

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria

Melbourne – Tuesday 21 November 2023

MEMBERS

Ryan Batchelor – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Wendy Lovell

Samantha Ratnam

Sonja Terpstra

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

John Berger

Ann-Marie Hermans

Joe McCracken

Evan Mulholland

Rachel Payne

WITNESSES

Sam Quigley, Acting Chief Fire Officer, Forest Fire Management Victoria,

Dougal Purcell, Executive Director, Agriculture Sector Development and Services, Agriculture Victoria,

Sarah-Jane McCormack, Executive Director, Agriculture Policy and Programs, Agriculture Victoria,

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

Sara Harbidge, Executive Director, Biodiversity; and

Daniel McLaughlin, Executive Director, Conservation and Planning, Parks Victoria, Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action.

The CHAIR: I declare open the committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria. This public hearing is for the Environment and Planning Committee, an all-party committee of the Parliament looking into the October flood event. We will be providing a report to the Parliament which will include recommendations to the government. Everyone, please ensure your mobile phones are switched to silent et cetera so that background noise is minimised.

I will begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on here today and acknowledge any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders who are joining us here today. I welcome into the room any members of the public gallery who are joining us and those tuning in. For those in the gallery, please remember to be respectful of proceedings at all times.

All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and 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 the 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's website.

I might ask the committee members to introduce themselves, starting with Ms Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Hello. I am Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

Melina BATH: Good morning. Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

David ETTERS HANK: Good morning. David Ettershank, Western Metropolitan Region.

Samantha RATNAM: Morning. Samantha Ratnam, Northern Metropolitan.

Sheena WATT: Sheena Watt, Northern Metropolitan as well.

Gaëlle BROAD: Hi, I am Gaëlle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria.

The CHAIR: I am Ryan Batchelor, Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region and Chair of these proceedings.

I invite you to make an opening comment, if you would like, as well as to introduce yourselves when you are speaking – state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of – so that Hansard can accurately transcribe. Could you make an opening statement of no more than 10 minutes. Over to you.

Carolyn JACKSON: Thank you, Chair. I will start, and then I will hand over to my colleagues. I would also like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting this morning,

the Wurundjeri people, and I pay my respects to their elders past and present. I also acknowledge and pay my respects to traditional owners and elders who may be joining us today. I also recognise the importance and impact of the flood event on country and areas of cultural significance.

Thank you, Chair, for the invitation to give evidence to the committee today. My name is Carolyn Jackson. I am the Deputy Secretary of the Regions, Environment, Climate Action and First Peoples group within the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, or DEECA. I would like to start by recognising those who were impacted by the flood event. I appreciate that there has been a very real human and ongoing impact to these floods. I would also like to recognise and thank all of those who worked tirelessly to keep people safe during the floods.

DEECA brings together Victoria's energy, environment, water, agriculture, forestry, resources, climate action and emergency management functions into a single department to maximise connections between the environment, community, industry and the economy. I am joined today by colleagues from DEECA and Parks Victoria who can speak to their involvement in the flood event, and they will introduce themselves in a moment.

Before the panel steps through the department's roles and responsibilities regarding the flood event, I wanted to acknowledge the significant role of climate change as a driver of natural disasters. The group that I lead is responsible for advising the government on statewide climate action policy. As part of this we develop whole-of-government strategies, advise the government on setting targets for emissions reduction and report on progress. We also provide government and the public more broadly with the latest climate science to help them make informed decisions. Neither my team nor I are climate scientists – we draw on the expertise of global, national, and Victorian climate scientists to support Victorian decision-making. What we do know is that warming of the global climate system is driving weather and climate extremes in every region of the globe. However, scientists tell us it is difficult to determine the degree to which climate change contributes to any specific, extreme weather event. We do know that Victoria's climate has and continues to change. Historical records show that Victoria's temperature has warmed by 1.2 degrees since 1910 and our climate has become drier, especially in the cooler months, during which rainfall has declined over the last 30 years. We also know that while total rainfall has declined, extreme, short-duration rainfall events are becoming more intense. That is why emergency management is embedded across all of our climate adaptation action plans, and it is front of mind in our efforts to reduce emissions and build a more climate-resilient Victoria.

If we turn now to the department's roles and responsibilities in preparing for, responding to and recovering from the flood event, my group is also responsible for wildlife, by which I mean native wildlife. DEECA is the designated control agency for preparedness and response to wildlife welfare arising from an emergency event. This includes flood events. Under the state emergency management plan, protection and preservation of human life and relief of suffering is paramount. In addition, DEECA's approach for managing wildlife welfare in emergencies is underpinned by two core principles: minimising harm and suffering to wildlife and ensuring that animals are treated humanely. In discussing the response activities that took place in and adjacent to the Barmah National Park, I would first like to acknowledge the concerns raised by the Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation in both their written submission and their appearance before this committee in Echuca. The issues demonstrate that consultation and communication can be improved. We also await the outcomes of the review into supplementary feeding mentioned in Yorta Yorta's written submission, and we will look to identify how we can improve our processes.

DEECA applied existing procedures to guide its response to wildlife welfare issues arising from the floods. The focus was on monitoring wildlife issues regionally and through feedback from the wildlife welfare sector and the community, intervening to address significant and immediate wildlife welfare impacts and undertaking community messaging and engagement regarding displaced wildlife and wildlife welfare. In addition to the rostered state duty officer, wildlife emergencies, DEECA recommended the deployment of a deputy state response controller, wildlife, to lead the overall coordination of wildlife welfare response activities. This role was appointed on 16 October. Between 15 October and 3 January DEECA coordinated wildlife welfare response activities across Victoria, with trained staff deployed across the flood footprint in response to identified issues. Throughout the event, community was engaged through a number of channels. DEECA led or requested others to lead three interventions. DEECA intervened on Beveridge Island, located in the Murray River at Swan Hill. DEECA also intervened on land of approximately 125,000 hectares that was inundated by floodwater across the 755-kilometre stretch of river between Swan Hill and the South Australia border. Finally,

DEECA directed Parks Victoria to intervene to address animal welfare issues as a result of the flooding in the Barmah National Park.

DEECA has committed to develop a wildlife and flood response plan, which will be supported by a range of tools and procedures which were identified during and following the flood event. We are exploring ways to deliver more appropriate and timely engagement with traditional owners and ways to improve our support procedures for staff responding to animal welfare activities. Daniel McLaughlin and my colleague Sara Harbidge are here today and can provide more information relating to the management of wildlife during the flood event.

Finally, DEECA holds significant lead agency recovery responsibilities under the state emergency management plan. These responsibilities include working with public land managers to rehabilitate, restore and reinstate public land and assets, mitigating risks to threatened species and ecosystems, rehabilitating injured wildlife, restoring water services and sewerage and supporting primary producers. Following the flood event, DEECA has undertaken an emergency recovery works program and is using lessons from the October 2022 flood event to inform the design and implementation of recovery operational frameworks, policies and procedures to improve recovery activities in future. I would now like to pass to Sam Quigley.

Sam QUIGLEY: I am Sam Quigley, Acting Chief Fire Officer of the forest fire operations division in DEECA. Chris Hardman is the substantive chief fire officer within the department and was in the position in the 2022 flooding event. Under the state emergency management plan, the department is designated a control agency for bushfire on public lands, and in this context ‘public lands’ is defined as state forests, national parks and protected public lands. As you are aware, Victorian State Emergency Service is the designated control agency for flood. A number of DEECA portfolios, including water and environment, support the State Emergency Service as a control agency for flood.

During the 2022 flood event, Forest Fire Management Victoria’s role was limited to the provision of operational and incident management team resources to support the flood response. The department has a well-established process and system to support the delivery of its emergency management responsibilities, including dedicated emergency roles and significant surge capacity. In this context approximately 3000 staff with emergency roles are spread across a bushfire and forest services group, Forest Fire Management Victoria partner agencies and the department more broadly. This surge model allows the department and Forest Fire Management Victoria to expand and contract its workforce to support emergencies in Victoria, interstate or internationally when called upon. Forest Fire Management Victoria are highly skilled in bushfire management and response and also as public land managers. They were therefore able to use these transferable skills to support the Victorian State Emergency Service with the flood and this emergency.

In short, Forest Fire Management Victoria provided significant support as a support agency to the response and relief, including supporting the state regional and incident management teams and the State Emergency Service with on-ground operational resources as a part of the response, establishment of a base camp at Bendigo to provide accommodation and kitchen and catering facilities for persons that were displaced and supporting the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing with resources for emergency relief centres to support impacted community members. In total 1348 persons from Forest Fire Management Victoria were deployed to support this flooding event. Between 12 October 2022 and 4 January 2023 these personnel worked combined total shifts of 12,699 shifts, or 137,668 hours. Forest Fire Management Victoria provided significant resources as a support agency in response and relief.

I will pass to Daniel McLaughlin from Parks Victoria.

Daniel McLAUGHLIN: Thanks, Sam. Hi. I am Daniel McLaughlin, and I am Executive Director of Conservation and Planning at Parks Victoria. Parks Victoria is a statutory authority of the Victorian government acting in accordance with the *Parks Victoria Act 2018*, and Parks Victoria is responsible for over 4 million hectares of public land, including 3000 land and marine parks and reserves. Parks Victoria is also a support agency for a range of emergencies as outlined in the state emergency management plan, including floods.

During the 2022 flood event Parks Victoria provided staff to support the incident in similar roles to those Sam has outlined for FFMVic in the emergency response. On 13 October 2023 a joint incident management team

was set up in Shepparton to manage the emerging flood emergency across the Goulburn and Murray systems. Parks Victoria was consulted as the manager of significant land in the flood-impacted areas and provided resources to support the response. The IMT was overseen by an incident controller, who on 4 November recognised the impact of rising water levels on the welfare of animals stranded on small areas of land within the Barmah National Park and adjacent private land. Then, under direction of the incident controller between 4 and 11 November, Parks Victoria assisted with the veterinary welfare monitoring and assessments and, where required, destruction of animals consistent with prevention of cruelty to animals protocols. Then, following an options analysis by the IMT, welfare actions were implemented from 12 November, which included the recommendation to feed feral horses and euthanise to prevent any further suffering for those where it was required. Parks Victoria also conducted engagement with the traditional owners, the Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation, as part of this role, particularly in the management of sensitive areas around Sand Ridge Track in the Barmah National Park. Then, following demobilisation of the IMT at Shepparton in December, the deputy response controller wildlife, as outlined by Ms Jackson, directed Parks Victoria to continue the management of welfare in the park.

The CHAIR: We are running short of time on opening statements, so if there are any particular things you want to get to.

Daniel McLAUGHLIN: I will pass over to Dougal, who will probably cover other things, and CJ has covered a couple.

The CHAIR: Do you want to make a brief statement?

Dougal PURCELL: Good morning. My name is Dougal Purcell. Thank you for having us today. My colleague is Sarah-Jane McCormack. My role is the Executive Director of Agriculture Sector Development and Services, and Sarah-Jane is the Executive Director of Agriculture Policy. Today we are going to present responsibilities of Agriculture Victoria. For natural disasters, including this flood event, Agriculture Victoria is a lead support agency to the control agency for the functional areas of agriculture and animal welfare on private land – farm animals. Agriculture Victoria is also a recovery coordinating agency for agriculture and animal welfare. As part of our annual emergency preparedness activities Agriculture Victoria conducted preseason briefings with staff and reviewed and updated our emergency management doctrine. In the week leading up to the flood event senior Agriculture Victoria staff and key emergency management staff within Agriculture Victoria met regularly to discuss preparedness measures. On Thursday 13 October Agriculture Victoria activated our stand-by arrangements and established an agriculture incident management team. Between 14 October and 9 December, Agriculture Victoria's management team led a response that supported the control agency within areas relevant to the agriculture sector. That included delivering animal welfare support services to farmers, gathering and collating impact assessment on the damages to the agricultural sector and supporting the control agency and also managing consequences for the agricultural sector that came up during the response.

Can I just say that industry engagement and industry advice were critical to the way that Agriculture Victoria conducted its response. We worked with a range of stakeholders, including the agriculture industry reference group, the rural assistance commissioner, the Victorian Farmers Federation and other forums to gain their input into the design of our response. Our response spanned 58 days – more than eight weeks – involved over 300 Agriculture Victoria individual staff, and at its peak we had over 100 staff involved in the response per day. On 9 December we closed our agriculture IMT and managed the residual floodwater through the north-west of the state in the recovery framework supporting the control agency. I will now hand to Sarah-Jane, who will provide an overview of the financial supports.

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: Thanks, Dougal. Just briefly, Agriculture Victoria was also responsible for the design and activation of support programs. Measures for recovery were activated quickly, with the first package of supports announced on 19 October 2022 and expanded with further support on 1 November 2022. Funding under the Victorian and Commonwealth governments' disaster recovery funding arrangements has supported the provision of over \$258 million, paid out as of 8 November 2023, through three primary producer grants programs and a primary producer flood recovery concessional loan, and the delivery of agriculture technical decision-making support and mental health and wellbeing programs delivered through the National Centre for Farmer Health and the Rural Financial Counselling Service. Financial programs are being administered by Rural Finance on behalf of the Victorian and Commonwealth governments. Agriculture

Victoria is continuing to work with impacted primary producers as they re-establish their properties and businesses. Thanks for the opportunity to speak.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I might just start on the animal welfare side. Obviously some of the circumstances that we found around native wildlife were reasonably distressing. What lessons do you think we need to learn from what happened in these flood events with respect to those incidents or circumstances, and what can we do to improve things for the future?

Carolyn JACKSON: Thank you for the question. There are two people that might respond to the question. Certainly Daniel McLaughlin from Parks Victoria can reflect on the work that they did, particularly around Barmah National Park, and Sara Harbidge, who is the Executive Director of Biodiversity, can comment on wildlife welfare more broadly. I might hand to Daniel in the first instance.

Daniel McLAUGHLIN: Yes. Thanks, Mr Batchelor. Would you like to talk about the kangaroos or the horses or native/non-native in particular?

The CHAIR: I am always more interested in the welfare of native animals, but I would not want people to think that is all I care about.

Daniel McLAUGHLIN: Well, I will pass over to Sara in a minute as well. As I said in the statement, that was recognised as an emerging issue across the whole flood footprint. Ms Jackson outlined where it was – from Swan Hill to the South Australia border – and that was also an issue. What the wildlife controller put in place was that monitoring to assess it and then some options analysis around what sort of strategies could be put in place to then manage that welfare with humaneness as the priority. But in terms of that wildlife control, Sara, did you want to introduce it a bit more? Then I will talk about the horses after that.

Sara HARBIDGE: Thank you. Thank you for your question, Chair. The management of wildlife welfare is a relatively new addition to Victoria's emergency response arrangements. This change reflects high levels of community awareness and expectations regarding animal welfare. The frequency and duration of wildlife emergency events is likely to increase in the future as a result of climate change. On reflection from our experience through this event, DEECA has committed to developing a wildlife and flood response plan that would be supported by a range of tools and procedures that have been identified as a result of the activities undertaken during the floods. We have a similar plan prepared for bushfire, but what we need to do now is finalise a response for wildlife in flood events.

In addition, one of the things that we learned through this experience was the need to engage traditional owners in whatever the measures are that we implement on the ground in terms of wildlife welfare to ensure that we are respectful of their cultural values. Another issue that we learned of through this event was that animal welfare issues can also have significant impacts on the mental health of staff and emergency staff involved in the response. We undertook a psychological debrief after the event, and we will incorporate learnings from that into the wildlife and flood response plan that we are aiming to finalise by the first half of next year.

The CHAIR: Mr McLaughlin, you mentioned horses.

Daniel McLAUGHLIN: Yes. Further to the management of the native wildlife, it was also recognised that the horses in Barmah National Park were becoming stranded on small parcels of high ground that were still dry, and the analysis done by the IMT looked at what options could prevent any suffering. Given the closeness of where they were, the option that was considered was feeding the horses within the national park. We recognise that was not aligned with the wishes of the Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation, but in terms of safety for people that were accessing the areas and the most humane outcome for the horses, that was considered the most appropriate action. In doing that, though, we did also need to euthanise a number of horses because of their poor condition as well as manage those in sensitive areas as required.

The CHAIR: Have there been any follow-up discussions with the Yorta Yorta about how that went and reflections on that?

Daniel McLAUGHLIN: Yes. During the flood event, we did have engagement with the Yorta Yorta nation. As I said, we recognised it was not their preferred option. Since then, and particularly from when we could access the park in January, we have done assessments of the cultural heritage along Sand Ridge Track. We

have undertaken the preparation of a cultural heritage permit with the Yorta Yorta nation to ensure that any rehabilitation works that are now completed were sensitive to the cultural values that were in that area. So the Yorta Yorta nation approved that permit and worked side by side with our staff in those rehabilitation works.

The CHAIR: I have got some further questions, but I might pause where I am now. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thanks very much. Thank you for all being here. Many questions, so little time. We will see how we go. Look, before I begin on some of my more formal questions, I was really distressed yesterday to hear Mr Pratt from VicParks association say that fee-paying residents of the caravan parks were, in his term – a term that he heard from the department, DELWP, now DEECA – considered squatters. Have you done any internal investigations as to who would have said that or why they would have said that? And if so, is that a term that you agree with? I think we need clarity around what is happening there.

Carolyn JACKSON: Thank you for the question, Ms Bath. I can answer that one. We certainly do not use the terminology ‘squatter’, so if someone – and I do appreciate what was said yesterday – has used that terminology, that is inappropriate and incorrect. We certainly use the term ‘residents’ or ‘permanent residents’ for people living in Crown land caravan parks, so we do not use – as far as I am aware, but I take the point from yesterday – the word or term ‘squatter’.

Melina BATH: I guess my supplementary is: if Mr Pratt is right and it came to his ears from a member of the department using those words, are you going to do an internal investigation as to why that came out of somebody’s mouth?

Carolyn JACKSON: Thank you for the question. I am certainly happy to follow up directly with Mr Pratt and see if I can get further information. We do have a number of regional staff and a number of staff based in the city, so it is a little bit difficult without further information to determine what might be said and who might have said it, but I am happy to myself personally follow up directly and see what we can find out.

Melina BATH: Thank you. I am sure Mr Pratt would – and also residents who, as he said, had dignity living in homes that were in a caravan parks. Thank you for that. We have heard over our many inquiries and in submissions there has been a disconnect or a concern around the flow of command. It might be to you, Mr Quigley, but I am happy to take anybody’s comments in relation to the chain of command and the information that is progressed. One of the concerns that we heard certainly in Seymour was about loss of corporate knowledge. Someone is in ICC and leaves ICC, and then people feel like they have got to explain that whole situation all over again – public. So can you, say, explain that chain of command and respond to those people who are saying it is not seamless, there are gaps? How are you going to improve on those issues?

Sam QUIGLEY: Thanks for the question. The emergency management arrangements in Victoria are well coordinated, with Emergency Management Victoria bringing together the response and control agencies in delivering our services for class 1 and class 2 emergencies in particular. Our command arrangements rest within those control agencies, so control and working in an incident management team often sees the bringing together of many agencies to deliver the functions. We often see the transition of staff in and out of those emergency incidents due to the longevity of the incidents, and we see transfer of control and command, but it is a well-practised event with standard operating procedures which are joint – shared by the agencies – which are continuing to be developed by EMV. They will be further refined, particularly for things such as public information and warnings, as joint standard operating procedures for that, and they are consistent across the sector.

Melina BATH: I guess my question is: we have heard witnesses saying that they felt like there was a disconnect between shifts, and I want to understand the notion that there is corporate knowledge that is taken with one person. They clock off; there may have been an issue. How is the department going to improve that flow of information, I will say between shifts, but, you know, corporate knowledge?

Sam QUIGLEY: In respect to the flooding event –

Melina BATH: Yes, particularly.

Sam QUIGLEY: the State Emergency Service was the control agency responsible for the incident management team. Forest Fire Management Victoria was a participant in the arrangements and provided

significant resourcing. I guess that the way in which we get better at those practices, particularly end-of-shift or end-of-deployment transfer of command and control to one another, is through exercising and greater capability building between us as practitioners in this space, particularly across the sector, when we often come together to deliver these services for longer duration events, not just flood but also fire.

Melina BATH: I guess there are people out there who want to know that there are going to be better communications next time. You are an element of that, so do you have any recommendations for us to recommend to government – that is a long way of saying it – about how that could be improved, Mr Quigley?

Sam QUIGLEY: I guess when I reflect on the total participation by Forest Fire Management Victoria being so substantial – we diverted from business-as-usual activities, which is delivery of a fuel management program at scale, which would be the burn fuel treatments, mechanical fuel treatments and others – it is about the ongoing capability set. We obviously moved persons from a policy style of role to being an incident planning officer. Everyone wears a lot of hats to deliver the service of emergency management as practitioners on the ground. The capability and capacity of the agencies to deliver this service at scale for longer duration events will be compressed over time, so exercising the capability and capacity of the agencies that are responsible for class 1 and class 2 emergencies is of importance.

Melina BATH: I guess the public needs to see that there is improvement from our witnesses. That would be a point I have. In relation to the ag sector, I am interested in wildlife; I am also very much interested in ag. What was the total cost of the floods – taken on notice or otherwise – to the agricultural sector? I mean livestock, I mean grain and the whole of horticulture – what is a figure? You can break it down by sector if you like.

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: Yes. Thank you for the question. We have done some work to understand the economic impact of this event on the agricultural sector here in Victoria. Our estimates are close to \$1 billion, about \$996 million, and that number includes both asset losses that have been reported to us and that we understand as well as an estimate of production losses. I do not necessarily have the breakdown per sector, but just to give you that sort of sense; that is the work that we have done in Agriculture Victoria – estimated that number.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Do you have a figure on death of livestock – death of cattle, for example?

Dougal PURCELL: Thank you for the question. Can I just start by acknowledging the very significant impact that the flooding had on the farming community. As a part of Agriculture Victoria's incident management team, we sought to make contact with as many farmers as we could who had been impacted by the flood. We did that for a variety of reasons. One was to ascertain any urgent personal needs they had, one was to address any urgent animal welfare issues that were occurring and one was to gain a feeling and an indicative number for the assessment. We made, through ourselves and the customer contact centre, over 28,000 phone calls to landholders impacted or potentially impacted by the flooding and received 1000 phone calls ourselves on it.

From that impact assessment, Agriculture Victoria was able to ascertain some significant agricultural impacts – almost 500,000 hectares of agricultural land impacted; over 15,000 animal deaths, particularly cattle and sheep; 12,000 kilometres of fencing impacted; 220,000 hectares of crop impacted, particularly broadacre crop right towards the end of season; 153,000 tonnes of hay and silage; and almost 170,000 hectares of pasture loss. They were some of the critical numbers that we utilised to calculate the almost \$1 billion of impact.

Melina BATH: Sure. We have had farmers here who have broken down in this committee by the distress and the loss. They care about their animals, and it was significantly impacting on their ability not only to work but to look after those animals; many perished. Looking back at your response, what would you do differently? What would you improve?

Dougal PURCELL: I will be honest: I think there is a lot that we are proud of in the way we were able to support the agricultural sector and the community. I think that the way that we collect intelligence within our agriculture IMT is always a way to think about how we do things differently. We convened the agriculture industry reference group. We worked closely with the horticulture sector and the dairy sector. But the ability to have timely and accurate information, particularly very early on in the response phase, is critical. For the first time in our agriculture incident management team we established an intelligence function, and it worked very

well, but I do think there are opportunities to think about how we collect that intelligence quicker and better. I note some of the submissions that you have had from northern Victoria that talked about the importance of local information and local knowledge from farmers, so how we can pick up on that is an area. I think that continuing to build the capability of our incident management team and our staff within Agriculture Victoria is very important. They are two that I would start with.

Melina BATH: Okay. And in terms of loans – many of those farms are incredibly stressed, and again, we have heard about the loans and having to provide exact amounts of receipts and the like. What has been your intel on feedback from farmers, if you could be frank with us? We need to learn how we can improve the system. In relation to those loans, what has been your feedback from farmers?

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: Yes. Thanks for the question. I think in general the feedback has been fairly positive in terms of how we have rolled out both the concessional loans that we have had available but also the grants that have been available as well. To your point about the evidence that is required for the grants, how we have structured the grants at this particular time is basically a tiered system where, say for instance, the \$75,000 primary producer recovery grant that has been available – there is an ability for upon application an initial amount being able to be provided to farmers of \$25,000 that does not necessarily require evidence of expenditure and receipts.

Melina BATH: But we have heard that it has been very stressful – that last part of it was quite stressful for people. How are you improving that?

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: Yes. We always welcome feedback on how we can get the balance right between both that really important support that we provide to farmers and the ease in which particularly distressed farmers can come and ask for assistance, but at the same time still getting the right balance to make sure that we are targeting our support to those people who need it as well. So we will always welcome feedback on whether we are getting the balance right. We will continue to listen to what farmers have to say, particularly those who have engaged with Rural Finance in receiving grants and loans, to figure out what we could have done better.

Melina BATH: And the VFF?

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: And the VFF as well, yes. As Dougal said, our –

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Bath. Dr Ratnam.

Samantha RATNAM: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you very much for the work you have done in response to the floods and for being here today. I have just a couple of follow-up questions on some questions that were asked. Just to follow up on where Ms Bath started around support for farmers, I am just interested to know: have you all done any sort of analysis of how many farmers have accessed the primary producer grant scheme versus how many were impacted, just to gauge how successful the scheme is at being accessible and responsive to those farmers?

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: Yes. I do not have the exact details here – we can certainly take that on notice – but certainly the supports that we have provided in terms of the grants and loans have been the largest response to date, and that I think reflects the significant impact of this flooding event on farmers. But in terms of the actual breakdown between our estimates of impacted farmers and those taking up grants, we can certainly come back on that question.

Samantha RATNAM: Great. Thank you very much. And just to understand the quantum of support that is available to those farmers, you are saying that there is a \$75,000 grant and then there are loans that people can access as well: what is the full quantum of the loans that people can access?

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: Yes, sure. We have activated concessional loans of up to \$250,000 that have been available for this particular event. We have also had three grants that have been on offer as well. The first is the \$75,000 grant that I mentioned for primary producers. And this event for the first time had an additional grant of up to \$25,000 that was available to smaller scale farms. We are calling it the rural landholder grant, which was based on some learnings from previous events. Those who might not necessarily meet the threshold to be considered a primary producer under the definitions but still nonetheless are important landholders in

regional Victoria have had the ability to access grants after this event as well. And we also had a third grant that was transport support, up to \$15,000 that was available to support farmers who needed to either transport emergency water or emergency fodder to their animals or alternatively transport their animals to agistment or to sale as well. So that support has been available as well.

Samantha RATNAM: Great. And just in terms of lessons for future disaster events and supporting primary producers, some farmers have presented to us that on top of being able to access the grants that were available, the quantum of losses were sometimes in the hundreds of thousands. There were big gaps in what they could insure as well, so there seem to be quite big gaps between what they can access to rebuild their businesses versus what they have actually lost. Are there any lessons that the department is considering for future events in terms of that gap, and what kind of implication is that going to have for food production et cetera in the future?

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: Good question. Certainly from our perspective, with the DRFA, or the disaster recovery funding arrangements, which are the cost-share arrangements with the Commonwealth government, the principle behind those is not necessarily to completely replace or reinstate everything exactly the same as it was before. It really is around a grant or financial assistance that is sort of, if you like, a helping hand for that recovery journey that farmers or others in the community are going through. So I think we do acknowledge that those financial supports we have available will not necessarily cover all of the costs that farmers have, but that is really one of the, if you like, principles behind that. The quantum of this grant, up to \$75,000, is historically large compared to what we have done previously. We had similar-sized grants that were available after the 2019–20 bushfires, but prior to that they were not necessarily to that level. And I think we are continuing to learn from each event that we go through what those sorts of issues are that we are engaging with farmers on and how we better design up the supports to make sure that we can do that. So we do acknowledge that, and I guess we will continue to work particularly with the Commonwealth government, given these arrangements are shared between states and territories and the Commonwealth, on how we make sure that we are really targeting that support to where it is needed the most.

Samantha RATNAM: Thank you very much. And if you all have any information that you could provide on notice at a later point in terms of what you might all forecast are impacts of future disaster events in terms of primary food production et cetera, that would be helpful to understand. If the department is doing any of that work, it would be great to get some of that on notice – if you all are doing that work.

Just to change track slightly – and thank you very much for the evidence you have provided in response to the submission by the Yorta Yorta First Nations group who came and spoke about the response and the gaps that they saw. I am glad to hear that that dialogue is happening and some remediation is happening to that response as well.

Just in terms of a couple of questions that were raised before, just to clarify, does your department have jurisdiction over the management and regulation of the caravan parks? It is because we heard from them yesterday and Ms Bath just asked a question. Do you all have sole jurisdiction, or is it shared?

Carolyn JACKSON: It is shared. So we have caravan parks that are on Crown land, and so they might be run by committees of management, for example, but there may also be caravan parks that are not on Crown land and are not run by us as the department.

Samantha RATNAM: Great. I am assuming that you heard the evidence presented yesterday or some parts of the evidence.

Carolyn JACKSON: I am afraid I did not; I had PAEC yesterday. I am sorry. It is inquiries week.

Samantha RATNAM: Oh, no, that is understandable. No problem. That is very understandable – lots of committees happening at the same time. There were a couple of points and recommendations made by the caravan parks association about the lease arrangements and the reinsurance issues that they are experiencing in terms of being able to get insurance and how residents are classified as a residents and non-residents. I would be interested to hear if the department had a response to some of that evidence. Perhaps if I could ask you to take that on notice, that would be very helpful.

Just another question on biodiversity loss and ecosystems damage that has been talked about: do you all have estimates of the total impact on biodiversity and of ecosystem damage that occurred because of the 2022 flood events?

Sara HARBIDGE: That might be one for me. Thank you, Dr Ratnam. The effects of an event such as this are broadscale and very difficult to quantify across the breadth of the landscape. Flooding is a natural part of river ecosystems, and the flora and fauna in those ecosystems have evolved over time to adapt to some form of flooding. Wildlife can be impacted through displacement, loss of habitat and food sources, injury and death, but it is also important to note that from a wildlife perspective many animals can respond to flooding by moving out of the way of the rising waters to higher ground. So in that sense it is different to a fire. Wildlife impacted by flooding, however, are likely to be fatigued and stressed and are best left alone to recover where they are if they are injured.

An accurate statewide assessment or count of the wildlife injured, killed or displaced as a result of emergency events such as floods or fires cannot be quantified. DEECA can only report on the number of animals that it undertakes assessments on and the type of interventions involved. For this particular flood event we do know that approximately 2000 kangaroos were euthanised or died at Beveridge Island near Swan Hill, and a further 1700 animals, again mostly kangaroos, were euthanised further along the Murray River from Swan Hill to the South Australian border. In terms of threatened species, the extent of the impact of the floods on threatened species is not known, however, it is expected that there are species that would have been impacted in some way. However, as I pointed out before, flood is a part of the natural environment. We do have the Victorian Biodiversity Atlas. It provides an observation database of where wildlife are sighted across the state, and we can determine trends over time, but it does not provide an accurate guide of the number of wildlife or the full extent of species present in a particular location or impacted by an emergency event.

Samantha RATNAM: Thank you; that is helpful to know. Can I also ask about landscape impacts, so in terms of natural environment impacts. Once again, a good estimate is hard to quantify, but I am interested to know what we should do going forward in terms of the quantum of resources we are going to need to rebuild natural ecosystems as well. Is there any work being undertaken to understand the impact on natural landscapes, and then the biodiversity recovery work that is needed and the resources needed to do that recovery work?

Carolyn JACKSON: I might just give some introductory remarks, and then I might hand over.

Samantha RATNAM: Certainly.

Carolyn JACKSON: What DEECA has, and what we deploy after emergency events, is something called rapid risk assessment teams, or RRATs – let us go with the full title. They are deployed across the state to assess immediate risks and to quickly identify needs and the required works across the public land estate. They are small teams, and they are comprised of discipline experts on things like public land assets, infrastructure, biodiversity, flooding and erosion on public land, cultural and historical heritage et cetera. Those teams prepare reports that then come back to the relevant areas of the department to then determine what works might be required. So we do have people who have expertise in biodiversity that will go out and look at the impact, and then that assists us when we are seeking additional funding for restoration and immediate response work. So you have obviously got the flood response, but then we have the secondary response, which is when there is a threatened species that is impacted and we know that, so we need some funding to go and do particular things. So there are those teams, and that is an established process that has been used for a number of years. But I will hand over to Daniel and Sara to see if they want to add anything.

Daniel McLAUGHLIN: I might just add something, Dr Ratnam. The flood plain – the public land particularly in the flood plain – has wetlands of international significance. So the floods are in fact of benefit to some of those ecosystems. The timing and duration is a key factor, so many species would have benefited from that duration. Particularly important, though, after these flood events, is the treatment of pests, plants and animals that may have been introduced during those floods. That is some of the monitoring that is picked up in the rapid risk assessment teams – where are those areas, and where should we get in and deal with those emerging threats or new threats to make sure that it does not become a persistent problem?

Samantha RATNAM: I think we have got 10 seconds more, so maybe take this on notice: if we wanted to understand what happened with the 2022 event on those responses, both the pest management and the impact

on the natural landscape and wildlife, where is an easy place to find that? Would that be in your annual reports? Is there actually a post-event summary somewhere that we can follow up? A question on notice, perhaps.

The CHAIR: Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you very much. My first question is for Agriculture Victoria. You spoke about the cost broadly to agriculture across the state. I am just wondering about the closure of major freight routes. That obviously had a huge impact on agriculture across the state. I am wondering whether you have done any assessment of the impact of that individually, and particularly I am interested in the closure of the Midland Highway at the Peter Ross-Edwards Causeway at Shepparton and the impact that that might have had on agriculture.

Dougal PURCELL: Thank you, Ms Lovell, for the question. The road access and road closures were certainly a very significant issue across northern Victoria during the flooding event for dairy farmers in terms of milk tanker access for the delivery of fodder into the region – particularly to intensive dairy farms, piggeries and chicken farms – and also for getting animals out as well. Agriculture Victoria, through our industry networks and staff in the incident management team, were aware of the significant transport issues across the region. Particularly through our agriculture industry reference group, industry members were able to directly call out the issues that were occurring, which was excellent. So as Agriculture Victoria we worked closely with the control agency incident management team, and we were able to gain a permit program so that agricultural trucks and fodder and livestock could cross the Shepparton causeway, which was a major part of making sure we got fodder in and out of some of those key areas.

At Agriculture Victoria we were also able to work with the control agency in the Department of Transport and Planning at the time to ensure that they were aware of the critical roads and McCoys Bridge and other critical road infrastructure that were so important for agriculture at that point in time. So we were able to help prioritise the roads that were most important for agriculture. I would also acknowledge the role of Peter Tuohey as the rural assistance commissioner, who also lives in the region and assisted us on those priority roads. So we were working very closely with the control agency. We were able to assist the transportation of fodder in, milk out and animals around some of those priority roads. I would then also just say that once the floodwaters subsided, the damage to the road infrastructure was significant across northern Victoria – roads and infrastructure and bridges – and Agriculture Victoria was able to work with industry closely, particularly as we came to the grain harvest of 2022, identifying the really high priority roads for agriculture that we sought the maintenance and repair on, and we were able to feed that in to the department of transport.

Wendy LOVELL: We heard from a number of dairy farmers about milk not being able to be picked up and the impact that that had on their herds. What work could be done on that, and what insight into the impact on the dairy industry can you give us on that?

Dougal PURCELL: That is a very good question. Agriculture Victoria worked closely with the dairy industry, particularly the northern dairy industry through Murray Dairy and what we call the industry leadership group of dairy in northern Victoria. I am unable to tell you, so I have to take on notice, the number of dairy farmers that were impacted directly. There were over ~~15,500~~ *(corrected following the hearing, to 12,300)* farmers impacted in total across northern Victoria from the flooding event. I would have to take on notice how many dairy farmers particularly. I would say that Agriculture Victoria's work in recovery, in addition to the financial support, has been significant, particularly in dairy across northern Victoria. So in our recovery program, if you would like me to give an insight into that –

Wendy LOVELL: Yes.

Dougal PURCELL: In our recovery program Agriculture Victoria was fortunate to supplement our existing services through seven additional staff, who have worked across northern Victoria to support farmers during their recovery phase. Those staff are funded through until later this year. As of 14 October, through our collective efforts we have delivered 360 farmer-focused recovery events across northern Victoria. Those 360 events have engaged with more than 3700 farmers. We also see a key role that we have is to provide technical information to farmers to support their recovery. The Agriculture Victoria website has been updated, and there have been 47,000 hits on the AgVic website to take technical information off that website. And those recovery services are broad. They include grazing management, pasture management, post-flood recovery,

irrigation and horticultural system maintenance, land management, animal health and nutrition, and a big focus on business planning and re-establishing your business post the significant financial impact.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you. Just on the other key agricultural sector in my area, the impact on the horticulture industry – water sitting on trees and future production.

Dougal PURCELL: Thanks, Ms Lovell. I agree that the impact on the horticulture industry was very significant, and I would probably call out that it was not only the flood event but then the subsequent hail events right through the late spring, particularly in early November, late December and then the March event after the flood events. Agriculture Victoria worked very closely with industry, particularly Fruit Growers Victoria in the Goulburn Valley, to ensure that farmers were aware of the financial supports that were made available through the financial grants and concessional loans and to gauge a feeling for the impact of the hail events. We have maintained that contact with Fruit Growers Victoria and the industry up in the Goulburn Valley. We are continuing to watch the impact of those trees in particular that were flooded for reduced productivity and some tree deaths and vine deaths as we have come into the summer, as well as the significant loss of last year's crop, which was so heavily impacted by the hail event, but then the damage to those trees has extended through this season as well. So we have kept in close contact with the industry and provided recovery services to help them in their recovery.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you. I am not sure if this one will be for Daniel or for Sam: the restoration of tracks within the Barmah. Last year many of the CFA brigades were very concerned about the condition of the tracks and were unwilling probably to send their tankers in if there were any fires, because of the condition of the tracks. What work has been done on the restoration involved?

Daniel McLAUGHLIN: I will speak to that one. Thank you for the question, Ms Lovell. After the flood events, as part of that rapid risk assessment we spoke about earlier, teams go in and assess the damage to the natural values but also the infrastructure and roading. It is prioritised in concerns of getting visitors back into the park and supporting that recovery from an economical and a tourism perspective but also the strategic access roads for fire, so those roads across the flood footprint have been assessed. As you would understand, some of that floodwater does remain in the environment for a long time, so even though it may come off the private land, the public land in particular retains floodwater right through to January and March and further down the river back into the winter months again. There have been delays in getting into some of those areas because of that and also delays in Barmah in particular because of the recent rainfall in the upper catchment since September, which caused 75 per cent of the park to go under water again this year. So there is not a significant flood onto private land, but the park is impacted where we cannot get in and do that work. In terms of fire response we do connect with the local CFA and groups to make sure that those strategic roads are accessible. That is not every road in the park, but that is the ones that make sure we can get people in and out and get people in to put the fire out.

Wendy LOVELL: So those tracks are all open and accessible for this fire season?

Daniel McLAUGHLIN: I will have to take it on notice in terms of the Barmah situation right now. As I said, it was inundated recently because of the upper catchment rainfall, but those strategic fire access roads, which are the primary roads, are the priority to have open for fire response. I do not know, Sam, if you had anything to add.

Carolyn JACKSON: I might just give a stat if I can. Just building on the rapid risk assessment team assessments we were talking about earlier, as a result of that work there were emergency works to restore access to 789 kilometres of public roads, including the strategic fire access network, so there were those emergency works. There were bigger impacts that were addressed through the broader recovery. But certainly there was that immediate focus and prioritisation of the strategic fire access network, and that was 789 kilometres.

Wendy LOVELL: Then the reopening of the park for camping and tourism – the locals were aware that assessment had been done of that. Particularly leading up to Easter, they had lost their whole summer season. They were very keen to get parts of that open. They were aware that assessments had been done that recommended reopening of parts of the park but were told the reports were sitting on desks in Melbourne. Why was there a delay if it was assessed as being available to be reopened?

Daniel McLAUGHLIN: I will have to take that on notice, Ms Lovell. I am not sure if there was a delay or why there was a delay, but I am happy to follow that up. But as I said, it is a priority for us to reopen those parks to support people coming back in. Some of that rehabilitation work is about the surface of the road but also the risks of tree fall and other infrastructure that may be damaged by the event.

Wendy LOVELL: Yes, and all those assessments had been done and they had been deemed okay.

Daniel McLAUGHLIN: I can look into the time lines.

Wendy LOVELL: The management of increased undergrowth that we will have from the floods – you know, we will have more grasses, we will have more sabi, more suckers, – what work has been done to address increased undergrowth and reduce the fire risk?

Daniel McLAUGHLIN: I might ask Sam. Did you want to talk on preparedness activities?

Sam QUIGLEY: If it relates to a fire risk, we manage them with a joint fuel management program as a part of our normal processes for the region, and it will go through the standard joint fuel management program nominated as a fuel treatment. It does need fuel accumulation and curing to obviously permit it to be burnt if we are going to use that method or undertake alternate methods, such as mechanical works, as relevant. That goes hand in glove with comment Mr McLaughlin made about roading works; it is about timing. So we will not be delivering them immediately, we will be monitoring it closely as we do with fire events as well. Regeneration and regrowth post fire is something that we actively monitor about re-accumulation and how we treat that at such scale, so we will work closely with Parks Victoria as we deliver the fuel management program.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you. Just one last one: Daniel, you mentioned that you are working closely with the Yorta Yorta. Who is actually speaking on behalf of the Yorta Yorta at the moment? Whom are you interacting with?

Daniel McLAUGHLIN: With the corporation – so Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation.

Wendy LOVELL: Yes, but who is the head of the corporation at the moment that you are talking to?

Daniel McLAUGHLIN: There is an active CEO at the moment. I can follow up the name if you like. But yes, there is governance in place with the Yorta Yorta nations.

Wendy LOVELL: If you could, get back to us with who that is.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Lovell. Mrs Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you, Chair. I want to hit on a topic that we have not discussed yet, and that is vegetation. With a flood, sometimes we see noxious weeds introduced into a fragile ecosystem. Have we seen that since the 2022 floods? Have you noticed any new species of vegetation within any of the forests?

Daniel McLAUGHLIN: Can you just go through the question again, Mrs Tyrrell, sorry?

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: You will see a flood occur, and it could transport new seeds of a noxious variety into an area that it is not natural to. Have you taken on any fieldwork to gather data to – I do not know what the word is I am looking for – see if there are any new species that could pose a risk to these environments?

Daniel McLAUGHLIN: Yes. The question I might hand back to Ms Jackson in a second, but that rapid assessment that occurs immediately after the flooding event looks at those areas and looks for where we need to go in and do that rapid treatment. Sometimes it will take a season before that germination might occur for those annuals that come up. But we would expect the introduction of some species, and the monitoring does occur.

Carolyn JACKSON: Thank you. As Mr McLaughlin has said, there are those rapid risk assessment teams, and they look at environmental monitoring as what part of what they do. I do not have any particular detail to share with you today, but we do have a weed control program anyway that is run from the department and through Parks Victoria. There are significant amounts of hectares every year that are treated for weeds, so if there were new weeds or weeds that had travelled a distance because of the floods, we would hope to be picking that up as part of that existing program. Post emergency events we do get additional funding to go out

and treat additional hectares, whether that is for weeds or predator pests. We sometimes see that post emergency events there is an increase in predator numbers, and so there is additional funding to undertake those control works as well.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: So we have not noticed any that could pose a real threat yet?

Carolyn JACKSON: I am not aware of any, I will just check with – no, we are not aware of any.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: All right, beautiful. It is just that prior to the floods over the past four years I have been going out and having a look at the Barmah Forest and other forests on both sides of the river, keeping an eye out, and I have noticed that they were absolutely riddled with Patterson's curse. So hopefully we will see that eradicated soon with these programs.

Melina BATH: Do you want to put that as a question?

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Is there a date on that? Also, sticking with the forests, the past several years I have noticed that with the man-managed flooding, we will say – the environmental flooding, the unnatural flooding – I have noticed patches of dead forest or dying forest. Since the 2022 floods has that increased, and are you addressing that issue?

Carolyn JACKSON: Thank you for the question. It might be something that our water and catchments area might need to speak to. They are the ones that oversee the environmental watering program. But I am not aware of any increase or change to impacts on forests as a result of flooding, whether that is man-made flooding or natural. I will just check with my colleagues, but we can take that on notice and see if there is anything we can provide.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Yes. I am talking more about the trees – the aged trees, the established, mature trees and the up-and-coming new trees. Is there a program in place for that to address that issue of dying vegetation now?

Daniel McLAUGHLIN: I can talk to it a little bit if you want, Ms Jackson. Yes, with catchment management authorities and the department's water and catchment division, we do seasonal watering proposals to look at where in the environment water is needed for ecological health so that flood events like this, as I said earlier, do get to the extremities of some of those wetlands that do not get water without a lot of introduction of environmental water. The seasonal watering proposals prioritise those important wetlands to ensure that water gets to them in the right frequency and duration. It is a challenge, but that is the program that is coordinated by the catchment management authorities.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. I am happy to cruise along for a little while, and you can come back to me.

The CHAIR: Come back – yes, no worries. Ms Watt.

Sheena WATT: Thank you, all. Thanks for being here. I have a number of questions, but perhaps I will start with some for Ms Jackson regarding the DEECA approach to the protection of sites of Aboriginal cultural places – I am thinking about ancestral burial sites, archaeological sites and heritage-listed assets – during the recovery process. Can you just talk to the committee a little bit about what some of the specific strategies in place are to involve and engage with Indigenous communities during these times?

Carolyn JACKSON: Yes, I can. Thank you for the question. I think, as I mentioned earlier, and Sara did also, the October 2022 floods certainly do provide examples of the need to more effectively involve traditional owners in emergency management. Over 5000 known Aboriginal cultural heritage sites were impacted by both the natural disaster, including the mass movement of water and sediment, and also by human actions as part of the result of the floods. The damage to culturally significant heritage sites includes the Barmah National Park, which is what we have talked about.

I am aware that in April of this year, 2023, the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council wrote to the emergency management commissioner with concerns about the impact of the emergency response and recovery to the October 2022 floods on Aboriginal cultural heritage. As part of that correspondence they raised concerns that traditional owners were not adequately consulted prior to flood response works being undertaken, including in areas where there is a registered Aboriginal party. And the letter also outlined the council's expectations that all

agencies involved in emergency management – so fire, flood, storm et cetera – initiate early, open and thorough engagement with relevant traditional owners and obtain free prior and informed consent before taking actions that might threaten the safety and integrity of their cultural sites and values.

Sheena WATT: Just before you go on, I just wanted to ask a follow-up question about that particular letter, but we will come back to that after.

Carolyn JACKSON: Okay, sure. I will talk about some of the work that we are doing I guess to improve things, but I think it is worth noting that there are some examples when engagement has been deliberately and effectively undertaken during response and recovery stages of bushfire emergency management, and they are things that we should and need to learn from. So, for example, DEECA has established a memorandum of understanding with the Gunditj Mirring traditional owner corporation whereby staff are on standby roster for cultural heritage adviser and firefighter roles, and this is embedded consideration of cultural heritage values during DEECA's response to fires on public land. And we have found that practice of embedding cultural heritage roles to be an effective mechanism for enabling timely engagement with traditional owners. So there have been examples of where we have worked better with traditional owners and certainly things –

Sheena WATT: More in the fire space, you mean?

Carolyn JACKSON: In the fire space, which we can talk to.

Sheena WATT: Yes, okay.

Carolyn JACKSON: There is work happening across government, so it is not just DEECA that is undertaking work to improve things in this space. There is work by Emergency Recovery Victoria, and they have released their *Strategy for Aboriginal Community-led Recovery*, which outlines the key areas of focus for the government as systems steward in planning, coordinating and supporting emergency recovery with strong and resilient Victorian Aboriginal communities. We have also – sorry, this is DEECA – invited the traditional owner corporation caucus, TOC Caucus, to nominate traditional owner representatives to be part of a panel in terms of bushfire risk management. That will look at the end-to-end framework for bushfire risk management. We are also working with traditional owners and with Emergency Management Victoria to look at adding traditional owners to the IMT arrangements, so when an incident management team is –

Sheena WATT: I was going to ask about where traditional owners are embedded in the system.

Carolyn JACKSON: DEECA runs something called the statewide caring for country partnership forum. That is a forum that is held with the caucus, in effect, twice a year, and we have certainly had conversations with the caucus about getting traditional owner representation onto those IMTs. At the moment we have access to data and the IMTs access that and use that to determine if there is cultural heritage there or whatever it might be, but actually getting traditional owner representation onto that IMT so that they can be involved in the decision-making, we are also looking to embed that as much as we possibly can going forward.

Sheena WATT: Can I go back to that 5000 number? That is a pretty significant number. How was that come to? Is that reporting from traditional owners to the department, or is that the department seeking that out? That is quite a significant number. I would like to understand more about how it is that we come to know that there are 5000 sites.

Carolyn JACKSON: I will need to take that on notice just in terms of whether it is from the data that we do have or a combination of traditional owners telling us as well, but I can certainly get that for you.

Sheena WATT: Further to that letter that you talked about from the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council, I would be very interested to see that, because as you mentioned it does outline a range of recommendations about how to improve traditional owner engagement in the recovery and the particular impacts of this flood event. Can you talk to us about the availability of that letter, or would we have to seek that from them?

Carolyn JACKSON: It was written to the emergency management commissioner not to DEECA, so it is probably best a question for the commissioner.

Sheena WATT: Okay. Perhaps that is one we will take and consider a little bit later. I did note actually in our terms of reference for this inquiry we have got the 2016 *Victorian Floodplain Management Strategy*, and

from the DEECA website it says that that is 100 per cent complete. I note that a really strong part of that is of course acknowledging the value of Aboriginal communities in planning and reporting with floods. Do you have any more comments on that, because it seems like you have ticked it off, and then that response there sort of says perhaps we have got some way to go when it comes to flood plain management, so I am keen to understand a little bit more?

Carolyn JACKSON: Sure. Flood plain management is not within my area, so it is a question that I would need to take on notice and follow-up with the relevant area of the department.

Sheena WATT: I am happy for that to be taken. It is a pretty central part of our terms of reference that I am keen to understand a little bit more of. We are needing, obviously as part of your response earlier, to improve the capacity building and integration of traditional owners in all of these works. That was quite stunning, the response you have just given us, but I am just wanting to understand how it is that the department is supporting traditional owner and traditional owner corporations apart from placements on various committees. Are there grants or supported funding? Talk to me a little bit about what does that landscape look like in terms of supporting traditional owners in this emergency response space, because there is a lot to be done.

Carolyn JACKSON: Thank you for the question. I will see if Sam wants to add anything once I have said some things.

Sheena WATT: With a particular focus on flooding.

Carolyn JACKSON: Sure. There is funding that the department provides to traditional owner groups. There are two aspects to it. There might be particular programs, for example, under a BushBank program, which is of no relevance to the floods but there is a traditional owner stream so there is funding that is available to traditional owners to undertake particular projects, so revegetation or caring for country. In terms of that core funding, if I can put it that way, we do fund liaison officers. They are, I guess, the main role, or the conduit, between the department and the traditional owner corporations. Those roles have been funded for a number of years, and we have just entered into further arrangements to fund them for a further four years. So there is that core funding that is provided to the TOCs. That is not specific for floods, but there is that core funding available to traditional owner groups from the department. I will see if Sam wants to comment on some of the emergency side.

Sam QUIGLEY: If I can just quickly, the department does provide funding to traditional owner corporations for enablement of cultural fire, and whilst we are here at a flood inquiry, the transferability of the skills that are being built and maintained by traditional owner corporations – they are entirely transferable from fire to flood. So there is a component of funding that is provided to registered Aboriginal parties and non-registered Aboriginal parties, both core funding and through a grants process, for enablement of cultural fire.

Sheena WATT: Any others? Otherwise I am happy to go to the next question, if I have got some more time.

The CHAIR: You have 2½ minutes.

Sheena WATT: Two minutes. Okay, great. You did talk about there being further opportunities for traditional owners to be involved in the response. Can you outline a little bit about where it is that traditional owners are currently involved when it comes to the emergency coordination and emergency response, particularly in those critical first couple of weeks?

Carolyn JACKSON: Sure. I think there is not a formal role at the moment, so at the moment –

Sheena WATT: That is kind of what I was looking to find: is there an actual –

Carolyn JACKSON: Yes, and that is what we are seeking to do, so those conversations that we are having with Emergency Management Victoria are about formalising arrangements. When we stand up an incident management team you would have an incident controller and you would have all of these set positions. We are looking at having a traditional owner representative as a formal arrangement. So if there was a fire or a flood or whatever it might be in a particular area, the intent would be that a traditional owner – obviously this is subject to agreement with traditional owners, but we are looking at having the relevant traditional owner group being able to be part of that incident management team. So they would be, I guess, in the thick of it, making decisions

and helping with those response activities, and then also providing the guidance around, 'There are areas of culturally significant sites ever here, so we need to think about how we do things a bit differently,' or if a levee is required, 'Put it here, not here,' for example, and you would have that real-time assistance. That is what we are seeking to do at the moment, and those are the conversations that are happening. At the moment it is more ad hoc. Certainly with Barmah as an example, using Yorta Yorta, there were conversations that were happening, but obviously with floods, DEECA staff were busy doing things and Yorta Yorta were the same, so there was not as much engagement and conversation during the flood event in real time as we could have had. That is what we are trying to address by setting up those incident management team arrangements.

Sam QUIGLEY: If I can, these arrangements are led by Emergency Management Victoria under the joint standard operating procedures for our preparedness and stand-up arrangements for class 1 and class 2 emergencies at incident control facilities. Whilst that does not stop us currently, and it has not stopped Forest Fire Management Victoria and the Country Fire Authority from embedding anyone within an incident management team that is required to effect a good response, I guess in a flooding event SES is the control agency and how they wish to establish their incident management team is part of their arrangements – when it is above and beyond, that is, what is prescribed. I guess what is important and what we as a sector have learned and which we are trying to – and we will – resolve as a collective emergency management sector is to better these arrangements for the preformed incident control facilities, and what active participation might look like to better inform our response into the future.

Sheena WATT: Lovely. I think that is my time.

The CHAIR: That is done. Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you very much. Thank you all for coming today. I appreciate it. I am just interested in the grants. You gave us some data earlier, but do you have any data that you could share just on the number of successful grants, the number ineligible, and just the value of that under the program?

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: I can provide that on notice, if that is okay.

Gaelle BROAD: That is fine. I am just interested too in the feedback. You mentioned you are open to feedback. With this, it was a new style of program with different tiers, which requires people to be in contact several times, at a time that is very difficult for them. Just with that, is that a model that other states have utilised? What do you look at in developing that grant program?

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: Yes. In terms of the tiered approach it was really to acknowledge that in this particular event there was a real need to assist with immediate needs that primary producers would have but also to kind of acknowledge the cash flow issue facing primary producers. So the idea behind really structuring it this way was around how we can make it as easy as possible to provide that up-front support to really commence the recovery activities that primary producers would need to undertake before then being able to access the second-tier amount, which is then showing that evidence of receipts and payments. Certainly we will be really keen to understand, after these kinds of programs are completely rolled out and finalised, whether that is a model that we would explore doing again, and certainly the feedback to date has been positive, although we do note there is some additional complexity to it. So again, it is really about how we get that balance right between, you know, the complexity that is required to make sure we are tailoring something and targeting it to those in need but at the same time really acknowledging where primary producers are coming at after these particular events. Often they are quite distressed and have, you know, concerns with cash flow and some of those other things, particularly if the actual farm or the enterprise has been impacted and they might not necessarily have immediate income that they would have otherwise been making.

Gaelle BROAD: That is right. I remember speaking with people – and they are displaced, they are away and they cannot get the works done readily because they have still got floodwater that sits there for weeks in some cases. So it is a very difficult program, to work that out.

I am interested in caravan parks as well. Now, I know that they were eligible for the small business grant program, which is separate to you guys, isn't it? It is kind of like a different area.

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: That is right, yes.

Gaelle BROAD: I guess they were, and this is perhaps feedback – and you mentioned that you looked at the Hansard from yesterday – not eligible for some assistance or only eligible for the \$50,000 grant, which for a small retailer is fine, but they were perhaps envious of the primary producers having a program that takes into account a different structure. So that may be something to consider. But just with the leases too – and this is perhaps more a question for you, I think – you touched on the 21-year leases. I guess just post floods, you know, they mentioned the need for long-term leases to be able to negotiate the finance required to help with the flood recovery. Is that something the department would consider – you know, renewing those leases more readily for flood-impacted caravan parks?

Carolyn JACKSON: Thank you for the question. I am aware that there were conversations or discussions about the lease, and we are supportive of committee-of-management proposals to negotiate a new lease with an incumbent tenant that is experiencing extreme hardship as a result of a natural disaster. And that includes support for committees of management to negotiate a new lease where more than 50 per cent of the lease term is remaining. So usually with leases, and they are 21-year leases generally, we will only look at renegotiating a lease when more than 50 per cent of the time has elapsed – so 11 or so years – but in cases of extreme hardship we are open to those conversations, where maybe only five years, for example, of the lease or eight years of the lease has elapsed, where there is that extreme hardship.

Gaelle BROAD: Okay. So that is committee management style. Does the same apply when it is on government property?

Carolyn JACKSON: Sorry. Committees of management occur on Crown land, so where there is Crown land we will put a committee of management over the top to manage that piece of Crown land. So if there is a caravan park on Crown land, it will be a committee of management that is in place as sort of the formal mechanism.

Gaelle BROAD: Yes. Okay. No, that is good. Yes. Hopefully that extreme situation maybe immediately after a disaster – it would be a huge help. I guess just going back to the grant programs, are there templates? If there was a flood event tomorrow, are there templates already prepared to, you know, go ahead with the next event? Because they seem to be getting a lot closer together.

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: Yes. It is a very good question. That is, if you like, one of the benefits of us establishing the supports under the disaster recovery funding arrangements with the Commonwealth. There are, if you like, off-the-shelf kind of products that are agreed between states and territories and the Commonwealth that are then sort of largely agreed in advance, so they can be turned on quite quickly. Certainly in this particular event having programs that were largely in existence already made it really a lot easier for us to kind of stand them up quite rapidly rather than designing them completely from scratch. We had some of that work already undertaken, and again, that is sort of one of the benefits of those arrangements. There will always be opportunities to make tweaks, though, to things as needed, and certainly in particular for the primary producer flood recovery grant of up to \$75,000 we did make a tweak to the eligibility to sort of broaden that out a little bit this year, and that was based again on experience and feedback we had had from previous events about farmers who could access it or could not. So we do make those small tweaks based on the feedback that we have after any given event and after any sort of program rollout. But certainly, the great benefit I think of the DRFA arrangements are that there are sort of agreed products in place already that we can turn on with the agreement of the Commonwealth government.

Gaelle BROAD: I have kind of worked in that space previously, and I guess the tiered and the different structure was fairly new. But obviously in rolling out these programs, they can be switched on or announced very quickly by a minister, but then the actual education of people on the ground is a whole other story. What does the department do to educate people – financial counsellors, Rural Financial Counselling Service? Can you share how you promote programs on the ground?

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: Yes, good question. Thank you. We do understand that one of the key things is actually getting the message out there and making it as easy as possible for impacted farmers to know where to go for advice or to apply for a grant. Particularly in those immediate days and weeks after an event, when distress levels are high, we do want to make sure that that is simple as possible. You mentioned the Rural Financial Counselling Service, which I think is a really core organisation that we fund and partner with and is often a sort of first port of call for primary producers who are impacted, because they might have an existing

relationship or have sought financial support previously. So being able to work with them – they have a really good understanding of the supports available but also the application form and all of that has certainly been something we have learned from previous events and has been really helpful. And then obviously, yes, communication is one of those key ones. We did work to put out as sort of clear and simple communications as we could to farmers during that time. Social media and kind of other channels were used as well, just looking to kind of make sure that the message was getting out there about the supports available but that it was not overly complex when people were sort of struggling who had just been impacted.

Gaelle BROAD: Just in terms of loans too – you mentioned the disaster recovery funding arrangements, but Victoria does not guarantee these concessional loans whereas other states do. Why has Victoria taken that position?

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: Does not guarantee it, as in?

Gaelle BROAD: The concessional loan programs for primary producers – in other states there is support, but not in Victoria. I guess I am interested in your stance or thoughts on – this is a concessional loan program which is to assist people who have just gone through a major disaster. Under responsible lending arrangements, it is a difficult position for a financier to do that. It is guaranteed by the government in other states, but in Victoria it is not. I guess because I cover Northern Victoria – there are a lot of residents that are on the border, so there are quite different programs being run in other states compared to Victoria. So why has Victoria taken that position?

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: I am happy to take that on notice if that is okay. But acknowledging the border community issue, our intent is to try and ensure alignment as best we can with states across the border so that that issue is managed. But I will have to take that question on notice in terms of the specific arrangements there.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you. Can I ask how long?

The CHAIR: You have got another minute.

Gaelle BROAD: What action did the department take to assist in the removal of water that was stagnant and there for long periods of time? Because there are mosquitoes. I know around Benjeroop and Kerang it is quite a significant issue. I went there, and there was still a lot of floodwater. What did the department do in that situation?

Carolyn JACKSON: I would have to take that on notice. I might see if Parks Victoria wants to comment on Crown land, but it is not something that sits within our respective areas. Obviously, we are also not responsible for recovery across the Victorian government – that is Emergency Recovery Victoria – but in terms of the work that Parks Victoria did, I will hand to Daniel.

Daniel McLAUGHLIN: Well, just quickly, as I understand there was work done while the incident teams were in place about residual water and standing water and how to manage that across private and public land. In some cases, where appropriate, it may have been pumped into other places. Given the scale of it, there was still standing water, and yes, mosquitoes are going to be an issue going forward. We are working with the Department of Health, as with DEECA, on preparedness for that issue, because of the standing water.

Gaelle BROAD: That is excellent. And when will the –

The CHAIR: You are just about done, Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Yes, nearly done? I have still got –

The CHAIR: Five seconds.

Gaelle BROAD: Okay. I was just interested in when the hydrological study will be ready for Lake Eppalock, because it was meant to be November, but it is nearly the end of –

Carolyn JACKSON: Again, that is the water and catchments area of the department. They have appeared previously, and the same for some of the other water questions, we are happy to take it on notice, and we can follow up with the water and catchments group.

Gaelle BROAD: That is fine, thanks.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Broad. Mr Ettershank.

David ETTERS HANK: Thank you. Thank you all for your appearance today – much appreciated. Ms Jackson, perhaps I could just start with your good self. I am trying to understand who is responsible for what, and we have had the pleasure of meeting with your colleagues from the water and catchments group. If we are looking at this – I will go back a step – would it be correct to say that your division is the sort of principal, responsible part of the department for understanding what climate change is going to mean for future flood events?

Carolyn JACKSON: No is the short answer, I am sorry. Part of my group is climate action – well, they have a longer title – so looking at the impacts of climate change. They do the whole of Victorian government policy work, and they are also responsible for mainstreaming the science into decision-making. They are not the ones that would take the data, for example, and then look at, well, what does this mean for a flood, or what should this mean for planning et cetera. That is the responsibility of the relevant areas, whether that is the Department of Transport and Planning for planning or other things. My area – we are certainly doing things like the release of a climate science report. The next one is due next year. That will provide the data for Victoria that we then seek to, I guess, mainstream across the government. There is lots of work that my team leads with those areas across government to build that awareness and make sure that they are building that into decision-making, but in terms of taking that information and implementing it, it is the responsibility of the relevant areas, depending on whether it is a water or a flood issue or a planning issue et cetera.

David ETTERS HANK: Okay. We have these flood plain management authorities that seem to sit in – it is almost more like a series of fiefdoms. If you were looking at taking, for example, mainstreaming that science, do you have an interaction with those flood plain management authorities? Because it seemed like when we spoke with the water and catchment group, they were much more about what is and what has already happened rather than looking over the horizon a little bit.

Carolyn JACKSON: We have a range of interactions. For example, there is a community of practice in the climate space that has, I think, from memory over 300 representatives across government that come together to talk about a range of issues. We also have had interactions with local governments in the past, with local councils, to talk to them about climate and disseminated information, but it is really about the development of the policy. For example, emissions reduction targets for government are something that we look at. We have also led the adaptation action plan development. So we are not responsible for those adaptation action plans; they are again the responsibility of the relevant areas. But in terms of the design of those, that is something that sits with us. We have interactions, but again we are not responsible for the implementation of the science and the implementation of addressing climate change in strategies or things like that. We developed up the climate change strategy, but then in terms of those flow-on strategies, that is not something that we lead or have a significant interaction on.

David ETTERS HANK: Okay. So at the risk of asking silly questions, if we have got a situation where we have got various flood plain management authorities all doing their own thing and making their own estimates as to what future climate change might mean, and we have also heard that we have got local government supplying a whole raft of – probably a bad choice of words – a whole range of policies relating to development on flood plains, often adjoining councils are incompatible in terms of how they do that. Where is the long-term coordination? Where does that sit? How is that addressed?

Carolyn JACKSON: Sure. What I can say is the climate science report that we do every five years – so there was one that was released in 2019 and there is one that is coming out next year – is where we get a range of data and information and we then downscale that to Victoria. So we will be looking at ‘what is happening with the climate and what does that mean.’ We cannot say there will be this flood on this day et cetera, but it shows the trends that are happening – that it is becoming drier, that there are more severe and more frequent emergency events et cetera. So in effect it is highly likely there will be more floods and more fires more often,

going forward. That data is the information that we prepare, and then that gives everyone that common baseline to use in the development of strategies. That is what we would then seek to mainstream across, so we would have conversations with local council or at least provide that information so that they have got that as a common foundation piece to then use going forward. If there are instances where councils are not necessarily working together, that would be something that Local Government Victoria, as an example, should be leading with their local councils. We provide the information, but it is then up to the responsible areas to implement that.

David ETTERS HANK: So there is no-one actually then coordinating and linking the decision-making processes of both the catchment authorities and local government as it stands?

Carolyn JACKSON: It is outside my area, so I would be guessing; I am not sure is the short answer, I guess. It is certainly not the responsibility of my area, that is not what we are there to do. But whether there are conversations between water and catchments, who oversee catchment management authorities, and Local Government Victoria, I could not say.

David ETTERS HANK: Could I ask you to take that on notice? I know it may not be your responsibility, but we are obviously getting towards a certain point in this process.

Carolyn JACKSON: Sure. Happy to follow up with the water and catchments group, which is part of the department. Local Government Victoria is not, so if they are doing something in particular in coordinating across local government areas, I could not necessarily know or be able to comment. But I can certainly follow up with our water and catchments group and see if they can comment on what they are doing with CMAs and others.

David ETTERS HANK: Okay. Thank you so much, I appreciate that. Most of my questions have been asked – sorry, there was one other. For Parks Vic, the farmers federation were somewhat critical in terms of the question of the extent and management of levees. Do you have data on the extent of levees that fall within Parks Vic’s jurisdiction?

Daniel McLAUGHLIN: I will answer some of the question, but then I might pass back to Ms Jackson in terms of other levee management, or Sam, if you have got that one. Parks Victoria do not manage levees for flood mitigation. Whilst they might be on public land, the management of levees and where they are placed in a preparedness sense is not the responsibility of Parks Victoria. Where emergency levees were placed during the flooding event, we were in consultation where we could, but an important thing about those is making sure they do not inhibit the ecological function of the flood plain either, if they are to stay in place. In terms of those rural levees that may be out there, or where people may have a sense that they are an active levee, if no-one is managing them, then we would not consider them a levee in that space and leave that to, as you mentioned, catchment management authorities or the local government in terms of where they should be in a preparedness sense. But I will see if my colleagues have got anything further to add on levees.

Carolyn JACKSON: No, nothing further to add.

David ETTERS HANK: Everyone is dodging the levees. Okay. Are there levees on Parks Victoria land?

Daniel McLAUGHLIN: As I said, it depends on how you categorise levees. Historically, yes, there have been levees, and they were placed there in some cases decades ago. We have a process where if someone wants to build a levee for protection of their private land, we can permit that to happen under relevant legislation. That would be theirs to maintain if that was the case. If it is the local government doing that, the same applies. We can facilitate that for them to maintain. We do not provide that protection in terms of management of levees.

David ETTERS HANK: I get that you do not provide the management of the levees. I am just wondering in terms of the land that you are legislatively responsible for or regulatory responsible for: do you know the extent of levees on that land?

Daniel McLAUGHLIN: I can take it on notice. As I understand it, there was an assessment done after previous flooding events on the extent of those rural levees that are largely unmanaged and a process to identify which ones would be appropriate. We would encourage all those considering levees to consult us as the land manager, as I said, in terms of that wetland and flood plain water movement, to make sure it does not inhibit

water flow to those important wetlands that need it. We would encourage them to be on the edge of the flood plain, where it is appropriate, for it to still allow the ecosystem to function.

David ETTERS HANK: Okay. Look, if you take it on notice, could you perhaps also respond at the same time then as to the sort of assessment processes that you are applying to those levees and what the future direction might look like, because clearly there seem to be some very disparate views as to what should happen to particularly all of these legacy structures that do impact on flow?

Carolyn JACKSON: Sorry.

David ETTERS HANK: Yes.

Carolyn JACKSON: I was just going to say again – and I am sorry to be sending things to my colleagues a fair bit – that the water and catchments group within DEECA, and I think you have heard from a couple of those representatives already, certainly have information on levees, and that is part of their responsibility. So we can follow it up. Some of the questions that you might have might be answered by Parks Victoria, but other aspects might be more appropriately covered by the water and catchments group within the department.

David ETTERS HANK: We are happy to get information from either or both. That would be great. That is mine.

The CHAIR: Done.

David ETTERS HANK: That is my time anyway.

The CHAIR: That is all your time done. Mrs Tyrrell has ceded her remaining time to Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you, and thank you, Mrs Tyrrell. This may be one to take on notice. When will the Echuca–Moama–Torrumbarry flood study be finalised and made public?

Carolyn JACKSON: Again, I am sorry. That is squarely within the water and catchments group of the department.

Melina BATH: Yes. That is fine.

Carolyn JACKSON: I will need to follow that up.

Melina BATH: Are you happy to take it on notice? Is that a nod?

Carolyn JACKSON: Yes, it is.

Melina BATH: Thank you. That is good. Nodding for Hansard. This is the same. These are some questions that we did not get to ask, so we are pushing them through you. Has the North Central Catchment Management Authority been given the funding allocation it needs to conduct an update to the flood data on the Campaspe valley?

Carolyn JACKSON: Again, CMAs are within water and catchments, so I will take that on notice.

Melina BATH: And when the work will start, thank you very much. You are happy on that one. In relation to the ag sector – so moving over to the very good people over here – in Seymour we had a farmer Richard Stecher, you may be aware, and his brother Nick, and they raised some points around the loss to their farm. They have multiple farms. They have 3000 hectares and 12 staff, and they lost \$2.4 million in crop and the like. They cannot insure for floods. They can only insure for hail damage. Richard said that – I am just looking at his transcript:

... I was only eligible for the most part for one grant to clean up all of those properties.

Why was that?

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: I am happy to take that one, thank you. Certainly the way in which we structure the grants that we have available under the DRFA are per business rather than per property.

Melina BATH: ABN, for example.

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: That is right. Certainly rather than being focused on each individual property it is more about the business. If on further exploration the farmer can really show that in essence those properties are run like different businesses, so there are a range of different things that would be considered in understanding that, then there is an open question about it, but fundamentally the starting principle is that it is based per business rather than per property.

Melina BATH: Taking that point, collectively there could be 12 different businesses all accumulating \$2.4 million worth of loss. That is a significant loss across the board and loss in terms of food security – you know, Victoria’s deficit of that level. I guess my question back to you is: is that something that you would reconsider looking at as a department?

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: Certainly, always open to feedback about how to make these things work easier or suit the needs that have been identified. I think the key thing for moving down that path would be being able to really understand what is a property, then. There could be some definitional issues that would need to be considered there, and there are probably some equity considerations as well. Our principle has always been we are really happy for feedback on what works and what does not in these particular instances.

Melina BATH: Emma Germano, a very passionate person, as you know, in her testimony said that many times farmers feel like they are the forgotten people in this – just putting that on the line. The next point from Richard was that the \$250,000 concessional loan, even though at a very low interest rate, missed the mark considering their turnover as a collective business:

We feel that loan should be probably higher and maybe based even on the cash rate.

In response to that, is that something the department could have input into?

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: Again, always certainly happy to consider these things. In terms of the amount of \$250,000 for concessional loans, because that was a question that has come up in a couple of instances as well, the starting point is again, to the point earlier, around that national consistency question, and \$250,000 available for concessional loans is the –

Melina BATH: Is the cap so far.

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: It is definitely the starting point and agreed position for the DRFA in relation to up to \$250,000. Again, the other consistency consideration is what other loans might be available to small businesses or others outside the farming sector as well. We always really welcome feedback on this particular question. But it is certainly something that we have been aware of, and our intent is really around how we ensure as best as practicable that national consistency question too.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much. In relation to the Shepparton bypass stage 1, it was put on the Minister King cull. It has been turned away, rejected, stopped. I want to understand specifically that loss of income or loss of agricultural output during those flood situations we saw in 2022. I am trying to quantify that as a financial quantity, but also what would it mean if there was a bypass, the stage 1 bypass?

Sarah-Jane McCORMACK: I am not sure that we would necessarily have that information. Certainly the economic assessment work that we have done has not necessarily isolated to that level the impact of different arrangements or roads or things – infrastructure.

Melina BATH: Do you have a loss? We heard that milk was, unfortunately, tipped down the drain because they could not access the market or processing. Do you have a quantum of that? It might be something you want to take on notice.

Dougal PURCELL: Yes, Ms Bath. We are able to provide our impact assessment for stock loss, fencing loss and hectares of crops at the local government level, so we can provide that for Shepparton.

Melina BATH: That would be really, really helpful. Fabulous, thank you. My last question – I have got a few more, but let us go to one more – is in relation to the environment.

Wendy LOVELL: Sorry, can we have that for each local government, not just for Shepparton.

Dougal PURCELL: We can provide that.

Melina BATH: There it is. It is in front of us, so that is wonderful. Thank you very much. Good pick-up, Ms Lovell. When we are fixing levees with cultural heritage overlays, what impediments does the department encounter, and how can that be resolved?

Carolyn JACKSON: Thank you for the question, Ms Bath. Again, levees are not something that we oversee, so it would be a question for water and catchments as the water area of the department. I am not sure, Daniel, if you have got anything to comment.

Melina BATH: When it is on, say, Crown land or national park and then you have got the cultural heritage, how does that play out?

Daniel McLAUGHLIN: Any recovery works or rehabilitation works need to follow the requirements of the *Aboriginal Heritage Act*, which include cultural heritage permits and cultural heritage management plans. If the cultural heritage was disturbed in the creation of that levee, it still needs to be considered in the rehabilitation, so the incident will still need to be compliant, and the land management, with the *Aboriginal Heritage Act* and those permits obtained if necessary. As I said earlier, with Sand Ridge Track in Barmah National Park we worked with the Yorta Yorta nation to get the cultural heritage permit for the clean-up.

Melina BATH: What is the time impost? Clearly these things need to be done quite often in haste, so how can that be expedited?

Daniel McLAUGHLIN: In the recovery or in the creation of?

Melina BATH: Probably it would be in the recovery in effect.

Daniel McLAUGHLIN: Given the quantity, as Ms Jackson mentioned – 5000 sites identified across that footprint – it is a prioritisation process of where to work first, but there are requirements of that legislation we need to follow.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Bath. I have a couple of minutes up my sleeve, but I just want to clarify one issue, largely because it came up yesterday, Ms Jackson, about the leasing of caravan parks. You mentioned that there was provision for a renegotiation before the 50 per cent mark of the lease in cases of extreme hardship. That means that leaseholders who were affected by the floods could ask for a renegotiation of that lease term even if they had not hit the 50 per cent mark, right?

Carolyn JACKSON: That is right. This is in relation to caravan parks on Crown land, and there are about 175 of them. Under the *Crown Land (Reserves) Act* a committee of management can grant a lease for a maximum term of up to 21 years, and there is approval from the minister that is required. Under the leasing policy, a new lease will not be entered into or considered until at least 50 per cent of the term of that existing lease has expired, so if you have got a 21-year lease, you have hit 11 years or 15 years and then there is the potential to renegotiate. My point before is that we are supportive in cases of extreme hardship, as you have said, where that lease term has not yet hit the 50 per cent – so two years, six years, whatever it might have been – that that lease could be renegotiated. The standing approach is you should have hit the 50 per cent, but in cases of extreme hardship that condition is waived in effect.

The CHAIR: In relation to that policy, the standard renegotiation after the expiration of the halfway point of the lease, would it be standard practice for those leases to be renegotiated from that point if there was an application to do so?

Carolyn JACKSON: It will depend, I think. I do not think I can give you a comment for everyone.

The CHAIR: Without going into specifics, in general terms what are some of the factors that would influence whether a renegotiation would take place or not?

Carolyn JACKSON: I would need to take it on notice for the specifics, but I think it would depend on the particular conditions. If there were some works that were required and the existing lessee could show that they needed a longer lease term, for example, to be able to get finance, that might be something that we would look favourably on in terms of extending the lease. I guess we are trying to balance certainty for the people that do

have a lease with also then making sure that there are processes that take place at the expiry of the lease term, but I can certainly come back to you with further information on that.

The CHAIR: Given we had evidence yesterday from the caravan park operators about the uncertainty they felt in the second half of their lease period, so the committee can be aware of the factors that go into making a decision and the relevant considerations that need to be taken into account, that would be very useful.

Carolyn JACKSON: Happy to provide that.

The CHAIR: That is all I had. Given we are just about at time, I thank you all for coming along today and participating in the hearing. You will receive a copy of the transcript shortly to review before its publication, and the committee will take a short break and resume at about 12:30.

Witnesses withdrew.