

TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Victorian Auditor-General's Report No. 202: Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands

Chelsea Heights—Tuesday, 3 December 2019

Members

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

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WITNESSES

Mr John Woodland, Manager, Regional Services (South East),

Dr Will Steele, Principal Biodiversity Scientist, Integrated Planning,

Ms Sarah Harris, Waterways and Land Officer, Westernport/Peninsula, South East Regional Services, and

Mr Paul Rees, Senior Asset Practitioner—Habitat, Catchment, Land and Waterway Services, Melbourne Water.

The CHAIR: I again welcome Melbourne Water to the meeting. Thank you for coming along again today, and thank you for hosting us here at Edithvale. We are pleased to be able to come onsite and to have a look at the work in action. As you will have heard us describe yesterday, this is obviously the Committee's Inquiry into the Victorian Auditor-General's Report No. 202: Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands, tabled on 14 September 2016. I would ask that people turn their mobile phones to silent, please. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege and therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. You will again be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check, and verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible.

I invite Melbourne Water to make a 15-minute presentation.

Mr WOODLAND: Thank you. First, I would like to welcome you all here today. Melbourne Water is proud to host the session at the Edithvale-Seaford Wetland Education Centre. My name is John Woodland. I am the Regional Services Manager at Melbourne Water for the south-east region; that picks up waterway drainage and flood services, and the wetlands are a part of the area that I look after at Melbourne Water. I would like to also start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today and pay my respects to their elders past and present and any elders and people from other communities who may be here today.

Joining me today on the panel we have got people with a degree of expertise around the management of wetlands. I would like to introduce Will Steele. Will Steele is our Principal Biodiversity Scientist at Melbourne Water. Will knows a lot around birds, how they breed and those specifics. He is also quite knowledgeable around environmental protection and biodiversity conservation. I have got Sarah Harris here on my side, and Sarah is involved in the day-to-day operations of the site. Sarah is quite knowledgeable about what we do on a day-to-day basis around maintenance, site management, pest control and those sorts of things. Also Sarah has been involved in working with DELWP on implementing the recommendations coming out of the VAGO report. Also we have got Paul Rees, who is a Senior Practitioner around habitat. Paul has a lot of history around the management of this site and actually was involved in the development of the site management plan back in 2016 when it was in its new draft. So Paul has a lot of knowledge around the site. We have got a lot of expertise around the table so later if there are questions, we will be able to go into bit of detail for you.

Visual presentation.

Mr WOODLAND: A bit about the history of the site; I am not sure how much people know about the history. Both the sites were once part of a much larger swamp area—4000 to 5000 hectares. If you know the area, it extends pretty much from the Mordialloc area up to just near Frankston, Olivers Hill as it gets up into the highlands, so quite a big area. Prior to European settlement the swamp supported a range of plants and animals, including the brolga and the magpie goose. They are no longer present at this site. The swamp was also used extensively for food gathering—fish, birds, mammals—by local Aboriginal people. The big change came in 1879 when the Patterson River was cut through to drain the swamp area, allowing for settlement—you know, farming and urban development. This effectively drained most of the swamp. It is fortunate that through planning and also the topography a couple of remnant areas of wetland were able to be maintained, which are the sites that we are talking about today.

A bit about the wetlands. When taken together the Edithvale-Seaford wetlands are the largest natural wetland of their type in the Port Phillip and Western Port basins. However, these are quite small compared to many of the other wetland sites around Victoria. As well as their critically important biodiversity function, the remaining wetland areas also help to manage flooding for the area. So they are quite low and below sea level and they do form a critical part of the drainage function for the area.

Melbourne Water is responsible for managing the Edithvale wetlands and manages the Seaford wetlands together with the Frankston City Council. However, we are the primary site manager and coordinator for both the wetland sites. Melbourne Water was appointed both the site coordinator and the site manager for the wetlands following the VAGO report, so that was more a formalisation of what we were doing already. This did not change the pre-existing management arrangements in a big way. It is just that we now have a clearer role and a clearer understanding of our responsibility in reporting in to DELWP's statewide Ramsar management system. We are also helped on this site by the Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands Community Liaison Committee and the Friends of Edithvale Seaford Wetlands, an active community group in the area.

A bit about the birdlife. Today more than 5000 waterbirds make their home at Edithvale wetlands at any one time, and actually up to 7000 birds in total, so that is 5000 waterbirds and 7000 in total. The wetlands attract over 197 different bird species—quite a number of species that are migratory and protected under internationally agreements and Australian legislation. An important migratory species at the wetlands is the sharp-tailed sandpiper. This is one of the birds that triggered the wetlands being listed in the first place. And also we are very fortunate to have this state-of-the-art discovery centre at the wetlands. This was constructed in 2011 and it forms an important education hub. You can see it is set up for schoolchildren, and we bring a lot of schoolchildren in to educate them, to learn about the wetlands and the history and appreciate the wetlands in general.

Some of the benefits from the VAGO audit—you would have heard yesterday from Dr Nerina Di Lorenzo of Melbourne Water how we have worked alongside DELWP and other organisations to implement the VAGO recommendations. The first thing: our people now have a clearer understanding of their role and how it fits into the statewide governance arrangements and policies, and we are actually benefiting from greater collaboration across with other site coordinators in Victoria. For Edithvale-Seaford, the requirement to develop an annual works plan—that has actually improved the way we are now working with Frankston City Council in terms of providing a bit more transparency about the annual works program. We also hosted the inaugural site coordinators meeting back in 2018 at this site. It was a great way to meet up with other site coordinators and share learnings. Also, we have developed the new MERI plan. That is the monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement plan, which I will take you through on the next slide. We also have a number of investigative actions that we need to take, and what we have done is set up a separate discrete budget around that to make sure that that is funded and those monitoring activities actually occur. The rollout of the Ramsar management is a tool for reporting, and we will now be reporting back into DELWP via that tool to provide a bit more transparency and coordination on our actions. The existing community liaison committee, which was established way back in 2004, has taken up the role of the Seaford-Edithvale site coordinators committee, so it is just a shift in name.

This is quite a busy slide up here but this is articulating how the MERI fits together—that is, the monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement framework. So at the top it lists the objectives, the long-term outcomes, intermediate actions, intermediate activities and foundation activities for the site. Down the side you can see the limits of acceptable change for the site, which is what we are focusing on around the objectives we are trying to protect here. So that picks up waterbirds, the number of waterbirds in abundance, breeding, threatened species and just the physical habitat for waterbirds. So the MERI pretty much provides the tool to track the status of ecological character; the identification of priority critical components, processes and services for monitoring the site at the site scale; the identification of priority management activities required for evaluation of the effectiveness of our controls to make sure we are actually achieving the outcomes that we intended; and there are also processes for reporting and management of the ecological character of the site. Some of the activities that help us manage these objectives include management of tall red growth, making sure some of that is kept down for habitat; pest and animal management, mainly foxes and rabbits on the site; monitoring water levels; and just undertaking weed control.

We are protecting a range of critically important values here at Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands, including maintaining habitat for the migratory bird the sharp-tailed sandpiper, the endangered Australasian bittern and the critically endangered curlew sandpiper. The limits of acceptable change, which are shown up on this slide, are a tool to measure and compare ecological change over time. They are developed from the identified critical components processes and services that make up the ecological character description for this Ramsar site. We are proud that despite all the emerging challenges across both wetlands we remain within the limits of acceptable change. At this point in time we have not had to notify the department of any ecological character changes at our site, so that is a good outcome.

I mentioned before the liaison committee that took up the function of the coordinators committee—that came out of the VAGO report and was one of the recommendations. The committee, which is active, has 10 members, and Melbourne Water chairs that committee. The committee plays a key role in providing feedback on how the site is managed as well as hearing about the works being carried out that align to the Ramsar management plan. That committee meets four times a year.

So looking ahead at what are some of the challenges we see and the opportunities at this site, we covered some of those yesterday, but certainly climate change is a challenge; securing a freshwater source for the Seaford Wetlands due to it being at risk of sea level rise and hence becoming more saline, and we talked about some of those opportunities potentially bringing water in from the eastern treatment plant, which is one thing we are looking into; ongoing control of pests, mainly foxes and rabbits, and in an urban area that is an ongoing challenge for us and something we put a bit of energy into; and also public access, getting that right balance and how to manage the public wanting to enjoy these areas while protecting the birds and the onsite values. This is especially so at the Seaford Wetlands. There have been a myriad of opportunities for us around learning from the other Ramsar site managers. There is also a captive group of kangaroos that we keep on site, hence you will notice there is fencing, which is part of keeping them in, and we are trialling innovative methods of how to keep a record of those kangaroos on site through remote sensing using drones with infrared cameras, which has proved quite successful. Just the ongoing opportunity around public amenity and education and harnessing that opportunity with this centre and the like. Thank you again, and that concludes my presentation.

The CHAIR: Thank you, we appreciate it. We will open up to questions. Apologies if I missed this, but how is the ecological character of the site publicly reported?

Mr WOODLAND: The ecological character of the site, would you like to take that one, Sarah?

Ms HARRIS: Do you mean in terms of how it is publicly reported on, the mechanism?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Ms HARRIS: With the new VAGO recommendations, one of the things that DELWP have rolled out is the Ramsar management system. So the idea with that is for us to report back into that database as a platform in ensuring that we are keeping to the ecological character of the site. We do that through the monitoring programs that we implement on the site and then that feeds back into DELWP and they can see how we are tracking in terms of maintaining and protecting ecological character.

The CHAIR: Further questions?

Mr RICHARDSON: Yes, I am happy to have a crack. Firstly, thanks, John, and your team for coming here again. And thanks to the Friends of Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands as well for hosting us here today. John, I touched on this yesterday a little bit, but I am wondering if you could take us a little bit through the learnings that happened from the environment effects statement process and the interaction that had with the level crossing removals at Edithvale and Bonbeach, and then also the EES process at Mordialloc for the Mordialloc Freeway and how ongoing monitoring, through the committee that meets four times a year, will be managed going forward?

Mr WOODLAND: Sure, I can give you a broad overview, and I know Sarah has come armed with what the actual specific conditions are that have been put in place about those. As mentioned, for any actions that could impact on the wetlands there are decisions made about the level of, I guess, investigation that needs to occur which can lead to an environment effects statement. So in the case of these wetlands one of the biggest risks is

obviously any disturbance to the groundwater and those groundwater flows as they come through the wetlands and enter into the sea. That was one of our primary concerns around particularly the cuts being done for the lowering of the rail; it is not such an issue for us if it is built above ground given that it is not going to impact on groundwater flows. So for one of the cuts in particular—I think the one at Edithvale—there was quite a lot of rigour done around groundwater modelling to understand the potential impacts on the wetlands through the movement of groundwater.

I mentioned that that modelling showed that the impact was really going to be negligible. However, we wanted to be a bit more conservative about that, and Melbourne Water's input into process was to ask for more controls to be put in place and to be very conservative because it is a big risk for the wetland. In that instance that included a specific engineering design to incorporate more ability for the groundwater to move through that site and not impact on the wetlands, in addition to ongoing monitoring of that groundwater. Those recommendations that Melbourne Water put forward were accepted and are being put in place. I will hand over to Sarah now, who can take you through a bit more of the specifics and more detail around those conditions.

Ms HARRIS: So as John has just touched on, we did request a groundwater monitoring plan to be developed which we had input into, and that is now currently sitting with the Commonwealth. Then in addition to that we asked for a groundwater implementation plan, so if trigger levels were reached as part of the monitoring plan, then an implementation plan would be triggered and then certain actions from that implementation plan would take place within the wetlands themselves. In addition to that, we also asked for additional bores to be installed—within the wetlands themselves and outside the wetland area—so we can have a better understanding of what is happening from the groundwater perspective. All of those things have been taken on board and have been implemented.

Mr RICHARDSON: Fantastic. If I may, Chair, carry on. Obviously we heard yesterday in evidence the challenge of salinity, and the federal maps on the impacts of climate change over the decades are stark for this area, particularly where we sit here today. What are some of the challenges in managing Ramsar wetlands going forward with the impacts of climate change and I guess like the eastern treatment plant discussion and potentially that investigation of the inflows flushing through those wetlands?

Mr WOODLAND: So with both the wetland sites, Seaford is more vulnerable to rising sea levels and those salinity challenges given (a) it is closer to the sea and also it has got a lot more connectivity through drains and through the Kananook Creek and what-not. So there is more opportunity for backflow up into those wetlands, so that is at more risk than Edithvale, but still it is a risk.

It is a part of the MERI process. Our role is to continually monitor how that is impacting and adapt as we go. So we do not have all the answers at this point in time, but what we do is basically take a risk-based approach and we start to plan and look at potential mitigation strategies to limit the impact of salinity on those wetlands. The example that you mentioned, and I did talk about it yesterday, was the start of an investigation to see if it is feasible to take treated water from the Eastern Treatment Plant, which is of a very high quality, and get that into the wetlands to flush them through with fresher water and get the balance right with the salinity levels to protect the ecological values. So that is something we are looking at. I think Paul has a bit more detail around this that he could add.

Mr REES: Yes. So I guess one of the other main challenges is the reducing rainfall. We have only had average rainfall for five out of the years since it was listed in 2001, so below-average rainfall obviously creates challenges for the filling of the wetland and then draining too quickly. And so we have small pumps at both wetlands, both Edithvale and Seaford, which we can use to provide supplementary water into the wetlands. So we turn them on to try to add to the level and retain water for longer, but given it is part of the whole drainage system we are constrained somewhat in how we deal with the amount of water that comes in and out, because we need to retain that capacity at the same time. So it is a bit of a juggling act, I guess, between both of them.

As John said too, the salinity challenges are far greater at Seaford wetlands given that backflowing, and so we are already starting to see some evidence that that is becoming a little bit more saline than it was previously, and hence the investigation into the Eastern Treatment Plant potentially providing some more fresh water. We have done quite a lot of work looking at supplying fresh water during drought conditions, and the problem is that everywhere is pretty dry and so the only places you can get that are places like the Eastern Treatment Plant,

where you have got that water supply that is constant even during drought periods. Aside from that, I think they are sort of the main two challenges of climate change at the moment.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Can I just clarify that? Are both wetlands historically fresh? Were they brackish, salty?

Mr REES: They probably would have been brackish, depending on the time period, so depending on the tides and things like that. The natural outlets to both swamps were Mordialloc Creek and Kananook Creek, and so Patterson River was cut through the middle and that now drains most of it, but historically saline water would have come up back through the creeks. So depending on which section you were at, some of it would have been more brackish and areas closer to the top of Dandenong Creek, where the swamp began, would have been fresher up that section as well.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Did you say you are getting water from the Eastern Treatment Plant, or not yet?

Mr REES: No, sorry, we are investigating that. So there is a pipeline that runs near Seaford wetland under south-east outfall, and so there is potential to be able to tap into that to provide water from there.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you again for the evidence. It has been incredibly enlightening, both yesterday and this morning so far. I am interested in finding out a little bit about how you are engaging with the local Indigenous community, what work you are doing in that area and how that is integrated into your business as usual, the work that you do.

Mr WOODLAND: Sure. At Melbourne Water we have two Aboriginal engagement advisers within the business. One you might know is Nova Peris, so she works for Melbourne Water. We are working through a process now to understand the best way to engage with the traditional owners at our various sites, and that includes for this site. So that is something we are working through. I note that this site is still contested, in a contested area, so we are taking expert advice and working on the best way that traditional owners want to be engaged with this site.

Mr HIBBINS: Just a couple of questions. You touched on this yesterday after a question from Tim, but I just want to ask about the Mordialloc Freeway. Obviously you have raised increased urbanisation as an issue that the wetlands is facing. Can I just ask what are the sorts of impacts that the wetlands are facing because of the Mordialloc Freeway and how they were addressed?

Mr WOODLAND: Sure. Actually I will hand this to Paul, given his historical involvement, in regard to the detail.

Mr REES: The Mordialloc Freeway—the extension is sort of starting diagonally opposite from the intersection where we are. That had a similar process to the Level Crossing Removal Authority side of things where we were involved and engaged in that process, but the drainage from that is all heading in the opposite direction to here. So in terms of the catchment impacts it is sort of pretty limited. I guess there is potential traffic increase along the roads, but as you would know, there is already Edithvale Road running through the middle of the site, so the Phragmites that is along there screens the road quite effectively from the birds. They have found from doing the environmental effects statement for that that there was no concern, and we were pretty comfortable with that side of things from the investigation as well.

Mr HIBBINS: Do you have authority over the wetlands adjacent to this site, so the wetlands north of here? Is that a Melbourne Water—

Mr REES: North of here?

Mr RICHARDSON: North-east of Governor Road?

Mr REES: Near Braeside Park?

Mr HIBBINS: Yes, Braeside wetlands.

Mr REES: Are you talking about the Woodlands estate wetlands?

Mr HIBBINS: Yes.

Mr REES: So Parks Victoria is responsible for the Braeside Park ones, and then Melbourne Water looks after the Woodlands estate wetlands. The freeway is going through the centre of them, and so part of the work that we have been doing with VicRoads has been to try to ensure that there are appropriate linkages between those wetlands and Braeside Park so that people can continue to connect between the two of them.

Mr HIBBINS: Is there a water flow connected between those wetlands and these wetlands?

Mr REES: No, not directly. They flow into Mordialloc Creek and then that will flow out. The water from here will also flow into Mordialloc Creek, but they are not directly connected in that sense.

Mr HIBBINS: Are there similar species of bird and flora and fauna on these wetlands and the other adjacent wetlands?

Dr STEELE: It is similar in some ways, but Braeside Park and the Woodlands estate do have a couple of important species. Latham's snipe was one that they were worried about, and also the Australasian bittern, which we also get here. So there was discussion about how to ensure that birds could continue to move between those two wetlands. There is also some aquatic vegetation. Part of the footprint seemed to be over what might have been seasonal herbaceous wetland, which is a nationally listed vegetation community, but there was some doubt about the real value of that vegetation.

Mr HIBBINS: Thanks. I have just got another question on another topic if that is all right. You have raised foxes and rabbits, so invasive species. Are you specifically funded, or where does the funding that you get to control invasive species come from? Is there any specific funding, or does it come out of—

Mr WOODLAND: The general funding for Melbourne Water for these sites comes out of the waterways and drainage rates that Melburnians pay, so that funds our management activities. But in regard to the management of pests, also Frankston City Council have a role and they fund some of the pest control. It is a joint operation, and that obviously comes from the ratepayers of their area.

Mr HIBBINS: And how would you say you are tracking in terms of pest control?

Mr WOODLAND: The latest monitoring shows that rabbits seem to be generally under control. We have trapped foxes in the past, but we seem to be doing okay in terms of the level of pests that we are finding on the site.

Mr REES: I guess it is always a challenge controlling foxes in a sort of landscape setting, particularly in an urban area where it is not front and centre for landowners to be doing similar things at the same time. So we have been trying to target fox control at particular vulnerable periods of the year when birds are breeding and things like that so that we can temporarily reduce that pressure from the foxes. We know that more foxes will probably reinvade in the future, but at least it allows the birds to potentially breed and fledge before they come back at that period.

Mr HIBBINS: So in terms of the foxes you are kind of managing the problem as it pops up rather than a sort of broader thing of actually—

Mr REES: I guess in that sort of urban context it is incredibly difficult because they can be under people's chicken coops and other things, so how do you get thousands of landowners to all be engaged in fox control in that sort of context? It is easier when you are surrounded by rural properties and things like that potentially, but here I guess we have just got to work with landowners and other authorities like Frankston council when we can and then try to target it as effectively as possible so that if we are spending that money, we are really getting a benefit for that expenditure.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Can I just jump in. To that end, are the wetlands fenced at all?

Mr REES: Yes, Edithvale is fenced. Seaford is partially fenced—it has got a low fence, but the foxes could potentially get through. But there is predator-proof fencing around both Edithvale North and Edithvale South.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Is that 100 per cent effective?

Mr REES: No. They can climb up trees and get over and things like that, and people tend to make holes in the fence and things like that. Part of our maintenance activities at the site is maintaining that fence—blocking any new holes that have come in and things like that and trying to minimise those entry points for the foxes wherever possible.

Ms STITT: I am just wondering if there is a noxious weed issue that you have to manage, given that we are in an urban setting—or not?

Mr REES: Yes. We have a monthly program at both Edithvale and Seaford for weed control, and Frankston council also undertakes weed control at Seaford Wetlands. There are particular species that we undertake at both. Blackberry and spiny rush are particular problems, with spiny rush particularly at Seaford but blackberry at both of them.

Ms STITT: How are you treating the blackberry?

Mr REES: In different ways; we have grooming approaches where we slash it, and then also use herbicide control where possible.

Mr MAAS: You informed the Committee before that a limits of acceptable change assessment had been carried out. Can you let us know when that was carried out and also further take us through some of the key findings that came as a result of that?

Mr WOODLAND: Sure. I will hand this one to Will, given Will has got detailed knowledge around it.

Dr STEELE: As the department mentioned yesterday, we have this rolling Ramsar review. The Federal Government paid for the first round—it is a three-year running program—and the department paid for the 2013 to 2016, I think it was, round of reviews. During that review period, in which DELWP came and had a look at the limits of acceptable change, we passed everything, and then the ecological character description was revised. An amendment came out in late 2017, and that was done by an independent consultant. There were a number of questions around the limits of acceptable change, and they do change in response to factors which I can go into just now. The 2017 review also found that we were within the limits of acceptable change. There were 19 of them, as you saw on the slide, all really around waterbirds or waterbird habitat. More recently we have started, with the new coordinating committee, on the annual reporting to the department under the Ramsar management system. The first round of that will go to the end of this financial year, and that is when we will look at the limits of acceptable change again.

I have looked at the bird data for up to 2018–19, and of the 18 bird limits of acceptable change we are well within 17 of them, to the extent that the limit of waterbird abundance is 2500 and we are at about 5300. One per cent of the sharp-tailed sandpiper population used to be 1600 birds. When I say 'limits of acceptable change', they can vary a bit. There was an international assessment that gave the global population of the sharp-tailed sandpiper as 160 000 birds, and that is what the Ramsar secretariat are still using. So that means 1 per cent is 1600. It was that at the time that the site was listed, and we were only occasionally meeting that 1600, but we are now up around 3000 sharp-tailed sandpipers, so we have done well. At the same time the Australian Government funded a review of the global population estimates, and the sharp-tailed sandpiper population now that the Federal Government accepts—the estimate is 85 000. The global population of the sharp-tailed sandpiper seems to have declined a lot, and there is still debate about, 'Are we held to the 1600 sharp-tailed sandpipers as our limit of acceptable change, or are we held to the 1 per cent of 85 000?'. Strictly according to Ramsar, who say they will only accept this globally published estimate, we are still held to the 1600, but we are still well above that, which is due to the management of the site and the grooming of weeds.

There was one limit of acceptable change for which, when I had a quick look at the data, the 2018–19 data looked wrong. That is for what they call fishing birds—piscivorous birds. When I look at the data, just this quick look, we have never actually met the limit of acceptable change, but the 2016 and the 2017 assessments said we had, so there is obviously some methodological error in how that fishing guild is defined or how people have queried the BirdLife Australia database. So with that exception, which is just this methodological error, I am sure, we have asked BirdLife Australia to look into it to get to the bottom of what are the correct figures.

We are well within the limits of acceptable change. To get back to your question, it was 2016 part of the rolling Ramsar review, 2017 the ECD amendment and then I have had a quick look at the 2018–19 data, and we will, from 2020, be reporting annually to the department using the Ramsar management system.

Mr RICHARDSON: What is the biggest threat to the sharp-tailed sandpiper? One thing in the EES for the Edithvale and Bonbeach level crossings was that the mounding of groundwater and the impact of 10 centimetres would be negligible, but large changes could impact on their migration to Edithvale-Seaford wetlands. But what are some of the key challenges to the sharp-tailed sandpiper's population?

Dr STEELE: The sharp-tailed sandpiper is an amazing bird because it is only 70 to 90 grams; it is a very, very small bird. They breed up in far eastern Siberia and they have about a 24 000-kilometre round trip coming from their breeding grounds—this tiny little bird. You think what its eyes have seen. Part of going into that is that when they arrive here after 12 000 kilometres, it is an amazing feat of physiological endurance, and it is important that we have foraging grounds in as good condition as possible because they need to feed up and put back on weight and moult before they fly back again. So the critical thing is their foraging habitat. A secondary consideration would be a safe and secure roosting habitat for them.

Considering that, we do try to have the foraging habitat here, which is mudflats—the open, exposed mudflats—not too much vegetation and soft silty mud. So that is what they are coming here for. The major threats to that at the moment here would be the overabundance of the common reed and the reed beds spreading and taking over these mudflats. That is why we have had this program of grooming and flooding the reed to maintain the mudflats. The BirdLife Australia data—they do our bird monitoring for us—has shown that we have been successful in maintaining some foraging habitat. The effect of the groundwater would not be that critical because the birds are not that affected by the salinity of the mudflat that they are in. They just really need that mudflat with invertebrate life for them to feed on.

Probably the second critical threat, or second most important threat, would be the introduced predators—cats and foxes just disturbing the birds at their roosting sites. Blackberry and things can take over the mudflats as well. But in general, the biggest threat at the moment would be the common reed and the spread of the common reed. I suppose coupled with that is the hydrology of the wetland—just trying to get the wetland hydrologically right so that we can expose those mudflats at the right time of year.

The CHAIR: How big a problem is the feral cat situation here?

Dr STEELE: It is difficult to say because we do not really have a good monitoring program with the feral cats. With the fox control program, one of the limits of acceptable change is breeding waterbirds, so they are a threat to our limit of acceptable change. We have tried the fox trapping. Because we are in this urban area we have had to try soft-jaw trapping, and as part of that we had cat trapping. We were quite interested to see how many cats were coming in from the outside and how many feral cats there might be. I am only aware of the first round, which I helped run. With that we only got one cat, and that was a domestic cat. So I am sure there are some feral cats, but we do not really have an idea of the magnitude of the problem.

Mr RICHARDSON: Just a point around interaction with the planning scheme as well through here and interaction with council and the state planning authority—obviously a very sensitive area and how tight this site is—I am just wondering: obviously VAGO's findings of, I guess, the collaboration in managing Ramsar wetlands is one area that has been focused on. What is the interaction with state planning authorities and local councils as that urbanisation continues and there are encroachments on wetlands?

Mr WOODLAND: I will hand over to Sarah, but I will start off. Melbourne Water are a referral authority for developments that happen in our areas of accountability around flood drainage and waterways. So that is picked up through the referral process, which then come into Melbourne Water, and then we will investigate as we need to and provide input.

Ms HARRIS: I probably would not add any more than that. As John said, we are a referral authority, so any development applications come to us, and then we can provide input and conditions on those applications in regard to making sure that the values and the threats are protected in relation to the site.

Mr RICHARDSON: Fantastic.

Mr HIBBINS: Sorry, I am not sure if we covered this yesterday or today, but are you able to provide the Committee, and perhaps take it on notice, with the entire funding allocated for this site, the Port Phillip site? And I think you also provide funding to Western Port as well?

Mr WOODLAND: I can certainly give you the detail around the funding for these sites and I can subsequently get you the funding for the other sites.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes, that would be great.

Mr WOODLAND: Would you like to go through the funding now for this site?

Mr HIBBINS: Sure, if you have got time.

Ms HARRIS: We just have some pretty high-level figures that I have got here. We have four main activities that we do, the first one being investigations. We have a budget for investigations, and for the past financial year we have spent about \$147 000 undertaking investigations. On monitoring we have spent around \$22 000 for the last financial year; maintenance, \$253 000; and capital works, \$125 000; so in total, around the \$548 000 mark for the 2018–19 financial year.

Dr STEELE: I do have figures for Western Port because I did inquire before we came. We do not have a big role at Western Port, but our applied research team is spending about \$330 000 a year at the moment on applied research, looking into seagrass restoration activities, mangrove coastal saltmarsh interactions and a lot of work on the sediment loads going into the bay and modelling the sediment, so about \$330 000 a year on research. A rural land program is looking at the Koo Wee Rup catchment, trying to help landowners reduce the amount of silt coming into the drains, and that program apparently is spending up to \$500 000 a year at the moment. It has increased rapidly in the last few years to that \$500 000. The final program we have is *Spartina* weed control at one of our properties on the coastline and also at the Bass River mouth, and it is not a large program but I do not have dollars for that.

Mr WOODLAND: And I can clarify: I have the notes for the Western Treatment Plant; we are spending \$1.2 million a year on average.

Mr HIBBINS: Great, thanks.

The CHAIR: Final questions: Danny, did you have one?

Mr D O'BRIEN: You just partially answered one, which was what involvement you have with Western Port as a Ramsar site, which is peripheral—is that a fair way to say it?

Dr STEELE: It is not as important to us as we do not have as big a role in the management as with the other two sites.

Mr D O'BRIEN: The other question was, for here and Western Port but particularly the Western Port catchment, how much involvement do you have with private groups—so Landcare groups, BirdLife, field and game or any of those other NGOs or not-for-profits that might come in and do restoration work and the like?

Ms HARRIS: For here?

Mr D O'BRIEN: Both here and Western Port.

Ms HARRIS: Okay, I will just talk for here. On BirdLife Australia, we do actually get them to do our bird surveying, so they come here every month to do the bird surveying and also to take recordings of the water levels. They also sit on the committee that we chair. We meet four times a year and they are part of that process. Then there is the friends group that are also actually actively involved on the site. They do undertake some plantings and other water bug activities on the site as well.

Mr REES: And I guess in terms of Western Port we do provide grant funding to Parks Victoria, councils and others for works around that Western Port site, around the coastal area, and we have got an active program

with Landcare groups and private landowners throughout the whole catchment, and that would include some that are directly abutting onto the coastal areas and some that just drain into that area as well.

Mr D O'BRIEN: And was that figure you said about a half a million dollars?

Dr STEELE: Yes, the Rural Land Program, yes.

Mr REES: Well, we have got a few different programs. The Rural Land Program is sort of working away from waterways to help dairies and other providers. So that is putting in new feedlots and things like that to prevent contaminated run-off going into the waterways, but we also have programs where we work with private landowners to revegetate their stream frontages and fence them off so that we can protect the water quality and the sediment going into Western Port Bay that way as well.

The CHAIR: Unfortunately our time has expired but thank you so much for your presentation yesterday and again today, and for hosting us here and for providing us with this important evidence. Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.