own sake and not just of course for their own mental wellbeing. But that is a wonderful side effect and a wonderful complementary outcome.

Supporting Landcare, friends groups, Coastcare groups—the plan is really important in terms of the coordination and a revitalised approach to environmental volunteering, and that supports and fosters a sustainable, modern and effective and valued environmental volunteering sector in Victoria. We know—and this is often talked about—that volunteering is the biggest sector. If it were an industry, it would be the biggest sector of any sector, certainly in Australia, if not beyond Australia, and it remains so. So harnessing that—assisting in harnessing that—will give us a great uplift.

If we have a look at some of the previous recipients of the fund supporting those volunteers, there is Friends of Merri Creek. They have done great work to coordinate community clean-ups of litter after storm events. There is the Scouts, a really fantastic movement, and it has been really reinvigorated, certainly in my area in Mill Park-South Morang, and it is fantastic. They have done some great work with funds that we have given them to survey street litter to build datasets. Conservation Volunteers Australia—there is support there to support their foreshore rehabilitation at sites surrounding wetlands of international significance. There is money, funds, for the Mornington Environment Association, for example, to support friends groups to target high-threat weeds invading vulnerable coastal habitat.

So that is stuff we have done in the past. This year's recipients include the Swan Bay Environment Association—that is out in the Bellarine region, I believe, Swan Bay. That is a partnership with the Wadawurrung traditional owners and the Marine and Freshwater Discovery Centre, and that goes to enhancing coastal scrub. Volunteers will rehabilitate these areas of ecological significance. There has also been money going towards ongoing volunteer teams who will monitor the health of Truganina wetland and the restoration of Laverton Creek bank. So there are some examples of really tangible, cooperative, collaborative partnerships that have been enabled by our strategic funding.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Noting that our government is leading the country through our work toward treaty or treaties with Aboriginal Victorians, how does the Port Phillip Bay Fund support self-determination for Aboriginal Victorians?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** We know that the importance of land for traditional owners' healing and self-determination is absolutely inherent to the success of that, whether it is reflected in a treaty or multiple treaties. So everything that we do that involves public land, because that is the extent to which we can influence it through my portfolio, has as an integral component: consideration for the role of traditional owners in being able to bring forward their own know-how, knowledge and skill towards improving biodiversity. I said quite a bit about that earlier when it came to bushfire management. So some of the work that has been traditional owner led—some of the projects for restoration and connection to country—some of those go to, for example, restoration of the western waterways, the waterways of the Wurundjeri by the Wurundjeri land and compensation cultural heritage council. They removed 5 hectares of weeds and planted around 3000 plants with the support of 20 community members. That is great.

**Ms TAYLOR:** That is great.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** People coming together—when we do that, we reach a greater understanding, which is fantastic. There are so many multiple benefits here. The Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation, in partnership with other Aboriginal Victorians and trusts for nature, have trained seven Aboriginal sea rangers, who have all obtained employment in land management roles after graduation—fantastic, the spin-off benefits there in terms of economic support, which is an important component of self-determination. What does it mean? Economic independence is the key to that. In the 2020–21 round of this fund with the applications that

have been opened up what we have encouraged through that process in terms of the types of applications that have come in so far from traditional owner Aboriginal Victorians were applications that go towards protecting ecological and culturally significant areas within the base catchment and projects with strong partnerships with traditional owners, if the applicant is not Aboriginal. This is a really important reminder to communities that that is a really critical link to success.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Taylor. Mr Newbury.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Thank you. Just taking you quickly back to the \$250 vulnerable Victorian energy bonus, Minister, I heard you earlier talking about its accessibility to vulnerable Victorians. Secretary, I do note you were talking about how there is an eligibility to lodge on paper—you do not have to do it online. I also understand you can request a cheque. Secretary, can I just ask: why are some of the cheques bouncing?

**Mr BRADLEY:** Thank you very much for the question. I do know that the Deputy Secretary is in a position to respond on that matter.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Okay.

**Ms HARRIS:** Thank you. That is something that we have continued to investigate. At this stage it appears that sometimes the information that we have received from the applicant is not necessarily matching up and so when that cheque goes out it bounces. But it is something that we are trying to get to the bottom of.

**Mr NEWBURY:** So sometimes it might be because their details are wrong, and there are instances where they are not, so what would the other reasons be? I mean, the state I cannot imagine is broke.

**Ms HARRIS:** No—

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** That is ridiculous. That is a ridiculous proposition.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Well, I think when vulnerable Victorians are receiving cheques that are bouncing—

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, could you allow Ms Harris—

**Mr NEWBURY:** I do not think it is ridiculous to say they cannot cash the cheque. I think that it is irresponsible to be sending out cheques that bounce.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, you have been rude to everybody all day. If you would allow—

**Mr NEWBURY:** Your assertion, Labor Chair, of that does not make it so. If you want to sit there as a Labor Chair, that is fine; we accept that fact.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, you continue to do so. Would you allow Ms Harris to answer the question, please, respectfully.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Sure.

**Ms HARRIS:** As I said, there are times when it appears to be an issue with the information that is provided. There are other issues that we are still in the process of investigating to get to the bottom of exactly why that is happening at the moment.

**Mr NEWBURY:** So at this stage there are instances where we do not know why cheques are bouncing?

**Ms HARRIS:** We are getting closer. We have been investigating that issue, but we have not got the answer today.

**Mr NEWBURY:** So unfortunately at this stage there could be more cheques out there that might bounce?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Let us see this within the context that we are talking about. The overwhelming majority of the 185 applications that have already been paid have received it through electronic funds

transfer—overwhelming. Those few that have needed to apply through a manual process and receive cheques—very few, we are talking about single digits—have come to our attention as being a problem in terms of the receiving banking institution. We have responded quickly and ensured that that customer has not been left with a question or any sense of anxiety or any cost through the result of what might indeed be an error on the side of the bank or the institution. That is being investigated, but let us not blow this into something that is an issue. They are obviously serious issues, absolutely, and we have dealt with those; we are dealing with those. But I will be really clear with you that we have provided this facility for non-online applications that have resulted in bank cheques being sent out and we are working diligently through any of those few customers, few Victorians, that have had trouble in being able to cash those cheques.

**Mr NEWBURY:** So just to clarify the point, you said that people were not out of pocket. So you are paying the dishonour fee?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** I think the Deputy Secretary is happy to answer that.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Sorry, yes, Deputy Secretary.

**Ms HARRIS:** I am afraid I will have to take the dishonour fee issue on notice, but I can point out that it is less than 20 of the 23 000 that have been issued. We are working with the applicants and the banks to determine the root cause of this issue, and there is a specific window of time over three days which suggests a specific issue rather than anything widespread. So we are trying to get to the bottom of what exactly has occurred, but we are not sure exactly now.

**Mr NEWBURY:** So it is more than single digits, and—

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Yes, and I am happy to correct the grave error that I made—

**Mr NEWBURY:** I do not think raising your eyes about it—I think a 'sorry' would probably be the right way to deal with this.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury!

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** I am not looking at you. What I am saying—

**Mr NEWBURY:** These are vulnerable people.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Yes, I understand. That is why we are providing the bonus and not you, and you never cared about it in the past. So let us be really frank about this: what we have said—and we have been really clear—is that we will ensure that no Victorian in this situation will be out of pocket in terms of any costs that go towards the honouring or the failure of a bank to honour that cheque. And some of them have already received the correct payment, and there is no cost to them.

**Mr NEWBURY:** So just for clarity, it was put that the dishonour fee would be taken on notice, but you are giving a personal guarantee that that dishonour fee will be paid.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** I am saying that. Yes, that is correct. That is right.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Can I just ask finally on that issue, with 225 000 applications of an estimated eligibility of 900 000, five months into the program—roughly speaking we are nearly halfway—and about a quarter of the eligible people have taken up the offer. What that says to me is hundreds of thousands of vulnerable people have not taken up the offer. Has the department come to you and said, 'Gee, there's hundreds of thousands of people we estimate who could take up the offer; let's do something about it.'?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** As I mentioned, I think, earlier, we have provided funding support for a whole range of community organisations right across the state that are in a position to be able to assist a lot of Victorians that might otherwise not be able to engage, say, for example, through the website. And those organisations have received funding earlier in the year but also in very recent times, and they are doing fantastic work. They are bringing through many, many Victorians, and we expect that that will only increase in number between now and when their program closes. So for example, more than 13 000 applications have been submitted. These are through a diverse range of ways: by phone or in person through, for example, the Brotherhood of St Laurence,

who are absolutely delighted with this program. They are cock-a-hoop because they know it will make a real difference to so many of the vulnerable cohorts that they help each and every day of the year, year in, year out. So the Brotherhood of St Laurence have already assisted 4500 Victorians with their applications over the phone; the Consumer Policy Research Centre, 2300 applications—

**Mr NEWBURY:** I think you read those details into the—

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Yes, but you may not have heard them, so—

**Mr NEWBURY:** No, no, I heard them. Do not worry; I heard them, so thank you for that—

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Well, you were not listening. There are more than 300 neighbourhood houses across the state—

**Mr NEWBURY:** No, I did, and I referred at the very start of my time—

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** who right now are providing that support to our most vulnerable Victorians, who this program absolutely targets—

**Mr NEWBURY:** No, no, I—

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury!

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** and the successes is in the numbers.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Thank you, Minister. If I could just come back to the question, if a quarter of the eligible people—vulnerable Victorians—have taken it up and we are nearly halfway through the program, I am not quite sure if we have got to an answer yet on why hundreds of thousands of vulnerable people have not taken up the program and what the government is doing about it.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Well, the program started in February. The success of it, I think, speaks for itself in terms of the sheer numbers that have come through.

**Mr NEWBURY:** I think I just spoke to that—

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** We are also running and ramping up education campaigns and communication campaigns, including to culturally and linguistically diverse communities. It has had a fantastic reach so far, and I expect that those numbers will only increase and increase significantly between now and when the program ends at the end of January next year.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Can I just move on to what is a heartbreaking 3000 homes without power; I mean, it is absolutely heartbreaking. I note that just a few minutes ago the eligibility rules for the grant that was announced today were released. Can I just confirm on that—and I am reading it hurriedly—that anybody whose power was out for the first eight days and has come back today is not eligible for the grant?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** I think you know the answer to that, because it was made very clear—

**Mr NEWBURY:** I am asking a question—

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Yes, I am answering it. The Acting Premier and myself and the minister for emergency services, the acting minister, were there at Sassafra this morning to announce this additional support payment. The payment will be made, understanding that AusNet Services made an announcement very late yesterday to inform those local communities that despite their earlier hopes of being able to have communities connected by—I think the last indication was—the end of this week or by the end of Sunday, now it will be much longer than that, to assist those Victorians that are going to be remaining off supply, for those who are unable to leave their home at least, for example. But certainly those customers, those Victorians, will be entitled to the flat amount, a payment of \$1680—

**Mr NEWBURY:** The hundreds of retailers and tourism and hospitality—will they have access?

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, could you stop interrupting.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Well, as the Acting Premier announced this morning and stated this morning, this payment is there for households who do not have the ability to be able to recoup costs either through insurance, for example, for being off power for this period of time, and I think the Acting Premier had made some comments around that. In the first instance our response is to assist those Victorians that sadly will remain off power for a while to come. It is an awful situation, absolutely—

**Mr NEWBURY:** Could I ask, then, what you would say to small businesses?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Well, I am answering your question. There are other forms of assistance that are available on the websites of the energy companies. And certainly I know that on the ground businesses may indeed—and I would encourage that they would—be looking at their insurance cover to see whether there may be any support that would be available there, but I am not telling them something that they do not already know. But in terms of being complete in my answer, certainly that is a consideration. We are absolutely sympathetic to the fact that small businesses have borne the brunt of this, absolutely—

**Mr NEWBURY:** And are getting nothing.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, your time has expired.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** as have many families.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. Mr Richardson.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Minister and department representatives, for joining us today. Minister, I am going to take you to the Great Ocean Road—figuratively of course—and refer you to budget paper 3 at page 36, table 1.10.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Sorry, what? I apologise.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** I am taking you to the ocean road, figuratively.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Oh, yes.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** You will come with us, Rich, on this one.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Oh, thank you.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** And I will refer you to budget paper 3 at page 36 and table 1.10. For the committee's benefit, can you please explain the government's 'Great Ocean Road management reforms'.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Yes, please. We would like to know.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** So I take it this is now your question, is it?

**Mr RIORDAN:** No, no. I am here to learn. I am very interested in that.

**The CHAIR:** We are all here to learn, Mr Riordan. We have been through that already.

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** All right. Okay. Thank you. Look, the Great Ocean Road, we know—it has been said many times, but we need to keep saying it because it is absolutely true—is one of the most iconic destinations and routes in the country. It certainly has a high visitation compared to many other sites across the country. Now, the importance of this has been backed by extensive consultation that was undertaken a number of years ago with local communities, the local committees of management at the time and of course local governments, tourism operators and the like, and that all came together with very strong recommendations about the need to establish an independent standalone authority, and we have absolutely done what the community has asked for. So certainly the task force that oversaw and undertook the consultations and made the recommendations was a bipartisan one, which is really important because we should not let politics get in the way of what is good for local communities and a whole region when it comes to trying to enhance and better capture the tourism opportunities in real dollar economic value for those local communities.

So this budget goes towards further enabling the new authority to continue to implement the Great Ocean Road management reforms, including the transfer of public land management within the Great Ocean Road coast and parks region that has been ably identified already to the GORCAPA, as we colloquially refer to it, and to developing an overarching regional strategic plan that will balance the competing needs of the region—it is not an easy thing to do; there are lots of competing needs and ideas—but importantly also to strengthen the capacity of traditional owners to be involved in those reforms. So the reforms are about reducing the complexity of what has existed for many years now, and that is the existing management arrangements that have been a real barrier to the sustainable development of the regional visitor economy. So sustainable development—those two words—are coming together for the benefit of the regional visitor economy. So establishing that authority is a dedicated parks manager. It will protect 90 jobs and create a number of other jobs, and every now and then I see advertised some new jobs that are coming up that have been advertised by GORCAPA, and these new jobs are for park rangers, construction work supervisors, caravan parks, community liaison officers and maintenance staff.

It is very important when you are establishing a new authority that you do it diligently and with a very careful eye to managing it well and doing it in consultation with the local community in terms of their own expectations, and that is what GORCAPA is absolutely doing. Certainly the reform and that transition are still underway—these things do not transition overnight—and the two sets of legislation that we are sponsoring, one that has been sponsored and one that will be coming forward, go to that question of transition and making sure that this is done in an orderly way so we do not lose and create gaps in management but importantly we start from a base of enhancement of opportunities for those local communities. So I am very pleased with the progress of this, and I know that there will be some very, very important projects that the authority will be able to identify in consultation with the communities that will deliver enhanced benefits for that region—a very important region for our state.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** So exploring that a bit further, and its significance, Minister, what has been the progress that has occurred since last year?

**Ms D'AMBROSIO:** Okay, sure. And I think it is important to reflect on those milestones that have already been achieved. The landmark reforms underway with the first of the two bills—I think I just touched on that earlier. So that was passed by the Parliament middle of last year—a COVID-constrained environment of course, but we did that—and that enabled the new authority to start operations from 1 December last year. So it has only been up and going now for—what is that—six months, nearly seven months.

A committee of management was appointed for coastal reserves. They were appointed in the first instance as the new committee of management for coastal reserves from Point Impossible, east of Torquay, to Marengo—first tranche. And this has been done in a very deliberate and planned way in terms of the transition. Cannot afford to have haphazard things that are rushed—you end up with a dog's breakfast—this is about getting it done and are doing it well. The new board of the authority is chaired by Libby Mears, with Peter Dorling as the deputy chair, and I know that both these people are very well regarded across the broad region for their capability, their management skills and their acumen.

Now, like the task force that came before it, the board includes positions for Eastern Maar and Wadawurrung traditional owner representatives. A new CEO has recently been appointed, Jodie Sizer, and she will be commencing very soon. The head office of the authority will be in Torquay, and we have already made this a commitment, and there will be district offices at points along that region, so a district office in Apollo Bay and at Port Campbell.

The second bill, which concludes the full transition enablement, if you like, is under preparation, and that will expand the functions and the power of the authority to enable them to manage public land of all types and to transition to its end state as outlined in the government's *Great Ocean Road Action Plan*. There is a standing advisory committee to provide independent expert advice on referred planning and development proposals—really important to get that right, making sure that we have got experts there—but also the community are being regularly involved in the management reforms, and that is a really important element of being sure that this is done well for the benefit of that region. So I think that that is a really good oversight of what has been able to be achieved in the last year.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** I might take you now, Minister, to the topic of zero-emissions vehicles and I refer you to budget paper 3 at page 36. I am wondering if you could please explain how the ‘Zero and low emission vehicles: accelerating adoption’ program will help support Victorians access a zero-emissions vehicle.

**Ms D’AMBROSIO:** The budget item—and when you consider all of the amount of money that goes towards decarbonising transport vehicles—is \$100 million from this budget. In terms of the importance of this for meeting our climate change aspirations, our goals and our targets—and I note the 2030 target is amongst the strongest in the world—our transport must play a vital role in meeting our net-zero emissions targets by 2050.

So with all of the reforms that we have made on climate change, they are about ensuring that people, no matter what place they have in our community and what their means are, are involved in the transformation, that they are involved in the transition and they are in a position to reap the benefits of that transition, whether it is renewable energy or indeed, now, with vehicles—electric or ZE vehicles. So this is again about reducing carbon emissions from the transport sector. Globally we know transport emissions are rising when they should be going the other way, and equally in Victoria we understand that we need to take strong action, especially in the absence of federal action here. So we are making it accessible to people, giving them the means to be part of that plan—really, really important. We want everyone to be able to enjoy the benefits and be involved in the transition. So just to unpack that, we are the only state to make available direct subsidies to make it cheaper, more affordable, for people to buy a ZE vehicle, and we are specifically targeting the lower end of the market in terms of the cost of the vehicles. So we are not here targeting super-duper Teslas out there. People who can afford that—they do not need a subsidy. This is about those that fall below a particular threshold. We have already had a lot of people making inquiries to Solar Victoria, because they are the ones managing this particular element of our ZEV commitments. We are very much looking forward to having those subsidies, the first round of subsidies valued at \$3000, and we believe that will make a big difference between someone choosing to buy a new non-ZE vehicle and buying a ZE vehicle.

With the inquiries we have had thus far we believe we have hit a really good mark here, and we are going to make it easier for people to adopt early. And the more of these vehicles we get into the market, we start to create a second-hand market, and I am sure the transport minister can speak in great, great detail about the importance of a second-hand market here. So that is something that we are absolutely committed to continuing to roll out, and those subsidies are available for any cars that have been purchased from the announcement date, which is 2 May. And we are just putting final touches to how those that have made those purchases and those that will subsequently make the purchases will be able to access those. The broad program will be very much about ensuring that the subsidy is made available at the point of sale, but certainly for those people that have already bought from that date to when we actually finalise the design of the program, there will be a special way for them to be able to access that rebate so that there are no gaps here at all.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Thank you—

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. Sorry to cut you off there. That concludes the time we have available for consideration of this portfolio with you. We thank you and your officials for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within 10 working days of the committee’s request.

The committee will take a short break before resuming consideration with you of the solar homes portfolio.

**Witnesses withdrew.**