T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Melbourne—Wednesday, 12 May 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Sonja Terpstra—Chair
Mr Clifford Hayes—Deputy Chair
Dr Matthew Bach
Ms Melina Bath
Dr Catherine Cumming
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Ms Georgie Crozier
Mr David Davis
Dr Tien Kieu
Mrs Beverley McArthur
Mr Tim Quilty

WITNESSES

Dr Adrian Marshall, Facilitator,

Ms Bonnie Gelman, Member, and

Mr Jordan Crook, Member, Grassy Plains Network.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the traditional custodians of the various lands which each of us is gathered on today and pay my respects to their elders, ancestors and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings. I would also like to welcome any members of the public who may be watching these proceedings via the live broadcast as well.

I will just take the opportunity to introduce committee members to you. I am Sonja Terpstra; I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee. Mr Clifford Hayes is the Deputy Chair. Joining us via Zoom are Mr Stuart Grimley and Dr Samantha Ratnam, and back in the room, Ms Nina Taylor and Ms Melina Bath.

All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee website.

Could I get you all, one at a time of course, just for the record to state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Dr MARSHALL: Adrian Marshall, Facilitator, Grassy Plains Network.

Ms GELMAN: Bonnie Gelman, Member, Grassy Plains Network.

Mr CROOK: Jordan Crook, Member, Grassy Plains Network.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. And with that, I will hand over to you now to give your presentation—5 to 10 minutes max—and I will give you a 2-minute warning as we approach the end of that time. Over to you.

Visual presentation.

Dr MARSHALL: Thank you very much. We are the Grassy Plains Network. We represent ecologists, community groups, academics and professionals. Our particular focus is on the critically endangered grasslands of the Victorian volcanic plain and, geographically, Melbourne and its hinterland.

Just to be clear from the outset—I am sure you know this already—the grassy plains ecosystems are some of Australia's most endangered ecosystems. Less than 2 per cent remain. This will become clear. If we look at this, you can see Melbourne's urban growth boundary, the purple line on the right-hand side. Basically we have grasslands all the way from the Yarra River to the South Australian border. This was pre 1775. This is the condition today: only 2 per cent remain. That large orange blob at the outskirts of Melbourne is effectively the Western Grassland Reserves, and it is the only large contiguous patch still remaining.

If we zoom into that patch, this is the Western Grassland Reserves as they are proposed to be, not as they have been purchased as yet. The main thing I want to draw your attention to are the red and deep red colours—they are our gold standard grasslands, if you like. They are the species-rich, diverse ones that we really want to

protect. And the point I want to make is that of that 2 per cent we have remaining only a very small fraction of that is actually high-quality grassland. The rest is mostly heavily degraded.

So we had the Melbourne strategic assessment back in 2010 that was supposed to minimise conflict between developers and conservation. Its outcomes identified a set of conservation areas within the 2010 urban growth boundary. They also set up the 15 000-hectare proposed western grassland reserve with its public acquisition overlay. And, as I am sure you have been told, the MSA process has been deeply flawed, botched—choose whatever word you like. Only 10 per cent of that 15 000 hectares has been acquired within the 10-year time frame, and it is really important to understand that that is not an administrative time frame, it is an ecological time frame. So what that means is that the land that has not yet been acquired is not under appropriate management. So it is in continuing decline. Weeds and pests are running rampant through it. It is effectively abandoned—a lot of it.

One of the other main problems with the MSA was that it was offset. I know we have had a lot of conversations here at this inquiry about offsetting. The offsetting was not like for like, so good quality grassland within the Melbourne urban growth boundary was being offset to purchase land in the western grassland reserves, and if you see that table there, 3.5 per cent—those first two numbers on the right—are the good-quality grassland. So only 3.5 per cent of the purchased land so far is actually land that we really want, okay—the good-quality grassland.

The other thing to look at is the 93.8 per cent nutrient-enriched land that has been purchased. Nutrient enrichment is really bad for grasslands—the superphosphate. So the nitrogen basically means that the weeds outgrow the native species, and the phosphorus presence in the soil means that there are a whole suite of native species that will not grow at all. So it is not great stuff to have 94 per cent like that. We can restore it, but not to the richness that we would ideally like.

The other aspect about the MSA is that it defined, I think it is, about 40 conservation areas within its urban growth boundary. They are yet to be passed—mostly—into public ownership, and that means they are suffering the same problems of ongoing decline from lack of appropriate management. If we are talking grasslands in general within the 2005 urban growth boundary, which was not covered by the MSA, there are a whole lot of grasslands that are good quality and that are protected by the EPBC Act, but effectively they are vulnerable to development at any moment and in an ongoing way. So they are contributing to the ongoing decline.

Solutions are pretty obvious in a way: buy the high-quality grasslands. I know the MSA has a funding stream associated with the rate of development, but that is inadequate in this case. We need up-front funding so that we can actually buy this land now, because every year that it does not get bought is a year it continues to decline. We need to resurvey the western grassland reserves to identify the best patches and appropriate management processes. Landowners have not let us onto a lot of that land. We have been looking over fences and with satellites. We need to improve management and restoration, and we are proposing a couple of mechanisms to do that: basically a series of recovery teams—there is more in our submission on that—and an authority that coordinates across land tenures, because so many different landowners and managers are involved in grasslands across the Melbourne region.

Perhaps most importantly we have to have a vision, because the western grassland reserves in particular, but grasslands in general, have just become like a legal land-purchasing process, and we forget that we can create one of the world's great parks. The western grassland reserves could be magnificent. It could improve connection to country for Indigenous people. Grasslands are a fundamental part of Australian culture. We rode on the sheep's back to our prosperity. 'The land of sweeping plains' that Dorothea Mackellar talks about—they are grasslands, okay? We can kickstart a native seed industry, create jobs—all sorts of things.

So, yes, that is really the end of my presentation. Basically just buy them, save them. You can make a great step forward to saving a critically endangered ecosystem. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Great. Thanks very much. All right, questions. Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you for your very passionate presentation—very inspiring, and I am not just saying that. It is lovely to see, and you certainly brought home why it is so important. Now, you mentioned superphosphates and how damaging they can be. What sorts of controls are there or what would you like to see

in that regard to help curb the tide of destruction, noting that is probably not the paramount, overriding issue but is an antagonist?

Dr MARSHALL: No. It is a very important issue. There are a lot of grasslands that farmers are inclined to crop and so on, so they still have sheep run on them or whatever, and preventing superphosphate additions to the soil would be a great step forward. Yes, that would be the main thing.

Mr CROOK: And with the western grassland reserves, we need to acquire the sites ASAP—that is the main thing—so phosphate does not keep getting applied by the people still working it. As Adrian pointed out, a lot of them are just sitting there and land developers are just waiting, waiting, waiting for overlays and things to be taken off. But there is a need to really speed up the acquisition of these sites. The longer we leave it, the harder it is going to be to bring back what was there—if at all.

Ms GELMAN: In the ground there are seed banks, so over the years and over the months the weeds drop their seeds—the seeds do not die; they can sit there for 10 years. Every year there are more and more seeds, so the longer we leave it, the more difficult it is to get rid of the weeds that build up and those that come up from the seed banks.

Dr MARSHALL: And we will be losing native seeds in the seed banks as well, indeed.

Ms TAYLOR: You do not have to list them, but are there many, many, many types of weeds or is there a dominant sort of weed?

Dr MARSHALL: We have a couple of major weeds. The serrated tussock and Chilean needle grass are the main two, and they are particular important because they displace the *Themeda* and the native grasses, so it is quite hard to come back from that sort of weed damage, yes.

Ms TAYLOR: Okay.

Ms GELMAN: It is tricky too because there are government regulations. If there was proper policing of these places that are infested by weeds, something could be done, but unfortunately that is not apparent at this time.

Ms TAYLOR: All right. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Hayes.

Mr HAYES: Thank you. Yes, lack of enforcement is something that has come up to the committee time and time again. I just wanted to ask you: the VAGO report was damning, but it was what was really expected in a way, because people have sort of been aware of what was going on in the grasslands, but have you had any sign of cooperation with the government as to the speeding up of the purchase and the carrying out of some of the recommendations you have put forward?

Dr MARSHALL: Yes. I am not sure if it is enough, but yes indeed. We had the 2019 Act that basically increased the funding and the rate at which money could come from development to purchase land. I know the Grassy Plains Network is working with DELWP's interim weed management strategy group, which is a bit of a mouthful, on the processes to manage the private land in the meantime, and DELWP has created community liaison positions and so on. Whether or not these are hitting the ground at the speed and with the efficiency that we would like is perhaps another matter. I think too, from what I know of their land purchasing program, it is targeted at the moment more towards creating large contiguous areas of land for management rather than targeting the areas of high-value grassland. That is basically for management convenience, if you like, which does not seem like very good reasoning for how one would go about purchasing these blocks of land.

Mr HAYES: Right. Could I just ask you on that: why is the funding stream so slow? I know it is very complicated but if you could just give a quick idea of why it is that purchases could not have been made earlier.

Dr MARSHALL: Okay. I am not an economist, but my understanding is that, well, first of all, the MSA was a very rushed process so it was not set up and implemented in a good manner at all. In scope it was huge—the whole outer ring of Melbourne is a vast, vast thing—and it just could not be adequately done because of that.

Mr HAYES: Right. Does it depend on developer contributions?

Dr MARSHALL: Yes, of course it does. Yes, indeed. Sorry, I will stick to the point. DELWP must have misestimated the rate of economic growth, of housing growth and development. They also probably failed to recognise the increase in property prices, and no doubt they got bogged down in a whole lot of internal stuff that I know nothing about.

Mr HAYES: Okay. And just one other question on this is—we have talked a lot about offsets—what do you think of offsets as a way of managing areas that should be protected?

Dr MARSHALL: I think offsets are generally a very poor idea. They destroy completely good grassland in this case, and the environment. They are implemented for developer certainty, and the consequence is that the environment carries the risk of what is going on. There is no guarantee of like for like, and they remove sense of place and local community—all sense of that.

Ms GELMAN: For members who may not be aware of what that that term 'offsets' means, we take this piece of nature, this kangaroo grass, with the striped legless lizards and all the flowers and critters and the fungus, and we say, 'It's very valuable but we want to build a warehouse here, and we'll have that over there'. 'Over there' could be in another suburb, could be in another municipality, sometimes far, far away. It cannot be that. Generally, most of what is there is lost—maybe some of the grasses, if there is a seed bank or whatever. The striped legless lizards are not relocated successfully. It is not like for like.

Mr CROOK: With grasslands, it is all about quality. When they have not been ploughed, when the rocks have not been taken off, those habitat structures are still in place for the species like the striped legless lizard. Offsets are not like for like and that means we are offsetting really high-quality stuff where the threatened species are already living. They should be managed where they are. They are being offset to areas that have a few things; they look like grasslands, but when you get down on your hands and knees and see what is going on, they are not like for like. That quality is not being transferred from site to site.

Mr HAYES: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Grimley.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Adrian, Bonnie and Jordan, for your submission. It was very interesting. I have a question. Previously the minister brought up a lack of data, and you have also spoken about the VAGO report, which I note was in 2015, around six years ago. So in your experiences, is the lack of data or recent and relevant data an issue?

Dr MARSHALL: It is definitely an issue, yes. The grasslands really need to be surveyed, and they need to be resurveyed with best possible current technologies and practices. We need access to the property so that we can actually see what is there, rather than using remote sensing and looking over fences. But the MSA was a rushed process too, so the amount of surveying that happened was not very good. And there has been a decline in the grasslands since they were surveyed. There are blocks that in the 2009 surveys are shown as being high-quality grassland. Our members have walked a kilometre into those blocks and seen nothing but serrated tussock and artichoke thistle, so conditions have changed. In some cases they have changed quite drastically. So, yes, data is essential indeed.

Mr GRIMLEY: Wonderful. Thank you. Just one more question: you speak about measures to preserve the grassland ecosystems and you talk about how it is necessary for the immediate introduction of conservation management, specifically for weed control; how do you suggest the most environmentally friendly process for weed control in terms of conservation management?

Ms GELMAN: There are excellent technologies available as an alternative to some of the currently used chemicals which more and more municipalities are taking on. For example, pine oil works very effectively as a weedicide, and I know that steam guns have been used. As a person with an interest in sustainable gardening I know of those two, for a start, that have been taken up by local councils.

Dr MARSHALL: We also have to, I suppose, balance the problems associated with weedicides with their immediate efficiency too and the urgency with which we do have to be dealing with the weed invasion that is ongoing.

Mr CROOK: And the other thing would be returning First Nations people to country. There is a lot of overburning going on around the country at the moment, but grasslands need regular fire, and that would have been from First Nations people and it would have been from lightning strike as well back in the day. You can control the weeds through herbicide use and ecologically friendly weed chemicals, but returning fire to grasslands is very much needed. It is again about that quality. Quality grasslands are burnt every three to four years.

Dr MARSHALL: And it is also removing cattle and sheep too because they introduce a lot of weeds as well.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thank you very much. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: I might ask a question just in follow-up from Mr Grimley's question because that was where my mind was going, about how has the landscape been managed and how is the interaction with First Nations people around these grasslands. Is there some? Is there none? I know it is complicated, because you talked about different owners in the landscape as well, so I have got a series of questions to better understand how the area you are talking about is managed and by whom. So perhaps we can start with the traditional owners. Is there dialogue with them, and how—

Mr CROOK: I cannot really talk on behalf of the traditional owners.

The CHAIR: No, I am not asking you to do that. I am asking you to tell me what the interaction has been with them.

Mr CROOK: With the MSA process—we will start there—not very well. I will leave it up to you to go and consult with the land councils and those people directly about the MSA—but not well, through the MSA. In grasslands management in general, when we get our parks and reserves co-managed it is a good thing. Grasslands are special because they are not just an ecological landscape, they are a cultural landscape as well. There are some places we burn too much, as I said before, where you can do soil cores and you will find that there was not cultural burning and stuff that was as frequent. But the grasslands were essentially farmed in some places, and the first loaf of bread was made from the kangaroo grass. So the grasslands are a very, very special part of Victoria, and the more we wreck them and we are taking them away, it is not good for First Nations people, for sure.

The CHAIR: So there has really been no traditional fire management practices used in the plains?

Dr MARSHALL: There has been a small amount through the Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative who look after the area of land known as Wurdi Youang. That is the Aboriginal stone circle that presumably predates the pyramids and so on. It points to the solstices and so on. It is an amazing thing. It is 25 miles from where we are sitting and no-one has ever heard of it. So that depth of cultural presence is there, and these guys do a great job of sort of trying to introduce their own practices and caring for country and so on, definitely.

The CHAIR: And so in terms of the entire network, what is the balance of private and public ownership? Like, if it was a pie, what is it?

Dr MARSHALL: Well, what—

Mr CROOK: From those maps before.

The CHAIR: Ten per cent—

Mr CROOK: Yes.

Dr MARSHALL: Public, that is what we have bought. And the other 90 per cent is private.

Mr CROOK: In the map, the grasslands took up almost one-third of the state, and now they are down to 2 per cent. And they really are scattered remnants along train lines, in between factory blocks or at very old cemeteries—some of the best places that grassland still exists, and the higher quality ones. It is scattered remnants, and it is across all these weird different types of tenures, like railway lines and cemeteries. Local councils also have quite a few from offsets, so the quality is here and there, but local councils are very good at managing their grassland reserves. So yes, 2 per cent of what was once one-third.

Ms GELMAN: At the moment, though, in Hobsons Bay—I live in Williamstown, part of Hobsons Bay—there is a proposed development in Ajax Road, which is out Altona North way. It is very, very high-quality kangaroo grass, remnant grassland, which if the proposal goes through will have a big new subdivision put on it with buildings. Now, where would that be offset to? So Hobsons Bay council is hobbled by what DELWP says it can and cannot do. So we say to DELWP: what are you doing to save our precious grasslands, these high-quality areas within developed places?

Dr MARSHALL: Indeed. There is a lot to be said for biodiversity-sensitive urban development. Like, we can actually do development around grasslands in such a way that they can support grasslands—if you keep trees away from shading them, if you maintain the hydrological regimes that existed there prior to development. The Victorian National Parks Association and the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects—we have done a lot of work on trying to create guidelines that would help support grasslands within urban development.

A lot of it is about creating cues to care and bringing in the community, too. Because grasslands in a way are the ugly duckling of our ecosystems, if you like, or they are like looking at a—from most people's experience of grassland—bleached coral reef. So what you have seen of a grassland may not be, like, what the Great Barrier Reef really looked like. You know, it is like there are magnificent examples, but most of them that you see now are degraded. So they are reduced to their grass species; they are missing a lot of the flowering meadow component of it that are remarkable. You know, these are grasslands. The yam daisy supported the Indigenous people; it was the main source of carbohydrate for the people of the Victorian volcanic plains.

The CHAIR: And you mentioned earlier about the data. You said when the MSA was done you felt that it was a rushed process and perhaps the surveying was not of a high quality. So I am gathering what you are saying is that the data is of a poor quality, coming out of that process. Is that what you are saying as well?

Dr MARSHALL: Out of the MSA?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Dr MARSHALL: Definitely.

Mr CROOK: It is predominantly satellite and computer based, whereas if you want to get to know the grasslands, you have literally sometimes got to get on your hands and knees to try and understand what is going on and if it is salvageable, if it is of higher quality—

The CHAIR: Or not, yes. So there is scope for improvement there. Do you want to provide us with a copy of that document that you referenced there?

Dr MARSHALL: Certainly.

The CHAIR: I will leave my questions there, and I will throw to Dr Ratnam.

Dr RATNAM: Thanks, Chair. Thank you so much to the network for your submission and for your incredible work on the ground. You know, I think that we would not have spotlighted some of these issues if not for the work you have done, so we are eternally grateful and very interested to hear your evidence here today. I think it is a really instructive example of just what is going wrong and some of the abject failures we have seen in biodiversity conservation. It is really good to be able to unpack what is happening with this example of the grassy plains and the need to conserve it. You have talked about it, and I am interested to know what has gone wrong with a view to what we can do to fix it—to focus the committee's attention on what things can be done now to remedy the situation—because it is quite critical that we do not lose any more of this land and we start acquiring more of it. You have talked about the MSA being quite rushed and about the funding models and that maybe they underestimated how much money they would be able to make to be able to acquire some of the land. And in your submission you talked about the governance framework needing potentially quite a significant revamp. So I am interested to know: what do you think fundamentally has gone wrong on top of some of the things you have already talked about? What can be done to improve the situation, particularly around governance, because my understanding is it is DELWP who have got the ultimate responsibility for this? I would be interested to know what your ideas are for how we turn the trajectory around immediately.

Mr CROOK: Money, unfortunately.

Dr MARSHALL: Yes.

Mr CROOK: If the state government could front up the cash now for the really good quality sites—you are going to get the money back from the development anyway; you could charge them a bit of interest as well. So essentially it is more money—put the money back into it so when the development slows down, the good sites are not being left degraded.

Dr RATNAM: Yes.

Dr MARSHALL: I think it is also a lack of vision too, if you like. That is why I wanted to emphasise how the western grassland reserves could be such a great place or how other grasslands could be such key parts in our community for our identity and so on. So we have to bring the community on board on this, which requires a lot of outreach—it requires getting these issues into primary school education and it requires funding and providing resources for friends groups and for local government as well. So there is all of that. A lot of the good knowledge that we have is siloed, so we really need a governance and recovery sort of structure like what we are suggesting, which is a provocation, if you like, that allows a lot of people to talk to each other—cross-fertilisation—to learn from the research and to do the research too, because there is a lot that we still do not know about what the best way of returning these systems to their former glory is.

Ms GELMAN: Also many of the families, I think it is fair to say, that are moving into those areas that have been developed on our western grassland reserves come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. It could be said that many of them do not look at the grasslands remaining around them with value. This is a valuable landscape, so we—the Grassy Plains Network, our local and state governments—need to work better with culturally and linguistically diverse people and their communities to value the grasslands so that all of us can work better to save them.

Dr RATNAM: You talked in your submission as well about potentially another authority. Do you still think that that could be a way of improving the outcomes?

Dr MARSHALL: Yes, definitely. We certainly need some sort of overarching governance that can span not only the western grassland reserves but the reserves identified by the MSA within the urban growth boundary and also all the other reserves—on the train lines, in the cemeteries, the scattered remnants—across the city that are under multiple land managers, yes.

Mr CROOK: Yes. Management of grasslands is quite a skill. It is a trade in itself. You go to TAFE and you do your conservation and land management diploma or your cert III and you go out there. There is a big difference if you have worked out in the west or if you have worked out in the east. Looking after grasslands is quite a skill, which is a big one to be shared with First Nations people. But you cannot be bringing bushland management teams from the east over to the west to do work, because there are big knowledge gaps, and a body like this would make sure that the knowledge is shared with everybody who works on the grasslands so they are looked after. We have got such a small amount left; stuff-ups can lead up to massive losses.

Mr HAYES: So you really need local management teams rather than an overarching sort of authority.

Ms GELMAN: Not another layer of bureaucracy, yes.

Mr CROOK: It is a layer of care more than bureaucracy—putting the care in the bureaucracy.

Dr RATNAM: But it is clear that the current system is not working, isn't it? DELWP has the overall coordinating responsibility, from what I understand, but something is not working with the government's framework, is it?

Ms GELMAN: The land has not been purchased. It is just degrading further and further—

Dr RATNAM: And that will be the job of DELWP, won't it?

Ms GELMAN: and we cannot see what is degrading either because most of it is on private land.

Dr MARSHALL: DELWP have definitely dropped the ball on this. Whether or not they have picked it up or not and are going to run with it to the extent that we want remains to be seen, I think. Parks Victoria is also involved in this because they have the day-to-day management of a lot of these grasslands.

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt. Following on from Dr Ratnam's point, to what extent can DELWP influence private landholders, though? I think that is the challenge with this network—you have got a lot of private land holdings and there is a mosaic patchwork of remnants that are owned by different people, so it seems a very complicated land ownership system. I understand where Dr Ratnam is coming from: how do we—

Dr RATNAM: I think it is the purchase of the land we are talking about. It is the purchase of the land that DELWP are responsible for.

The CHAIR: But it is the management of it whilst that is not happening, right? So that is what I think I am struggling to get my head around. You are raising two problems at the same time, but who is responsible and how?

Dr MARSHALL: The solution is to buy the land, though.

The CHAIR: Yes.

Dr MARSHALL: Once that happens the problem with interim management and private landholding goes away.

The CHAIR: Right. So you are saying the state government should buy that land?

Dr MARSHALL: I am saying—

Mr CROOK: They are obligated to buy that land.

Ms GELMAN: They said they would buy that land.

The CHAIR: Yes, under the MSA.

Mr CROOK: Yes.

Dr MARSHALL: Not only the western grassland reserves land but the other land conservation areas identified through the MSA: the 40 or so—

The CHAIR: And then the managing authority, you are saying, would be DELWP—is that right?

Mr CROOK: It is DELWP until it is all purchased and it is brought semi back to health and then it gets handed to Parks Victoria.

The CHAIR: Right. Okay.

Mr CROOK: Apparently. Sometime in the next 60 years unfortunately.

The CHAIR: Okay. Yes. It is just good for us to get that history. Sorry, Dr Ratnam. Did you want to say something else, because you are shaking your head there.

Dr RATNAM: Oh, no. I was just really talking about 60 years. It just came through that we are talking about a vision that feels like it is going to be so far from being realised and the shock of that. We have just got to get on with purchasing this land, preserving it.

The CHAIR: It is good for the committee to understand the history, though, and what you are talking about because it seems there has been a long history and a further projected forward plan.

Mr CROOK: Like, it was meant to be delivered last year.

The CHAIR: Right.

Mr CROOK: It was meant to be delivered by 2020. We were meant to have those 15 000 hectares of grassland protected by last year, and they got 10 per cent.

The CHAIR: And why has that been? Is that because of the development contributions?

Mr CROOK: That would be a question for DELWP.

The CHAIR: Right.

Mr CROOK: That is a pretty big fail. That is an agreement between the federal government and state government, and the ball was well and truly dropped.

The CHAIR: Why do you think it is, though?

Mr CROOK: There was a lack of money, but there was probably a lack of leadership in some areas to say, 'Hey, we need money to buy these sites', because remembering it was not a 10-year administrative agreement; it is a 10-year ecological one. So now we are going to be buying things that are not as high quality as they were in 2010. That is where we get our knickers in a knot—because it is all about quality, and if we wait another 60 years we are taking on a liability more than we are taking on a possibility that could be an amazing park for everyone.

Ms GELMAN: And we know that DELWP has the money to buy at least the good-quality areas now, and we do not know why DELWP is not doing that.

Dr RATNAM: Right. Okay. That is really interesting. Thank you.

Ms BATH: It could be a question to go back to DELWP with.

The CHAIR: And we will—DELWP and other governmenty-type witnesses are coming back to us, so these are certainly questions we can ask.

Mr HAYES: Can I just throw another question in? I just wanted to ask: the MSAs, these apply to a lot of peri-urban areas, don't they? It is not just in the west. We heard Nillumbik mentioned—the MSA is guiding their development. So it seems there are flaws with the MSA process in general.

Mr CROOK: Yes. And it was down Cranbourne way as well, you might remember. We have got still got southern brown bandicoots down there, these beautiful little fellows that help reduce fire risk by turning over the soil and moving fungi and seed and stuff. That was part of the MSA process and, like, they copped the wrong end of the stick and there are no proper reserves out that way put aside for the bandicoots. There is all these—'One day, some day, something might happen' or we might have a corridor that was 100 metres wide and now it is down to, like 10 metres wide. So the MSA was a process to help developers, and it is almost as if the environmental outcomes were secondary. Remember they saved $500 million, the developers, so—

The CHAIR: I am conscious of time and I know Ms Bath has got a question, so we have to move on.

Ms BATH: Thank you very much. I am having an education today. So there are approximately 13 500 hectares not purchased. Do you have a profile of the number of landholders that have that and the number of farms that are on that? Do you have that profile?

Mr CROOK: It would be in the 20s or 30s.

Dr MARSHALL: Possibly, but no. DELWP has that information and it is privileged information.

Ms BATH: And would they share that with you?

Dr MARSHALL: No.

Ms BATH: I wonder why.

Dr MARSHALL: Because it is—

Ms BATH: Anyway—privacy, potentially.

Dr MARSHALL: Yes, privacy.

Ms BATH: It seems to me—I can feel your frustration in that you feel that the land is being degraded, that land that is owned by private people that have possibly owned it for 10, 15, 20, 40 years, potentially. So they have not had an investment in this project. I guess they were aware of it 10 years ago. So what I am saying is: what connections can you make with those people to support them not to continue to degrade the land even though it may not be great land? I come from Gippsland where we have beautiful, high-quality soil and lots of lovely everythings—including weeds. So I guess I am trying to seek a way for you to make connections in. It is almost like a holding pattern. You could try and stop the degradation of that land until you are able to access it. That is my first question.

Dr MARSHALL: Sure. Wyndham council have a very proactive process of engaging with private landholders within their council. They have managed to do a lot better job than the heavy hand of DELWP has in getting these people onside. They have subsidies for weed removal and so on, so that there are financial incentives for people to do something.

Ms BATH: So there are other councils that sit overlayed on the rest of the 13 000—they could do a model from that council.

Dr MARSHALL: Yes.

Ms BATH: I am looking for ways of positivity in this.

Mr CROOK: There is a big chest of money that DELWP have to do that. That is their job. Why does it have to come back to volunteers again and why does it have to come back to local government, when DELWP have the money sitting there but they are not that great at communicating with the private landholders?

Ms BATH: So part of our role in this committee should be to ask those questions of DELWP on your behalf, on behalf of the Grassy Plains Network.

Mr CROOK: Ask DELWP. That would be great.

Ms BATH: And then the other question—I guess you have started to answer it—I was going to talk about volunteers, but I think I am interested in your sites that you talk about: Craigieburn grasslands, Cooper Street, Derrimut grasslands. Now, I am a Gippsland girl, so I am not really familiar with these. You talk about them—that they are actually declining post reservation. I guess that is a real concern, because you have that land now and it is walking backwards, in your opinion. What sort of science do you need to have a baseline? Do you have a baseline of what it started out like? You are saying it is declining. What science are you doing or what do you need to do to have a baseline to see degeneration or subsequent improvement?

Dr MARSHALL: We have got a lot of data from the 1970s onwards. These have been surveyed, so we have quite good data on their decline, as it were. We do not need any more baselines, as it were. We need the funding to actually look after them better. It is interesting you are from East Gippsland. You know there were grasslands in East Gippsland.

Ms BATH: I am from South Gippsland, but it covers everything.

Dr MARSHALL: South-east Gippsland, I am sorry. These were the grasslands of south-east Gippsland, which are extinct now, so we actually have no idea what they looked like because we—

Ms BATH: Human beings are a great problem, aren't they?

Dr MARSHALL: They are.

Ms BATH: If we all just left the universe, we would probably be better off.

Dr MARSHALL: They are also the solution, unfortunately—or fortunately.

Ms BATH: I fully agree. I kind of sometimes scratch my head, and I would like your feedback. We heard from the Victorian National Parks Association. They have got a $1.5 million budget. They have got

1200 volunteers, 10 EFTs. I know you said we cannot always rely on volunteers, but there are legs and there are people willing to do this. I am wondering how could they be mobilised, or my question is: why are they not being mobilised? Why are they not offering their services to support regeneration of this small patch that you have left? The Wilderness Society told us that they have thousands of members. I do not know why such operations are not being undertaken.

Dr MARSHALL: They are. I think it is very important to realise—if you pardon the pun—that it is a very grassroots thing, that we have a lot of community organisations and they are usually the ones leading the call for grasslands that are endangered and the striped legless lizards that are about to go under the bulldozer or whatever. They are the people who are bringing this up and coming to organisations like the Grassy Plains Network or presumably the Victorian National Parks Association to ask them to do stuff.

Ms GELMAN: And Friends of Iramoo grasslands, and the work they have done with the striped legless lizards, the work they have done to include community in understanding what is there, looking out for it and valuing it.

The CHAIR: And I am sorry, we have run out of time. I am so sorry. So what we will do is if we have got any additional questions—I know Dr Bach missed out on a question—we will get them to you on notice.

Dr BACH: I will put some on notice if that is all right with you. Thanks, Chair.

Ms GELMAN: Apologies.

The CHAIR: No, no. We often find we do run out of time in these proceedings.

Ms BATH: I will cede my question to Dr Bach next time.

Mr CROOK: The other thing was you should come out and see some good grasslands.

The CHAIR: We are travelling around the state, and we have had a demonstration on Yorta Yorta land with fire in the landscape and a whole bunch of things. So we are casting our net wide, aren't we?

Mr HAYES: We sure are.

Dr MARSHALL: Well, come out to a good quality grassland and see it in spring.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your evidence today. I really appreciate you coming in.

Witnesses withdrew.