

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2024–25 Budget Estimates**

Melbourne – Monday 27 May 2024

### **MEMBERS**

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak



**WITNESSES**

Steve Dimopoulos MP, Minister for Environment; and

John Bradley, Secretary,

Kelly Crosthwaite, Deputy Secretary, Bushfire and Forest Services,

Carolyn Jackson, Deputy Secretary, Regions, Environment, Climate Action and First Peoples,

Chris Hardman, Chief Fire Officer,

Kate Gavens, Chief Conservation Regulator, and

Sally Fensling, Deputy Secretary, Corporate Services, Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action; and

Lee Miezis, Chief Executive Officer, Environment Protection Authority Victoria.

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

I ask that mobile telephones now be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2024–25 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, any comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream today and other committee members.

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.

I welcome the Minister for Environment the Honourable Steve Dimopoulos as well as officials from DEECA. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, after which time the committee members will ask you questions. Your time starts now.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Thank you, Chair. I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we gather here this morning, the Wurundjeri people, and pay respects to elders past, present and emerging.

**Visual presentation.**

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** I want to start by saying how proud I am to be the minister representing the environment portfolio. In the 234 days since I got the job I have begun working to advance traditional owner land rights, regenerate forests following the end of native timber harvesting, prevent waste crime, mitigate biodiversity impacts and advance our ambitious circular economy targets. I visited communities in Mirboo North to speak with locals and help with storm debris clean-up, Pomonal to join hundreds of locals for a community lunch at Barney's bistro to raise money for fire-affected families, Loch Sport with Mr O'Brien to tour around Seagull Drive and discuss coastal adaptation, Budj Bim to tour the important cultural landscapes, the electorate of Laverton to open Visy's new glass recycling facility, and Karkarook Park with the Member for Clarinda, which has been upgraded as part of our chain of parks program. I have appeared before the Yoorrook Justice Commission, seen the endangered species breeding programs in action at our zoos and Parks Victoria sites, supported the incredible Forest Fire Management Victoria team through eight level 3 fire events and two major storms and announced that half a billion containers have been returned through our incredible CDS program in only the first six months.

As we all know, this budget was about making sensible decisions that respond to the challenges ahead. We are continuing to plan for the future of our forests whilst building on our existing work streams in our circular economy. This graph shows the cumulative increase in investment this government has made in the environment portfolio since 2014. This budget has delivered additional investment of \$609 million for environment-related initiatives, which takes the total investment to over \$4.8 billion since 2015–16 budget.

As to how we are delivering on our investments, this graph shows the 2023–24 performance against our targets. For the six outputs in the environment portfolio, it is expected that we will make or exceed most.

The transition from native timber harvesting will see new opportunities for over 1.8 million hectares of land. The budget allocates funding to support those opportunities, including \$115.7 million to manage state forests where timber harvesting will no longer occur, \$290 million to secure the services of forestry sector harvest and haulage entities for forest and fire management purposes. Funding will also support seed collection and forest regeneration. I have also established a Great Outdoors Taskforce that will make recommendations to the government on the future of how state forests are managed.

We recognise the significant threat that climate change poses to communities, the economy and the environment through more frequent and severe fire and storm emergencies. This is why we will always invest in protecting Victorian communities from these threats.

More than 330 planned burns were delivered this season, the highest number in Chris Hardman's six years as Chief Fire Officer. Over \$92 million will go towards creating full-time firefighter roles, aviation resources and brand new heavy plant and machinery.

We made additional funding to continue delivering on our ambitious circular economy agenda. These investments continue to build on the government's \$380 million investment since 2020, which is reducing waste, boosting jobs and establishing a recycling system Victorians can rely on. In this budget we are providing over \$20 million to support existing and important policy in waste and the circular economy. Ten million dollars was provided for a landfill levy waiver and gate fee rebate to those affected communities. \$8.9 million has been provided to continue the ResourceSmart Schools program.

Improving access and protecting public land is another key objective supported in this budget. Through this budget we have allocated \$11.9 million to continue the successful Zoos Victoria kids free policy and \$2 million to Trust for Nature to facilitate the establishment of conservation covenants.

We are strengthening our regulators, including an investment of \$44.4 million for a variety of EPA programs, including the waste intelligence network. We are also investing in the health of the environment by providing funding for the management of contaminated public land.

This budget will protect important coastal land values, enable management of the land in accordance with traditional owner aspirations and create additional land for public enjoyment. Investment in policies that manage coastal hazards means we can adapt and become more and resilient to changes caused by the climate, which you can see with our investments here.

It is a privilege to work in this space, and I am looking forward to learning more each day about how we can improve the health of our land and seas in partnership with traditional owners, experts and the Victorian community. Our continued efforts will ensure that future generations inherit a thriving environment.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. We are going to go to Mr O'Brien.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Minister. You mentioned the timber industry and the transition. I am very keen to ensure that all those who worked in the industry get their correct entitlements and transition payments. Is that you, though, or is that entirely with Minister Spence?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** It is Minister Spence. Where it impacts this portfolio is the work we are doing in forest fire management.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** You are engaging some of the contractors.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** We have offered those harvest and haulage contractors five years worth of – to see out the 2030 commitment that we initially committed to them.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** How many contractors are being contracted to DEECA or FFMV?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** I am pretty confident all were offered. DEECA has created 80 new roles to support expanded –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Eighteen?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Eighty.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Oh, 80?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Eighty, sorry, to support expanded forest management functions, so that allows for retention of a large part of the workforce that are experts and have the expertise around forest management. Even the most recent debris clean-up in the Yarra Ranges employed contractors.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** At Mirboo North, yes. That is fine, Minister. Can I move on – and I will probably have some questions for Mr Miezis from the EPA, if he is here.

**Lee MIEZIS:** Yes.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** But, Minister, can you confirm the number of sites where asbestos has been found on public land, including children's playgrounds?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** I might throw to the CEO of EPA in a moment, but can I just say that in the week that the New South Wales contamination came about, EPA, before there was any Victorian contamination found, quickly got onto the front foot by investigating 59 mulch suppliers around Victoria and found them all to be compliant. But I might throw over to the CEO.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** How many sites have currently been found to be contaminated with asbestos – children's playgrounds – was the question?

**Lee MIEZIS:** As of 20 May EPA has inspected over a hundred parks and reserves. We have confirmed small amounts – so less than a shopping bag – of bonded asbestos at 22 parks and reserves in seven local government areas. Of those 22, 20 have been remediated, so cleaned and reopened, with the final two expected to be reopened in the coming weeks. The extended period of time for those is because the clean-ups are being undertaken as part of broader works by the council.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Are those 22 – and you said seven. They must be local government owned, are they?

**Lee MIEZIS:** They are all local government managed.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** So, sorry, is it 29 in total?

**Lee MIEZIS:** No, 22.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** What was the seven local government?

**Lee MIEZIS:** Sorry, 22 across seven different local government areas.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Oh, across seven. Okay, sorry. Is that public on your website, where they are?

**Lee MIEZIS:** Yes, it is. We have been providing – well, it was daily updates and now weekly updates through our website on progress.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. On Friday 5 April, the week that asbestos was found at Donald McLean Reserve in Spotswood, the EPA released a statement ruling out asbestos at other sites, saying that:

... the issue is localised to Donald McLean Reserve ...

How did the EPA come to this conclusion?

**Lee MIEZIS:** The investigation we were undertaking at the time we put that statement out was focused on the supply chain of mulch products that were provided to Donald McLean Reserve, so we were looking at that particular line of evidence. We examined a number of parks that also received that same mulch product and found no other contamination, hence that release.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** But subsequently we found a lot more.

**Lee MIEZIS:** In parallel Hobsons Bay City Council started looking, as we had directed them to through a letter, in other sites. That sort of gave rise to separate lines of investigation, which we then continued to follow up and provide public information about.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** So the 22 sites – they were all children's playgrounds or parks and reserves?

**Lee MIEZIS:** They were all parks and reserves.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** How many other public land sites has asbestos been found in in the last 12 months?

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

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Is the EPA or the government doing an audit of any description based on the findings from what we have found so far?

**Lee MIEZIS:** No. We wrote to all local governments, and public land managers I should add, and asked them to assess their quality management processes and if unsure, to undertake their own investigations. To give you an example, the City of Casey looked at about 370 parks and reserves within its local government area and found two small pieces of bonded asbestos in two parks. One we believe was the result of illegal dumping and the other was legacy from former agricultural buildings that were on the site.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I was going to ask: is there evidence that any of this asbestos in parks and reserves is the result of illegal activity? More particularly, have any charges been laid?

**Lee MIEZIS:** We do believe some of it was a result of illegal dumping. As the minister said, we did look at 59 mulch producers in Victoria that use recycled timbers when the New South Wales incident was first announced. We assessed for presence of asbestos in mulch products, and we also looked at contamination controls in those sites. Fifty-three of those 59 were found to have good contamination controls in place; six required improvement, and improvements have since been made. So we were able to quickly rule out that mulch was the source of contamination. Then as we undertook our investigations really the two main sources were either legacy contamination, so small amounts that were left in the ground either from previous buildings or from previous industrial uses of site that were disturbed when landscaping workers were being undertaken, or in other sites there were small amounts of illegal dumping. We have and are continuing to work with Hobsons Bay, where about 15 of those 22 sites were found, to continue those investigations, but to date no charges have been laid for those particular issues. We have of course a number of other investigations and have laid charges and been successful through the courts for other matters relating to illegal dumping of asbestos materials.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** The EPA gave a press conference the week after the first asbestos was found and said that basically the asbestos was safe to eat. Is that something the government endorses?

**Lee MIEZIS:** I am not sure the words were 'safe to eat'.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** It was a comment in the press conference.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** We never say that.

**Lee MIEZIS:** No. It is bonded asbestos, so it is low risk – a lower risk than friable asbestos.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr O'Brien. We will go to Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Good morning again, Minister, Secretary and officials. Thank you for joining us. Minister, I would like to ask you about the Great Outdoors Taskforce. Budget paper 3, page 32, outlines this in some more detail. But can I ask you, Minister: what does this taskforce do? What are its parameters, its timelines? What are its projects? Is there any update you can provide?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Thanks, Mr Galea. This is something I touched on very, very briefly in the presentation, and it is something that should bring a lot of good opportunities and joy to the Victorian community. \$11 million has been provided in this budget to support the work of that Great Outdoors Taskforce. As I said, we are really proud of the opportunities in this beautiful state. Again, only 3 per cent of Australia's land mass, but there is so much to do on public land. We have established a taskforce effectively to give us advice in about a year's time – so about this time next year – on what other options are there right across the board for the land that was previously given over to native timber harvesting. If you look at that land, it is 1.8 million hectares, and that and the existing state forest effectively present an opportunity the size of which is bigger than Tasmania as a parcel of land. I think it is incumbent on all of us to set the best kind of governance model to see what we do in this land. That is why I was really proud and pleased that a very, very busy and experienced former environment minister in Lisa Neville agreed to chair this taskforce. Lisa could be doing a lot of other things, as she is. She was excellent. She is also someone who is from regional Victoria. So regional and environment – tick, tick. I am really pleased about that. Also, we have got a panel of five others, including a rotating traditional owner on the board, on the taskforce.

But if you look at the membership of that taskforce, it speaks to what the government's aspirations are – really, really important – for what they are going to come back to us on. We have, yes, environmental experts on the taskforce. We have outdoor recreation people on the taskforce. We have tourism people on the taskforce. So we are really conscious of those people guiding the conversation with the community over the next 12 months and the report back to government about what we could do. Because I am conscious – I think one of the first questions was on this – and the government is conscious that these communities in Gippsland predominantly but elsewhere in Victoria deserve economic opportunities as much as they deserve other opportunities, including to conserve areas which need conservation. We are conscious that, with the decision to end native timber harvesting, these communities will have economic benefit from new industries, including tourism and outdoor recreation opportunities. We are not about shutting those down, we are about providing an authorising environment for that to happen. That is why it is called the Great Outdoors Taskforce – because that is the ambition. It will be amazing. This is absolutely in concert with traditional owners, so the very first bit of the taskforce's work will be to develop a consultation framework for partnership with traditional owners. So there are really exciting things to happen in this space and we have got a really good panel.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Minister. It is particularly interesting that you said the land we are talking about is roughly the size of Tasmania, which is absolutely huge. As you say, both for the environment and outdoor recreation, these are all things that can be supported through this. It is very interesting as well that you said in relation to the transition away from native timber harvesting about providing those regions with that tourism potential and supports for that economy. I would like to ask about something that you touched on in that question about traditional owners and their engagement with this taskforce. What engagement is being done and what input are you receiving from those traditional owner groups?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Thank you. Particularly through the work of the Yoorrook commission but even before that, there is no space in this portfolio to do things without at least a proper foundation or conversation with traditional owners. That is important. In the terms of reference for that taskforce one of the first jobs that taskforce has to do is develop a consultation framework for partnership with traditional owner groups. I am looking forward to seeing what that looks like. The other thing is that if you look at the concept of these lands being effectively cared for for thousands of years before white settlement, they were cared for by the ancestors of these same traditional owners that we are working with. So issues around fire management, issues around seed collection, issues around how forest and some national parks maintain their health into the future – that knowledge is often held by those traditional owners in different ways right through Victoria. It is important that we take that into account. But also there could be tourism opportunities; in fact there are. There are existing tourism opportunities that traditional owners have and hold which we would all benefit from. I am just trying to remember the group, Mr Galea – I will in a moment – but there are really incredible ideas about how to promote tourism run by traditional owners as well, and I want to see more of that. I want to see more of even non-traditional owners – people in Gippsland, towns and others – being involved. Fundamentally, it is a

taskforce that has a bit of money to it, and it has got a bit of time, so we expect some really good things to come out of it in towns like Foster and in towns right through regional Victoria and Gippsland.

We want to market this state as a place to come and enjoy the outdoors, both from a tourism perspective and from a cost-of-living perspective. The government is really, really clear that public land should be for public use. That means people should be encouraged and supported to go hiking, walking, birdwatching or camping. We have got a range of programs to support that already through half-price camping fees – you can camp for free in most parts of Victoria – in those parts of Victoria where there are camping grounds –

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Minister.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Galea. We are going to Mrs McArthur.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. Let us go to the national park land in Victoria, and I refer to budget paper 3, 2024–25, page 25. Late last year the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council recommended converting about 75 per cent – that is 300,000 hectares – of the 389,725 hectares of state forest into a large protected area, such as a national park, that would merge the existing Yarra Ranges, Kinglake, Lake Eildon and Baw Baw national parks and the Bunyip, Cathedral Range and Moondarra state parks. Minister, have you personally undertaken any consultation with community groups and residents of the Yarra Ranges, Kinglake, Lake Eildon and Baw Baw national parks and the Bunyip, Cathedral Range and Moondarra state parks who will be affected by this national park conversion?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Mrs McArthur, that is a rich question.

**Bev McARTHUR:** I am looking for a rich answer, Minister.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** It deserves a rich answer, and that is, not to play with words but to be really factual, that there is no conversion in relation to this at all. What has happened, if you step back a moment, is when the government decided that we would withdraw from native timber harvesting it set in motion some work to be done by the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council, VEAC, which is an important part of government apparatus, to do value assessment around forest values, biodiversity values and environmental values. It then gave a report – made public, as you referenced – to the eminent panel for community engagement, another body that government established to see through consultation with the community. You have got the eminent panel here, and they have received a report from VEAC, which is one element of their information source, if you like. They have gone around Victoria, they are doing consultation, and it has been extraordinarily successful. Hundreds of people have rocked up to town hall-type meetings right through regional Victoria to engage the eminent panel on their ideas for what should happen to those areas you reference and other areas. Once that eminent panel has done its work, that and the Great Outdoors Taskforce work, which Mr Galea referenced, will all come to government through me, and we will make a determination in relation to what should happen on those lands.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** When will that be, Minister? When will you decide on that?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** As I referenced earlier, the Great Outdoors Taskforce returns to us in about a year – 11 to 12 months. The eminent panel's report is due to us in June this year – so VEAC has gone to the eminent panel and the eminent panel has done community consultations, and that is due in June. I am working through how we deal with both those bits of information together, but no decision has been made. This is a big community consultation, and I love that people have embraced it, Mrs McArthur. I have absolutely spoken to the communities I have gone to visit, whether it be in Mirboo North and other parts of Gippsland or whether it be in the Grampians or other areas –

**Bev McARTHUR:** You locked the rock climbers out of rock climbing in the most iconic rock-climbing area in the world.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Mrs McArthur, over 100 rock-climbing sites are available in the Grampians right now.

**Bev McARTHUR:** And the best ones are not. Now, Minister, clearly you have not got the community onside on this and neither have you got your union movements onside, because we have got the AMWU, the



ETU, the CFMEU, the mining and energy union, the AWU, the plumbing and pipes trade union – they are all totally against locking up this park and throwing away the keys, which is what effectively will happen. They have joined with a multitude of outdoor recreation groups who are absolutely opposed to what you are about to do. You do not have the community onside. Clearly these recreational activities of the sporting shooters association, VRFish, mining and prospectors, Australian climbing – they are all very concerned about what you are about to do. How do you argue the case that you are not going to lock up the park and throw away the keys?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Okay. This is the only government in Victoria's history that established a portfolio of outdoor recreation. This Premier and this government is absolutely committed to outdoor recreation, absolutely committed to communities in regional Victoria having economic activities, including tourism and outdoor recreation activities. We are not about locking up anything, Mrs McArthur. We are about protecting our natural environment but also allowing people to enjoy it in whatever way they enjoy their outdoor recreation activities. That is why we did not ban duck hunting. That is why we support fishing more than any other state in Australia. That is why we are doing a power of work through this Great Outdoors Taskforce for mountain bike riding and four-wheel driving, a whole range of – but you cannot do every one of those activities on every bit of land.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Minister, though, will you guarantee then that horseriding, bushwalking, prospecting and mining, hunting and fishing will still be allowed in those areas of state forest that are currently under consideration?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** What I can tell you is all those things will be allowed in different parts of Victoria, yes.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** No, in the area. You are going to create the great forest national park, aren't you? That is your legacy to the world.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Mr O'Brien, hang on a minute. I get there are politics in this for everybody –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** But you just said, Minister, that this government is committed to the great outdoors and outdoor recreation. If you are, answer the question: will you allow those issues that I just listed to still continue in these areas of state forests?

**Michael GALEA:** He has answered the question.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** I answered the question by saying that we are not about locking up forests. What we are about is people being able to have outdoor recreation. What we are doing also – because they are the same people that love the environment, so they want to also make sure that it is looked after. That is why VEAC matters. That is why –

**Bev McARTHUR:** Yes, they are the same people that made sure you did not ban duck hunting, I might tell you.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Mrs McArthur, you cannot take one report early in the process, only one source of information from the eminent panel, and decide that is the future. The eminent panel has important work and the Great Outdoors Taskforce has important work, and they will all culminate back to me early next year to make decisions around how we support these regional communities to have an economic life and have outdoor recreation.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Will all those groups have access to this new national park? Guarantee them.

**The CHAIR:** Mrs McArthur, the minister has answered your question twice.

**Bev McARTHUR:** No, he has not.

**The CHAIR:** Just because you do not like the minister's response, that does not mean that he has not answered.

**Bev McARTHUR:** No, he has not. 'Not everywhere, not at this place, not at that place.'

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I actually think he did, Mrs McArthur. I think the answer was, 'No, we will not guarantee it.'

**Bev McARTHUR:** No, no guarantee.

**The CHAIR:** Moving forward to Mr Tak.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Minister. I want to talk to you about the container deposit scheme. Minister, page 69 of the department questionnaire outlines the continued funding for Recycling Victoria and the container deposit scheme – and how wonderful it is. You know, out in my electorate two weeks ago with my kids, my eldest son got his first 10 bucks from that. Could you elaborate on how the implementation of the CDS has facilitated the environmental conservation and supported Victoria's transition to a circular economy?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Thank you, Mr Tak. This is something that I did not – it was previous minister that initiated it, but I was really proud to have been in this job when the launch date happened, which was 1 November last year. It is extraordinarily impactful for multiple reasons. The key one for me is you have a generation of young people in Victoria who know nothing else other than returning something we used to discard to go back into what they call feedstock for the next bottle, which is pretty incredible. Already now if you are holding a can or stubby or something in your hand, 70 per cent of it is likely to be recycled. We will move towards 100 per cent in due course. But it is pretty incredible. When you and I grew up – I know I am a bit older than Mr Tak – you discarded that, right, and that was considered waste. It was evidenced as waste because you saw it littered through the streets and the waterways and the parks. Now you look at the same bottle, whether it be a PET 600-millilitre bottle, a can – cans are the most predominant ones thrown into the CDS – or a glass bottle, and you see it as an asset because it goes back into the supply chain to produce the next bottle. Industry has become really good with this as well. Some of the biggest beverage containers – Asahi, Coke, Lion – all have got together to establish a recycling facility under a name called Pact, and they effectively recycle and produce the same feedstock back to their own businesses to produce the next bottle. It is so impactful in many ways.

The other thing is we have lifted effectively the milestone that you referenced at over 520 million – by the time we announced that last week to now, it would be probably 550 million – containers returned since 1 November. You could imagine that most of those would be on the streets of Victoria somewhere; they would be in waterways or parks or gutters. Some would be in landfill but messed up with every other item of landfill. This has completely removed half a billion containers from that process and put them into a clean feedstock. It is so important for the industry, and also it has created \$52 million which did not exist before back into the Victorian community, because that is the refund equivalent – \$52 million, including for charity partners.

For all those reasons I think this such a successful program. It is not just me thinking that: the Victorian community has absolutely lapped it up. I was in Melton – a great electorate after yours, Mr Tak – and the second highest collection point in the whole of Victoria is in Melton, and it is run by a charity partner, Kari Foundation, which is an Aboriginal organisation, and TOMRA Cleanaway. It is extraordinary. I met a local person from Melton there with Steve McGhie, and she said in the last 6½ months – single mum with a young child – she had collected 11,000 containers and dropped them off, and one of her go-to points for that was building sites. People find interesting ways to contribute to the scheme, and she has obviously received a significant amount of refund.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you so much, Minister. How does the growth in terms of the number of refund collection points enhance community accessibility and participation in the container deposit schemes?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Thank you, Mr Tak. We said on day one, on 1 November, that this would be a nine-month rollout to the end of August this year. We are obviously not at August yet. We said by August we would get to 600 sites; we have now 550 sites. It is a combination of over-the-counter – so a small business might be partnering with us because they think it might be beneficial, but also they want to do something for their local community, often in regional Victoria – or it could be the reverse vending machines, the RVMs, where you put it in and you get your refund, or a depot site – depot sites are the ones where you take in more than 2000 containers, off memory. There are a bunch of these sites around Victoria. We will get to 600 by August. In fact my expectation is we will probably beat that target, and there is a requirement with the operators, the three scheme operators – so Visy, TOMRA Cleanaway and Return-It – to be able to provide

sufficient sites whether they be any of those three types of sites like over-the-counter, RVMs, subject to the population size of those communities. So everybody in Victoria, including regional Victorians, will have a site that is fairly proximate to where they live. So we are getting there. I think we are far ahead from where other states were in the development of their kind of full program, and I look forward to August.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Minister, can you share insight into how the CDS has influenced local economies, particularly in terms of job creation, and supported local councils and the waste management sector?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** There are so many great examples of that. The most recent one in the time I have got left is the Kari Foundation in Melton. The organisation employs First Nations people in Melton to run the depot. So all of a sudden you have a job created because of the depot that would not have existed had we not had this scheme. Equally, in many other areas around Victoria the same thing happens. This scheme is meant to create around 600 jobs, and I think we are well on the way to the creation of those 600 jobs.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Tak. We will go to Mrs McArthur.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Minister, you have a very important role in saving the environment and looking after it. How will you protect the environment from the 88-metre-high transmission lines that will cut a swathe through many areas of the environment across rural and regional Victoria and particularly a biolink in the Myrniong area?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Thank you, Mrs McArthur. All these projects, whether they be energy transmission or any other project effectively – most other projects go through an environmental assessment process. It is contextual – so my answer is contextual to the actual proposal that you are talking about – and there is an assessment that is public, and it is effectively me and the Minister for Planning –

**Bev McARTHUR:** Would you be opposing a transmission line cutting a swathe through a biolink?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** What was the question?

**Bev McARTHUR:** Would you be opposed to a transmission line cutting a swathe through a very important biolink?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** The answer to your question is there is a process that these things are assessed –

**Bev McARTHUR:** The answer to the question is no.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** No, they are assessed. We have also got to remember that the investments that we make in clean energy are fundamental to the very environment that we are trying to protect that they are on. You cannot do one without doing the other. And we are leading the rollout of the Victorian transmission investment framework, which is a new integrated approach planning and developing our infrastructure so it is cognisant of the topography of where it is, cognisant of the environmental values –

**Bev McARTHUR:** So far it has not been, Minister, but anyway. I will move on to Mr O'Brien.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Mrs McArthur. Minister, how much does Lisa Neville get paid as chair of the Great Outdoors Taskforce?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** I cannot tell you off the top of my head, but it is –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Does the Secretary or someone from the department know?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Yes, but just quickly – I am happy to throw to the Secretary –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I am just after a figure, Minister.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** But I think context matters too, Mr O'Brien.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Well, context does matter, but context is nice when I have time, and I do not have time.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Okay, but if you just give me 10 seconds – DPC puts out guidelines in terms of board appointments and who gets paid what. It is not a decision that is made because it is Lisa; it could be John, it could be Mavis, it could be anybody.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Whoever.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** There is a framework that is followed through DPC.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I get that. Secretary.

**John BRADLEY:** I am sorry, Minister, I do not have the number with me, but it is classified –

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Okay, sure.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Ms Jackson, have you got the number there? Could you take it a notice for me?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** We can come back to you.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you. Minister, you talked about the CDS. You promised 800 collection points. I think you just said there are 550.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** No, we did not promise 800. No, I am sure the target was always around 600.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Six hundred – there are 550 now.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Yes, that is right.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** When are you going to get to 600?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** The rollout is a nine-month rollout. We said that from day one. We are already well ahead of where other states have been in their rollouts; in fact we were well ahead on day one. So we will get to 600 at least by August this year, which is the end of the nine-month rollout.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** In my electorate you have both Wellington and South Gippsland shires' waste transfer stations. The contractors there have dumped it. They have got out because it is just too hard. They have been saying that they are not getting regular enough pick-ups and they are getting robberies and vandalism, people trying to break in and steal stuff, so they have actually dropped it at, I think it is, about 16 sites. How many sites have been established and then closed since the CDS started?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Thanks, Mr O'Brien. I mean, I appreciate the question. Just to start with the first one first, it is a shame that those two withdrew, but I have been advised by Return-It, the scheme operator in Gippsland, that they have secured a new site in Yarram and it is currently scheduled to open in June or July. Your broader question about how many: effectively what happens is because we partner with businesses – IGAs, other businesses, NGOs – there are a whole range of 'Let's suck it and see' type of how much demand. Some businesses decided they did not expect that amount of returns –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Well, the issue has also been that it has been extremely frustrating for them. They thought it would be a good outcome. Yarram is a classic example where the hardware store just found that they spent so much time dealing with that and did not get a reward for it, but they lost business with other customers in the hardware store.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** I understand that.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** The question still remains, though: how many have actually closed since you started?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** It is a strange question, because I think –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Well, you can tell me how many have opened. How many opened and then subsequently closed?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** My point is our aspiration and our commitment to the Victorian community is 600 sites. We are at 550. We still have got four months of the rollout.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** The question is: did we get to 580 and then we have dropped back because so many close? That is what I am after.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** No. The teething problems were early on. There are a couple now, but they were early on exactly for the reasons you say: people decided that it was not compatible with their business or the demand was too high and it took over the normal operation of their business or the demand was too low. It is hard to predict what part of Victoria is going to take up the scheme in greater numbers, but –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I understand all that. Can you tell me how many opened and then subsequently closed or had contracted but never actually –

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Not to hand.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Can you take that on notice for me then?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** If I have got that information, you will have it, Mr O'Brien.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Well, you must have that information surely. You would know how many have opened. You have told us how many have opened, so you must know how many have opened and then subsequently closed.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** If the department has that information, we will give it to you.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you. Why are there no collection points in Melbourne's CBD?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** There are.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Well, in the area within Spencer and Spring, Flinders and La Trobe?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** There are.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Where are they?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Off memory, and the Deputy Secretary might be able to furnish me with more information, there is one in Lonsdale Street, I think, or Queen Street.

**Carolyn JACKSON:** I am not sure.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** We will come back to you, but there are sites in the CBD.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** What has been the overall cost for establishing the CDS?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** The government made an initial commitment of just over \$8 million –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Eight million dollars?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** to establish the scheme and since that point it is self-funding because it is effectively the beverage industry. There is a board, the VicReturn board. There are beverage industry people on the board, I also make appointments to the board, and it is self-funding because of that. But the initial commitment by the government was just over \$8 million.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. Very quick one, Minister, what is the government's spend per hectare on the national park estate?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Say again?

**Danny O'BRIEN:** What does the government spend per hectare on the national park estate?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** We do not work on hectares, we work on different things like pest control and forest care and seed management.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** What is the budget for the entire national park estate? Can you take that on notice?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Yes, if we have got that, I will give it to you.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** We will go to Ms Kathage.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Chair, Minister, officials. On page 31 of BP3, Minister, there are some details there of the Future Forests program. Can you explain a bit more about this fund and how it will support regeneration of land that had been used for native timber harvesting but also how it is going to support the biodiversity/conservation side of things?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Thank you so much. The concept of future forests is because we know there is a future in it now that there is a different regime, so no native timber logging. We have invested over \$115 million in this year's budget to manage those beautiful assets on behalf of all Victorians and for future generations. It will result in immediate benefit, for example, through recreational opportunities, as I said earlier, wildlife conservation, waterways management.

The country as a whole has a commitment that 30 per cent of its land mass will be protected by 2030. That is a national goal, but Victoria will do its part in meeting that national goal. In terms of some of the work that goes into that, you could imagine there is a range of what they call coupes that VicForests used to log which need regeneration and repair. That is a big part of the work that the Future Forests program will do. But there was some really important work that VicForests did that will transfer over as part of the Future Forests portfolio of work and will be housed within DEECA. That is seed collection, for example, because you cannot regenerate without seed collection. That is really important. There are programs like BushBank, which also do work on adjacent land in terms of private land adjacent to public forests.

There is a whole range of work that will be taking place in the Future Forests program now that I have got a little bit of clean air, all with the understanding that we want to look after our environment because that is the commonality between all of us: those who want to recreate in it, those who want to understand its importance for our quality of life – the lungs of Victoria – and all the other benefits of the natural environment. We all have something in common: we want to make sure that it is looked after, for us and for future generations. And we want to make sure more people get to enjoy it in whatever fashion that they want to enjoy it in, within reason in terms of different parts of Victoria needing different treatment. My view, as the person lucky enough to hold this job at this time, is that the more people that enjoy the natural environment through the Future Forests program, through all the other work, the more ambassadors you build for the natural environment and the more people you get to love it and then want to look after it in perpetuity. So I do not subscribe to the view that we should just let scientists look after the forest. Everybody should be custodians of the forest. That is why the 80 staff that are coming over from VicForests to DEECA, the staff that do some of the work that I was talking about – seed collection and regeneration – are really fundamental to the work of maintaining these forests into the future.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you. And I see there, listed as one of the components of that program, the biodiversity and threatened species surveys. Can you expand a little bit about what is involved in that, how many you are likely to do and how I can get a job doing that?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Yes. I might throw in a moment to the Deputy Secretary, but this is really important work because it is effectively a mapping tool of biodiversity values and things that are important. It applies across a range of functions of government, including the work we are doing that Mrs McArthur asked about, including forest fire management, and we are building this effectively longitudinal database. But I might throw to the Deputy Secretary.

**Kelly CROSTHWAITE:** Thanks, Minister. I would add that up until now we have had a similar program running in timber harvesting groups, but now that native harvesting has ended we are expanding that program to a broader biodiversity survey program. We are building on that longitudinal data that exists and has been

created through our timber harvesting program, but we can now more broadly understand the biodiversity and threatened species values in the forest. We build them into atlases, so they are there and able to be taken into account in any future consideration of how the forest is used and for our own works in terms of managing those values.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you. I think citizen science would be very popular too with campers and people that like to be out there. Minister, in terms of funding for forest roads around safe access and fire management, with the maintenance of forest roads, the funding there, what will it actually deliver in terms of maintaining those roads?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** I missed the first bit, sorry.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Forest roads and the funding there for maintaining them – the safe access, fire management –

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Yes. Absolutely important. There is an enormous asset in the internal roads across state forests, which is the responsibility of DEECA to look after, not VicRoads or the department of transport; it is DEECA, or the department of environment, that has to maintain those. They are principally for two main reasons. The first one is emergency response. If you cannot have access ways to get to different parts of the forest, then you are hampered in terms of your response to emergencies, both fire emergencies but a storm or anything like that. That is why the first thing Forest Fire Management Victoria did – and Chris Hardman might want to add to that – in Mirboo North was actually accessing those roads. Chris, do you want to add –

**Chris HARDMAN:** Yes, thanks. The road network, as the minister said, is absolutely fundamental to safe access and egress but also to tourism, recreation and visiting the wonderful places in Victoria. But quite often they do present a really significant risk if they are not properly maintained for communities to evacuate townships if needed during major fires but also for firefighter access to get to the seat of a fire rapidly and quickly and safely. When a bushfire impacts a public road or one of the public land roads, one of the greatest risks is trees falling, which presents risks to communities and firefighters.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Mr Hardman. We are going to go to Mr Puglielli.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, Chair. Good morning, everyone. Apologies, Minister; a lot of my questions I think are departmental, but I will see how we go. The Future Forests program – I see some of that budget allocation is for fire ecology and forest modelling. Two weeks ago it was reported Forest Fire Management Victoria killed an endangered greater glider while creating fuel breaks in the Yarra Ranges National Park, but my understanding is that government was informed ahead of time by citizen scientists we have just been hearing about that the trees they were clearing provided critical habitat for endangered species. My question is why did FFMV not pause this logging when they were told it was at risk of killing greater gliders?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Mr Puglielli, I will throw your question to the Chief Fire Officer, but I just want to address something. I am not sure you meant it necessarily in the way that it came across, but FFMVic does not have to be informed in and of itself. It does the work with the department to actually find the values in the forest before it does its planned burns or debris removals. I do not want that committee to think that somehow Forest Fire Management Victoria sits there and gets informed by others. Yes, there are absolutely people that give us advice, but the work of Forest Fire Management Victoria always happens only after they have done their own forests values assessments with DEECA. I might throw over to the Chief Fire Officer.

**Chris HARDMAN:** Thank you so much. Obviously, there was a greater glider that was found deceased at the site of our work, so that is always regrettable, but the work that we do in evaluating and assessing the need to undertake those works and the values assessments that we do are extensive. We do have experts that evaluate the habitat values of the trees, but one of the primary things that we do is the overarching protection of the environment. Yes, we do create a disturbance – say a 20-metre fuel break – and we use those areas to stop large fires in the landscape. One of the greatest risks to biodiversity is large fires that impact significantly all animals and all species and the ecosystem itself – plants and animals. So the work that we do – yes, it does have an impact on a specific tree or an animal. We do everything we can to mitigate that risk, but the primary purpose for that is that if we get a large fire in the landscape, building these strategic breaks now does present a fantastic

opportunity to save thousands and thousands of hectares of bushland from being negatively impacted and protect the plants and animals.

The strategic break in question also protects Melbourne's drinking water, so fundamentally, if that catchment was lost, it would be a \$10 billion impact to the Victorian economy through the building of a treatment plant at Silvan. So, yes, there are some impacts, and we minimise those impacts, but I think that the overarching level of protection that we provide outweighs the risks associated with doing the work.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you for the comments. Just to follow on – that survey and that evaluation work that FFMVic undertakes, are any of the results of that made publicly available?

**Chris HARDMAN:** Certainly we undertake detailed values assessments. The good thing about the works program that we do is it is very much in the public domain. We publicise the three years worth of works program. We work very closely with the Victoria National Parks Association. ENGOs collaborate with us. They actually walk onsite with us. We quite often do not agree with the work that we need to do, because we come from a different perspective, but certainly much of the work has been tested. We have obviously had VAGO audits and other audits of the work that we do, and we do make information available.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Sorry to jump back in. In terms of making it available, for this particular site, where the greater glider has been killed, can we expect that that is going to be publicly available information – that surveying?

**Chris HARDMAN:** I have certainly briefed the VNPA and other organisations on what we found. We found that the greater glider suffered a blunt-force trauma on the back end of the animal. We cannot say how the animal was killed. Certainly this work 20 years ago was referred to the Commonwealth to create these breaks, and we are just doing the maintenance on these breaks as we speak. So we are as transparent as humanly possible, and we do make as much information as possible and do site walks and take people –

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Mr Puglielli, can I just add one thing quickly?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Sure, very briefly. We are just short on time, thank you.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** I know. I just wanted to say to you, though, that the very nature of this work is to prevent a million greater gliders dying through fire.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Yes, that point has been well made. I think we agree we want to prevent bushfire; I think that is accepted by everyone here. In terms of transitioning former native forest workers and contractors, of the total former VicForests harvest and haulage contractors how many have exited the industry entirely and how many have been absorbed into DEECA and FFMV?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Who is that directed to?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** To anyone who can answer it.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Okay.

**John BRADLEY:** Earlier this year as part of the government's decision to fund the transition of those contractors, there were 21 contractors that were providing services at that time to VicForests, and 19 of those contractors have received offers to negotiate for what would be five-year contracts to provide certainty for that important area of the industry. You will see within the budget papers that there is \$290 million provided over four years for the purpose of maintaining that capability, which supports the bushfire risk management capabilities the Chief Fire Officer is responsible for.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. With respect to the timber by-products framework, is that essentially seen as a way of commercialising the wood that is sourced from salvaged logging and firebreaks?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** If I may on that one, we are developing a framework currently because naturally there is going to be forest work done and naturally there will be a by-product, whether that be used for traditional owner uses, whether that be used for firewood or whether that be used for bespoke industries, like



guitar making or instruments. The worst possible outcome, in my view, would be that we do not actually put a value on that, because it is valuable.

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

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you, Minister. Thank you, officials, for your attendance today. Minister, I might just take you back to some of Mrs McArthur's conversation around rock climbers. I am just keen to understand how we are supporting Victorians to get to some of these great locations across the state.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Thank you, Mr Hilakari. It is a pet topic of mine: (a) it is a beautiful part of Victoria, but also there is a lot of misinformation around it. In the Grampians, in Gariwerd National Park, there are 103 designated climbing areas available for climbers to enjoy.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Sorry, how many was that?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** 103 in just one designated area. That includes 11 bouldering areas, which is what people seek to do. Three licensed tour operator-designated areas are available for bookings. Fifty areas have been identified as special protection areas. In Mount Arapiles–Tooan State Park most of the 3000 established routes are currently available for those wishing to climb – 3000.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Wow!

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** So this notion that somehow we are forbidding people climbing rocks in this beautiful state is just not true and not backed up by the facts. In fact, Mr Hilakari, in anticipation that this might come up I found a large travel website which talked about the five most desirable rock-climbing locations globally. There are multiple of these sites; this is one of them. Only one was in Australia, and it is Mount Arapiles. It says:

Located in the Australian state of Victoria and part of Mount Arapiles–Tooan State Park, the area is a rock climbing destination known for its majestic granite formations. Mount Arapiles offers a diverse range of climbing styles ... The striking rock formations, expansive views of the surrounding Wimmera plains, and rich indigenous history make it an attractive destination for rock climbers.

It is a site called *Outlook Traveller*. It has over 240,000 followers on Instagram. That was as of February this year, that assessment. I take the approach, Mr Hilakari, as I think you would, that when I go to the Parthenon in Athens or when I –

**Mathew HILAKARI:** A long-term destination for me, thank you.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** It is a frequent destination for me. But I do not seek to go behind the barriers of that and climb on the actual structure, because I respect the civilisation that it represents – its international cultural heritage. I respect the civilisation that rests on these lands. There is rock art there from a culture far older than the Greeks – far older than the Greeks. We should respect that.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** It is quite a point of pride.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Absolutely. To have bolts and all this paraphernalia that comes with rock climbing on those sensitive areas – we should respect that just as much as we respect the Parthenon and the Acropolis and just as much as we respect *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre. These are important cultural heritage sites. We should be proud of them. But within that frame there are still 3000 established routes to climb in Mount Arapiles and 103 in the Grampians National Park, so thank you for that question.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** As you said, there were tour operators – businesses running – taking people and guiding people through these areas, so it does not sound like they have closed down at all.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Not at all, and in fact it is actually a beautiful part of the world, a beautiful part of Victoria. And what happens also is the kind of benefit that the local traders get and the food producers and the wine and the jobs –

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Of course, yes. They are wonderful parts of Victoria.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** That is right.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Fantastic. Well, I am talking about another wonderful part of Victoria. I will take you to budget paper 3, page 25, and the Zoos Victoria kids free policy within the community that I represent and also my neighbour the Treasurer; we share a wonderful, wonderful zoo. I was just hoping you could talk a little bit more about Werribee zoo and this policy. We are in the middle of a school term at the moment, so kids are going to be getting excited for this to happen again.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Thank you, Mr Hilakari. I am very happy that in what is a budget that is responsible and contextual to the times we were able to fund this important program. Again, going back to the cost-of-living issues we discussed earlier, zoos being free for kids means extraordinary things, because it means you have got four assets in Victoria to visit – and you could spend a week in one of them, let alone in all four.

Just before I get to Werribee, in Kyabram – I have got some recent statistics. When we took over Kyabram we made it into a fauna park, a zoo, as part of the zoos portfolio – so we have got Healesville, Kyabram, obviously Werribee and Melbourne – and Kyabram has gone from 15,000 visitations last year to 50,000 this year. So I am really proud of Rebecca McKenzie, her board and Jenny Gray, the CEO. They are doing an amazing job.

In terms of kids going free, over 5 million kids have attended one of the Victorian zoos for free under the kids policy from 2011–12 to 2021–22. So in the 10 years, 5 million kids – who knows how many of them would not have had the opportunity to have attended.

We are also, as you would know, making a significant investment in Werribee for the new elephant enclosure.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** We are super excited.

**The CHAIR:** Hear, hear. It is a very popular zoo.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** It is a very popular zoo. I had the chance to meet – can you actually meet an elephant? You can, can't you?

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I think so.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** It was a highlight for me. I do not think they would remember, but I met the elephant –

**Mathew HILAKARI:** They have a long memory, I have heard.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Actually, sorry. It is a good point. They would have a very good memory. I met the elephants at Melbourne Zoo that are being moved over to Werribee, and the new park we are creating is fit for purpose but also will have the ability to be a recreation and tourist attraction, because you can get the best vista through the walking path we are creating around Werribee zoo. It is extraordinarily important. It is a great asset. It is a beautiful part of the world that you represent, Mr Hilakari, and the Chair.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** We look forward to seeing you again soon there.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Yes, together with the elephants. I look forward to it.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Touching noses with the elephants.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Hilakari.

Well, Minister and officials, our time together this morning has come to an end. Thank you very much for taking the time to appear before the committee. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

I would like to thank all ministers and officials who have given evidence to the committee today as well as Hansard and the committee secretariat, particularly Jacqueline and Rowen – a big shout-out for the intensive work that you have been undertaking over the past couple of weeks – and the parliamentary attendants.

I would like to thank the hospitality staff and the security and cleaning staff who have looked after all of us over budget estimates.

This hearing concludes the 2024–25 budget estimates hearings.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Committee adjourned.**