

TRANSCRIPT

SELECT COMMITTEE ON VICTORIA'S RECREATIONAL NATIVE BIRD HUNTING ARRANGEMENTS

Inquiry into Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements

Melbourne – Friday 16 June 2023

MEMBERS

Ryan Batchelor – Chair

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Jeff Bourman

Katherine Copsey

Bev McArthur

Evan Mulholland

Georgie Purcell

Sheena Watt

WITNESSES

Ms Lisa Palma, Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director, and

Ms Meg Butler, Head of External Relations, Wildlife Victoria.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the Inquiry into Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements. I will just read a short statement, then we will get you to introduce yourselves.

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For the Hansard record, can you please state your name and any organisation you are appearing on behalf of today.

Lisa PALMA: Sure. Lisa Palma, CEO of Wildlife Victoria.

Meg BUTLER: Meg Butler, Head of External Relations, Wildlife Victoria.

The CHAIR: I might invite you to make an opening statement, if you would like to do so – 5 or so minutes – then we will introduce ourselves and ask you a series of questions. Over to you.

Lisa PALMA: Sure. Wildlife Victoria's submission is based on evidence and insight associated with Wildlife Victoria's specific observations and experience in the context of our role in providing Victoria with a wildlife emergency response service for 35 years. Our relevant experience for this inquiry includes providing and operating an in-field veterinary triage facility for the opening week of duck-shooting season to assess and treat impacted waterbirds. It includes veterinary assessment and treatment of impacted waterbirds subsequent to that and for the duration of the season as they arise; substantive in-field experience responding to sick, injured and orphaned wildlife, including waterbirds; overseeing a statewide network of wildlife rescue volunteers; interfacing daily with the Victorian public on wildlife matters; and engaging with and interfacing with state government departments and agencies on wildlife matters at both the operational and strategic level. I can comment today on matters across that experience. Wildlife Victoria does not support the continuation of recreational native bird hunting in Victoria. Our concerns, I note, are across five aspects but, most importantly and significantly, the primary one is wildlife welfare. Wildlife Victoria has evidence of native waterbirds left in field alive with life-threatening injuries and not collected by shooters. This includes threatened species, non-game species and other waterbirds. All native waterbirds that presented alive to our veterinarians for the 2023 duck-shooting season opening needed to be euthanised on welfare grounds, and we were unable to save any lives.

Secondly, compliance and enforcement capability: so given the geographic scale of Victoria's wetlands, with shooting on both public and private land, we contend it is near impossible for the GMA to monitor all of the wetlands where duck shooting takes place, particularly where shooters are very few in number and widely dispersed, which is what we have seen the last couple of years, and given wetland topography. Wildlife Victoria in the field does continue to see non-compliance with duck shooting regulations, impacting welfare; for the 2023 duck shooting season we provided the GMA with veterinary evidence related to 83 native waterbirds.

Thirdly, the impost and impact on Wildlife Victoria and our volunteers. This spans cost, both direct cost and indirect cost, of responding to an annual duck hunting season; people impacts, spanning mental health, fatigue and lost productivity; service impacts associated with the diversion of scarce resources out of home region; pressure in meeting communication and information demands of stakeholders in media; and wildlife welfare

impacts, and I will reiterate that is our primary concern, given our organisation purpose is improving wildlife welfare and managing community expectations.

Fourthly, community sentiment. Wildlife Victoria statistics show us that the Victorian public genuinely care about our wildlife and our native waterbirds, and increasingly so. We are seeing an increase in calls into our emergency response service of 15 per cent per annum, year on year, and close to 110,000 calls a year. The case volume originating from regional Victorians seeking help for wildlife is now close to 40 per cent of our total case volume, up from 25 per cent of total cases 10 years ago. We have seen a 185 per cent increase in case volume from Victorians seeking help for ducks across the last five years, and finally a 202 per cent growth in case volume from regional Victorians seeking help for ducks across the last five years.

And finally and fifthly, the pending Victorian legislative framework with regards to animal care and protection. We note that new animal care and protection legislation is in train to replace the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act*. These new laws introduce the concept of sentience, specifically that animals, including our native ducks, have the capacity to feel, perceive their environment and experience pain. Shooting native waterbirds – killing them and wounding them – we contend is adverse to the intent of this legislation. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I might ask members of the committee to introduce themselves. I think I am up to starting at this end.

Katherine COPSEY: Katherine Copsey, Member for Southern Metropolitan.

Georgie PURCELL: Georgie Purcell, Northern Victoria.

Michael GALEA: Michael Galea, South-Eastern Metropolitan.

Melina BATH: Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

Jeff BOURMAN: Jeff Bourman, Eastern Victoria Region.

Bev McARTHUR: Bev McArthur, Western Victoria region.

The CHAIR: I am Ryan Batchelor from the Southern Metropolitan Region and Chair of the committee, and I get to go first, just because. You have been operating for 35 years as an organisation. Are things getting better or worse, in your opinion?

Lisa PALMA: Worse – worse for wildlife holistically across the state. We see three key areas most impacting our native wildlife across all species, and that is climate change increasing severity of floods, bushfires and extreme weather events. In fact Wildlife Victoria's busiest day in the organisation's history was two Octobers ago, where we had close to 1000 calls in a 24-hour period from the Victorian public based on a storm in Melbourne. Secondly, we see, with population growth, urbanisation and also habitat fragmentation and destruction. Certainly every single day we are seeing a large number also of our wildlife hit on roads.

The CHAIR: And for native birds, in particular?

Lisa PALMA: It is the same trend for native birds. So again when we look at the case volume of native birds reported into our emergency response service, it absolutely echoes those trends.

The CHAIR: You obviously run a service, I suppose, during the first five days of the season – that is correct – where you check waterbird injuries. Can you talk us through a little bit about the nature of those injuries and what you are seeing from the on-the-ground work that you are doing at the opening of the season?

Lisa PALMA: Yes, sure. So the opening of the season, the first thing I would say, is pretty quiet from our perspective in terms of humans out shooting, but nevertheless we are still seeing –

The CHAIR: Sorry, are you saying this year that was the case?

Lisa PALMA: Yes, and the previous year as well. Despite that, we are still seeing a sizable number of waterbirds brought into our veterinary triage facility for assessment. This year we had across the first five days 22 waterbirds that were still alive when they were brought in. We also saw threatened species – so blue-winged

shovelers, hardheads and a freckled duck – that were deceased on arrival but on veterinary assessment and X-ray were also wounded. We also saw in total around 73 birds across the first five days. On examination of those birds – so what happens is the vets assess them and they X-ray them to determine a cause of death. Any that are alive of course we try and save. But of those that were brought in across that period, 67 per cent of the 73 definitively had a cause of death by gunshot wound – so they were birds that had been left in field that were brought into our triage unit. In terms of the wounds, and I give a couple of examples in the submission, there is evidence of shotgun pellets. It is typically broken bones, entry wounds, things like that – but a lot of fractures.

The CHAIR: How many of them were threatened species?

Lisa PALMA: I will just make sure I get the number absolutely right: we had five blue-winged shovelers, two hardheads and one freckled.

The CHAIR: And that is of the 73 in the first five days?

Lisa PALMA: Yes.

The CHAIR: What happens with the rest of the season in terms of monitoring of injuries to threatened species on the wetlands?

Lisa PALMA: We would like to be there every day, but we cannot, given resource constraints. Again, we are responding at this time of year to around 400 calls a day from Victorians seeking help for wildlife right across the state. What we do is make our vets available if rescuers are in field and find birds that need assessment. Post the opening of the season we in fact saw another – and I will just make sure I get the number exactly right for you – 13 birds that our vets X-rayed, which were brought in from various wetlands, all with gunshot wounds.

The CHAIR: In the time you and your organisation were out in the field did you see any evidence of birds being dumped or hidden to avoid bag limits?

Lisa PALMA: Yes, we did. We did not physically observe it. If I could explain how things work on the wetlands: our role is like an in-field hospital, so we have veterinarians and other operational staff there. What we were assessing were birds that were brought to us. There was a blue-winged shoveler that had been stuffed into a tree hollow that had been shot and banded, and on examination and X-ray from the vets it was found to have died of gunshot wounds.

The CHAIR: Do these instances get reported to the GMA or anyone else when you find them? And then what happens as a result of that?

Lisa PALMA: Yes, absolutely. It is very, very important to us that we keep good records, and we provide them to the GMA. What happened on the first day of opening was I met with both the Victoria Police leader and the GMA leader in field. They were shown through our veterinary triage tent and had a chat to the vets. Then at the end of every day I provided a summary report to the GMA of our findings, and then at the end of the first five days a very comprehensive and detailed veterinary report, including multiple X-rays.

The CHAIR: We had a bit of a discussion earlier today about minimum standards for hunters in terms of skill to try and reduce wounding rates. Do you have any views on what the minimum standards for skilled hunters would require to achieve a reduction in wounding rates?

Lisa PALMA: I cannot really comment on that, not being a hunter myself nor participating in observing the activity in field, in wetlands in the water, but it would be our expectation from a welfare perspective that we should be absolutely avoiding animals dying slowly of gunshot wounds.

The CHAIR: So you would be in favour of things like retrieval being required – those sorts of practices.

Lisa PALMA: Absolutely, yes.

The CHAIR: We also heard evidence about the types of environments that make retrieval more difficult. In your experience are there any types of environments in different types of wetlands where retrieval is more difficult?

Lisa PALMA: Being out on the wetlands, you are out in the bush. There is long grass, there are lots of trees and there is scrub. It is in the bush, and the landscape of the wetlands is quite vast, so the ability for us to see every single bird that might need help is probably limited and based on the ability of rescuers to find them, I would suspect.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you, Chair. Thank you very much for being here this afternoon. I want to pick up on the 73 ducks. In your submission you said all waterbirds had been left abandoned in the field in contravention of duck hunting regulations. How can you verify that all of those 73 were, to quote you, 'left abandoned' in the field?

Lisa PALMA: They were rescued by wildlife rescuers in field and brought to us.

Melina BATH: Right. Now, I am just looking up the GMA website and 'How to humanely dispatch a downed duck'. In that, it says, 'Swatter loads'. If a duck has been wounded and it ends up on the water – the lake or the swamp – it says:

Swatter loads are shotshells with small –
holes. And it says:

Firing a swatter load is the quickest way to dispatch a downed –
injured –

duck.

If your rescuers are out on the lake and swim out in front of somebody who is about to shoot that duck for the second time, clearly they are not allowed to do that and they will stop that. The hunter will stop and will not fire if there is a danger of endangering human life. So a rescuer could hypothetically go into that water situation and remove that duck when the hunter could actually dispatch it humanely and quickly as per the fact sheet from the GMA.

Lisa PALMA: Ms Bath, I probably need to reiterate our role in field. We do not have Wildlife Victoria volunteer rescuers. They are Coalition Against Duck Shooting rescuers. Our Wildlife Victoria role is performing the veterinary services in the field.

Melina BATH: Yes, sure. But you are saying that you believe that the 73 ducks were all taken and left abandoned, so you are taking that from another source, not Wildlife Victoria.

Lisa PALMA: Yes, we are. And I would like to point out that the time that the birds came into our vets for assessment is also quite telling on what has been left and what has not. I would like to point out to the committee I was asked what it was like in field. We started work around 4:30 or 5 o'clock in the morning, and our vets were still in field until, one night, after 9 pm assessing birds, which is well after all of the shooters had left.

Melina BATH: Next question: on the 88 birds that were left on the Treasury Place steps as a display or demonstration, what do you know about those birds that were dumped on the Premier's office front steps, and what is your position or commentary around the fact that almost 50 per cent of those birds were not carrying any shot? There are two questions: what do you know about them, and what do you say about them?

Lisa PALMA: Well, those would all have been birds that came from rescuers through our veterinary facility for assessment and then for disposal by the GMA. In terms of gunshot wounds in bodies, that would be correct. However, I point out that our vets will still determine gunshot wounds as cause of death where an animal has had a bullet go in one side and out the other. It is purely a function of what the veterinarians say.

Melina BATH: Okay. Thank you. My next line of questioning is: in your annual report you speak to the Victorian government contributing just shy of half a million dollars towards running costs and you thank the government for this, but you are also claiming in this report that the use of this service, your service, over duck season is at no cost to the Victorian public. So does the government pay that almost half million dollars or not?

Lisa PALMA: That is an excellent question and thank you for asking it. The government provides us with that \$500,000 to run our emergency service hotline, which is our call centre. The Victorian government does not fund the Wildlife Victoria veterinary service. The vets' salaries, the infrastructure, the medications and the X-ray units are all paid for by us.

Melina BATH: Thank you. And in this report again you talk about \$7 million in costings. I thought your annual spending was circa \$3 million.

Lisa PALMA: No. It is going to be a lot more than that, I think you will find. Our annual spend is comprised of operational spend and program spend. We launched our travelling veterinary service plus our volunteer services improvement program and drew down our substantial reserves to pay for both of those things. Wildlife Victoria over the next few years will be operating at a deficit of probably \$3 million as we continue to invest in wildlife welfare in the state.

Melina BATH: Thank you. On to another part of your submission, you reference heavily a 2012 report, *Out for a Duck*, in which approximately 500 people were interviewed. I find this report absolutely gobsmacking in its outrageous assumptions and assertions of what is stated and then the assertions drawn. You are a scientific body and you have got veterinary people working here, but even the RSPCA said, 'Oh, don't worry about that. We just worry about wounding,' basically today. It is unclear why you are referencing a very outdated report that I think is highly sceptical.

Lisa PALMA: We, in our report, reference publicly available data, but I think the statistics that I have articulated in my opening statement around Wildlife Victoria's calls from the public about ducks, the growth in our service and the number of calls we are taking per annum are indicative of the fact that Victorians do care about ducks.

Melina BATH: But in your report you are referencing a very outdated piece of information with wild assertions in there.

Lisa PALMA: Wildlife Victoria's role is wildlife welfare, and we used data that was available publicly in our submission, together with proprietary data. Our primary focus here is to talk about wildlife welfare and what we saw in the field.

Melina BATH: I understand that, but when you reference something, you should probably check out the validity or the value of it in terms of providing information to the committee.

Lisa PALMA: Again, that data has been published, it is publicly available and it was utilised by us, and other organisations, as supplementary information in compiling a comprehensive report.

Melina BATH: Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Time. Ms Purcell.

Georgie PURCELL: Thanks, Chair. Thank you for appearing today and for your great work out on the wetlands each year. You have obviously spoken about how Wildlife Victoria is a statewide service in terms of the rescue and call-out work that you do. Can you talk us through the impact that having a duck-shooting season has on your resources for those five days and the way that it affects other native animals in the state?

Lisa PALMA: Yes. Sure. The two vet units that we deployed to the wetlands are our two vet units. One is based in West Gippsland in Warragul and the other one in the outer east of Melbourne. During that period we were on the wetlands we were unable to provide any wildlife veterinary coverage to at least 35 wildlife shelters, and even on a conservative estimate that is 350 native animals in care, plus our vets were not able to respond to any rescue cases. So the deployment of these very scarce and precious resources really did have an impact.

Georgie PURCELL: And I guess I would personally describe those events that you are attending as avoidable, given that it is a legislated recreational season. Can you describe the – I guess, would you say that your resources are being taken away from an avoidable wildlife situation and it means you miss unavoidable things such as road strike?

Lisa PALMA: Yes, absolutely. And what is particularly challenging for Wildlife Victoria and our volunteers when our focus is welfare is – you know, we are day in and day out, 24/7, responding to wildlife in need of help because of a range of factors. For our own people, our statewide network of volunteers, it is deeply distressing to be in a position where there is deliberate harming of wildlife that is sanctioned by government. So it is very, very, very challenging, when your purpose is wildlife rescue, to be responding to wildlife that have been deliberately shot. And it does have an impact, you know – mental health, fatigue, a whole range of factors.

Georgie PURCELL: Last year you reported losing a generation of swans due to duck shooting. Can you explain what you mean by this and provide further details?

Lisa PALMA: Yes, sure. So last year we had reports of swans at Kerang – Lake Bael Bael near Kerang – that had left their nests. Unfortunately, given the time of year, all of those nests had eggs in them. The swans left the nests in fright once they heard the gunshots go off, rendering those eggs unviable, so that is what we mean by losing an entire generation of swans at that location. We were able to save one very small swan that subsequently went into care and was released, but nothing else.

Georgie PURCELL: Thank you. And could you describe some of the injuries that wounded birds that come into the veterinary triage unit experience?

Lisa PALMA: It is typically quite nasty fractures, shattered bones. They are bleeding. Their wings are unable to be used because bones have been broken. It is mostly pretty nasty breaks and wounds – a lot of blood.

Georgie PURCELL: And we heard earlier witnesses say that they believe wounded birds could go on to live a perfectly happy and healthy life after wounding. What would your response to that be?

Lisa PALMA: I would absolutely disagree with that. From our perspective, focusing on wildlife welfare, it is quality of life. So, yes, it may be the case that a bird who is injured is unable to use a wing, but it cannot fly. So being a bird, it is very important to your quality of life to be able to exercise the ability to fly and the like.

Georgie PURCELL: And based on some of the injuries that you have seen come through the vet tent, do you believe the majority of those birds would have eventually succumbed to their injuries?

Lisa PALMA: Absolutely.

Georgie PURCELL: Thank you. You touched on this just before, but I am keen to know in more detail about the impact that witnessing this cruelty has on your veterinary staff. We talk a lot in the animal protection movement about compassion fatigue, particularly on veterinary professionals. What impact does this have on your staff when the cruelty is deliberate rather than unintentional?

Lisa PALMA: Awful.

Georgie PURCELL: Yes.

Lisa PALMA: Yes. It is incredibly heart-wrenching, when your role is to protect life and to look after it, to have to euthanise otherwise healthy animals.

Georgie PURCELL: Thank you. How long has Wildlife Victoria been providing veterinary service on the wetlands for?

Lisa PALMA: Only two to three years because we did not have veterinarians on staff prior. Now we do, and obviously we need to respond.

Georgie PURCELL: Yes. Over that two- to three-year period has your observation been, despite birds continuing to come into the treatment tent, that there is less and less participation in duck shooting in that time?

Lisa PALMA: Yes.

Georgie PURCELL: What are the reasons for that in your opinion?

Lisa PALMA: Well, look, all of our statistics show that Victorians care more and more about wildlife. We see it every day. There are a range of surveys out there that show that the majority of the Victorian public do

not support duck shooting. Particularly after the 2019–20 bushfires we saw the fate of wildlife and the role of wildlife in our ecosystem very much on the minds of the public, and also the effects of climate change and its impact on wildlife are becoming more and more obvious and prevalent. Again, I am not a shooter – I am not involved – but my observation is that there are very, very few out there.

Georgie PURCELL: Yes. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, both. Thank you for joining us. Ms Palma, the submission, on page 15, says that you yourself actually heard gunshots –

Lisa PALMA: Yes.

Michael GALEA: ahead of the 8 am start on 30 April. Were any GMA officers present at this site at the time?

Lisa PALMA: No.

Michael GALEA: No. Can you describe where you heard them from? Were they absolutely on the wetlands and could not have been anywhere else?

Lisa PALMA: Yes, absolutely on the wetlands. Between 7:30 and 7:40 am I was walking to our veterinary triage unit, and the gunshots were very clearly occurring on the water.

Michael GALEA: Aside from obviously those birds that are shot, is there any insight that you can provide the committee on the reactions of birds who are not shot but who nevertheless hear gunshots: how do they react, and other wildlife too?

Lisa PALMA: Well, they take off in fright, like we saw with the swans. Again, we do not have any evidence on wildlife populations outside waterbirds. We have not seen it because we have been focusing on waterbirds.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. On page 38 of your submission, and I appreciate Ms Purcell asked a similar question, you reference that outer metropolitan areas and West Gippsland were not served as a result for five days. Is that correct? Did that include the south-eastern suburbs?

Lisa PALMA: Yes, absolutely.

Michael GALEA: Across those areas, in total, how many animals within that sort of typical five-day time frame would not have been attended to as a result of your resources being allocated elsewhere?

Lisa PALMA: Yes, sure. What our vets do in the normal course of business is two things: they both respond as first responders to sick, injured and orphaned wildlife in field that need assistance – that is often euthanasia, sadly – and they also do patient management of wildlife in care with wildlife rehabilitators licensed by the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action. Typically a workload over a week would encompass 35 wildlife shelters, and in those visits our vets can see multiple animals. Look, I would estimate probably animals in care that did not have ongoing patient management – if we average, which is very conservative, around 10 animals per wildlife shelter – would therefore be around 350. In terms of rescue case volume, I would need to come back to the committee on that because I do not have that at hand, just on what the normal rescue case volume is, and specifically the percentage our vets would normally attend to.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. I would appreciate that. And possibly as well, on notice, if you are able to find data on any call-outs that you did receive that you could not attend to, that would be informative as well.

Meg BUTLER: In the south-eastern region or –

Michael GALEA: In totality.

Meg BUTLER: Yes, okay.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. I note on page 27 you have outlined a graph which shows increases over time of call-outs as well, specifically relating to ducks. Firstly, would it be possible to get the data points off that on notice as well?

Lisa PALMA: Yes.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. And this is not merely restricted to duck hunting, is it? This is duck cases in totality.

Lisa PALMA: Ducks only. Yes, it is ducks in total.

Michael GALEA: And as a rough proportion, are any of these connected with duck hunting as well? Do you receive call-outs too, or is it just that you attend to duck hunting injuries when you are on site?

Lisa PALMA: We attend duck-shooting injuries when we are onsite. All of our records for duck shooting specifically we submit to the GMA, and this is ducks in total.

Meg BUTLER: Yes, so those will be included in their statistics as well. And ducks that are reported to us outside of our in-field time but during duck season will be recorded in our data as well.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. We have also heard throughout the inquiry comparisons with other jurisdictions, including New South Wales, where there are reports of duck culls including hunters for that purpose, including on rice fields. Do you have a position or any commentary on that?

Lisa PALMA: Yes, look, Wildlife Victoria's position is that we should be protecting and preserving our native wildlife, so no, we do not support culls of native wildlife in any form.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. And on page 17 you refer to your belief that there is an inherent conflict of interest in the role of the Game Management Authority. Could you outline what your concerns are and what role you think the GMA should play if duck hunting does continue?

Lisa PALMA: Yes. We have a respectful relationship with the GMA and a collaborative relationship in-field. I think for us, given that the data that the GMA is using is so impactful in making a decision on an annual duck-hunting season, we would love to see more transparency over the research that is utilised and the process around that. That is really where that is coming from there.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. I do not believe I have any further questions, so thank you.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair and ladies. Now, you state in your submission that all waterbirds, alive or deceased, are X-rayed to determine cause of death and for evidentiary purposes. Can you disclose how many birds were presented to you in 2023 that had in fact not been shot?

Lisa PALMA: I will take that on notice and come back to you. We will provide quite a detailed breakdown and all our vet reports if that is useful for the committee.

Bev McARTHUR: That is so good. Now, I imagine you are interested in all wildlife. You have just said that?

Lisa PALMA: Yes.

Bev McARTHUR: Yes. So I am presuming you support the concept of biodiversity zones on roadsides.

Lisa PALMA: Yes.

Bev McARTHUR: Yes. I know you go round in your two HiLux vehicles putting crosses on dead kangaroos and wombats. Should we ban all cars?

Lisa PALMA: No, we should not ban all cars. I think the issue here is driver awareness and being aware that our wildlife are prevalent and move around at dusk and dawn, particularly ground-dwelling marsupials, and the public knowing what to do if they hit wildlife, and that is to call for help.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, I am not sure that our wildlife know about looking right, left and right again when they try and cross the road or get tangled up in the wire rope barriers. So is that feasible?

Lisa PALMA: What is feasible is that we raise public awareness about our wildlife living in our community and, as Victorians, we respect our wildlife, and if they are injured, if someone does hit them, someone is calling for help and we will respond.

Bev McARTHUR: Now, correct me if I am wrong – I might have misheard. I thought I heard you say you will be \$3 million in the red going forward?

Meg BUTLER: No, that is not what we said.

Bev McARTHUR: What did you say about your budgetary situation?

Lisa PALMA: What we said is \$500,000 is provided by the Victorian government to partly fund our call centre, and we raise all the rest of our funds from the public in the form of donations. We are embarking on a series of programs to uplift the service we provide Victoria based on donations received since 2019. So yes, we will be reporting a sizeable deficit in our financials this year.

Bev McARTHUR: In the vicinity of \$3 million. Was that what you said?

Lisa PALMA: I cannot tell you at the moment, Mrs McArthur –

Bev McARTHUR: But you just said it before.

Lisa PALMA: because we are still finalising our end-of-year accounts with our financial accountant.

Bev McARTHUR: Don't worry, Hansard will have recorded it. Can we have any credibility in your organisation if you are operating into the red?

Lisa PALMA: We are not in the red.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, you are. We have just heard you are going to be in the red.

Lisa PALMA: No, I think there is a difference between balance sheet and operating profit.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, no, there is.

The CHAIR: Order! Mrs McArthur, can you let the witness answer the question.

Lisa PALMA: When one looks at the financial health of an organisation, one looks at the balance sheet. We have over \$13 million in assets, Mrs McArthur, in cash, and that has been kindly donated by the Victorian public for us to use for the purpose of improving the welfare of wildlife in Victoria.

Bev McARTHUR: So why with \$13 million in assets do the taxpayers of Victoria need to contribute one cent to your organisation?

Lisa PALMA: I think we probably need to consider the role of Wildlife Victoria and our hardworking volunteers, over 1000 of whom are not paid, in performing a public service for Victoria. In fact we would welcome more funding from the Victorian government so we can do more.

Bev McARTHUR: Oh, you want more money from the taxpayer?

Lisa PALMA: Yes.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, that seems extraordinary, when you have got all these assets and when the taxpayers of Victoria are already footing the bill for what is going on in this state to the tune of millions every day just in interest alone, that you think you have got a right to ask for more money.

Lisa PALMA: Our purpose here today is to provide information to the select committee on our observations during duck-shooting season. Wildlife Victoria has a five-year strategy that we are busy delivering on, which involves utilisation of our reserves to do exactly that, and I will probably leave it there.

Bev McARTHUR: So duck shooting happens for five weeks of the year. For the 47 other weeks of the year what are you doing in relation to ducks?

Lisa PALMA: Rescuing them, as the statistics show.

Bev McARTHUR: But there is only duck shooting for five weeks of the year. The other 47 weeks?

Lisa PALMA: Our native waterbirds and ducks, like every other species, are impacted by a range of factors. They get sick, injured, orphaned and shot all through the year.

Bev McARTHUR: I am glad you have got to that, because you did mention, and we have heard expert witnesses tell us, that the greatest threat to native bird populations is urbanisation, habitat reduction and fires. How many birds were lost in the fires?

Lisa PALMA: I do not have that information, I am sorry.

Bev McARTHUR: But you are the expert organisation, aren't you, with \$13 million in assets?

Lisa PALMA: Wildlife Victoria provides a rescue service. We are not an ecological organisation.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, how many birds did you rescue in the fire season?

Lisa PALMA: I will have to come back to the select committee on that.

Bev McARTHUR: Any?

Lisa PALMA: I do not know, Mrs McArthur. I do not have the information at hand.

Bev McARTHUR: You are very familiar with what you do with ducks, but there were birds destroyed in the fire season. Surely you would know if you rescued any.

Lisa PALMA: Yes, we would, and I do not have the data at hand.

Bev McARTHUR: Okay. Well, we will take it on notice. I notice in your report, on page 35, that you quote an eight-year-old as some sort of expert evidence:

Ducks are our nature, and it's bad if we kill our nature, they might become extinct.
Is it feasible to be quoting an eight-year-old for evidence?

Lisa PALMA: The Victorian public are comprised of people of all ages, and we interface with them every single day. We certainly see our young people becoming increasingly concerned about the fate of our wildlife.

Bev McARTHUR: How many calls do you get about other wildlife?

Lisa PALMA: 110,000 per annum.

Bev McARTHUR: So how many about ducks?

Lisa PALMA: Ducks: we have the statistics in there. It is around 5000, I think, Meg. But again, my purpose here and the expert information we can provide is what we see during the opening of duck shooting season.

Bev McARTHUR: We just want to make sure it is credible and viable.

Lisa PALMA: Certainly.

The CHAIR: Your time has expired, Mrs McArthur. Ms Copsey.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you, Chair. I want to explore a little bit more around your observations of the capability of the GMA, noting your comments before that you have a respectful relationship. However, with the scale of operation of the duck shooting season and based on your observations of the difficulty of supplying field units, what would you say generally about the ability of the GMA to police hunting regulations during the season?

Lisa PALMA: It would be incredibly difficult. Given the size of the state, the number of wetlands, the fact that shooting occurs both on public and private property and the wide dispersal of shooters as well, I think it would be incredibly difficult for the GMA to be able to cover the entire state to supervise shooter behaviour wherever they are.

Katherine COPSEY: Do you think it is possible across the entire state, should duck hunting continue, for those infractions to be avoided and for the loss of threatened species to be avoided?

Lisa PALMA: I think it is impossible. For it to be possible would require, I suggest, a substantive increase in the number of authorised officers at the GMA so that there is one authorised officer for every shooter.

Katherine COPSEY: In relation to the material that you provide back to the GMA, to your knowledge, are there often successful prosecutions around, for example, the taking of unauthorised species?

Lisa PALMA: The GMA do not engage with us once they receive our veterinary information. They use that for evidence. I do not think so. We see very few prosecutions.

Katherine COPSEY: I want to go to, in particular, page 12 of your submission, which is a confronting image of the blue-winged shoveler you were referring to earlier, I think, from April of this year. Can you describe the circumstances in which that duck came into Wildlife Victoria's assessment?

Lisa PALMA: Yes. That duck was found by a volunteer rescuer, and it was collected, photographed and transported to our vets. The vets then laid the animal out and systematically began assessing it and X-rayed it.

Katherine COPSEY: My observation from looking at that – as a layperson, I acknowledge – is that you can see that that duck, which is a threatened species and which is not on the list for shooting this year, has not only been shot but has had its breast meat removed, presumably, it says, in your opinion, for harvest, for it to be consumed. The carcass of that duck was located in a tree hollow. It was presumably hidden because it is a species that is not supposed to be shot, and had it been taken out in a bag it could have resulted in a charge were anyone there to pick it up. Have you seen that sort of thing in prior seasons? We know it is happening this season. It is the concealment of threatened species, I would say.

Lisa PALMA: Look, that would probably be a question more to pose to the Coalition Against Duck Shooting, because we are responding to birds at the veterinary triage tent. I would have to go back through our records from last year to see, but I do not know the answer to that.

Katherine COPSEY: That certainly, in my view, does not look like an accidental targeting of a species that was not supposed to be harvested this year.

Lisa PALMA: Yes. I would agree with that.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Bourman.

Jeff BOURMAN: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for presenting. Is Wildlife Victoria a statutory authority or a government-recognised emergency service?

Lisa PALMA: We are not a statutory authority. We are a not-for-profit organisation governed by a board of directors. We are a member of the DEECA wildlife emergency support network, which operates once the state emergency management plan is activated.

Jeff BOURMAN: The reason I ask is that when I saw the Warragul van out near the hunting expo, first I thought it was a GMA vehicle and then a Parks Victoria vehicle, but as I got closer I noticed it had 'Wildlife Victoria' on it. Are they deliberately styled along a governmental template? Because if I did not know any better and was not involved in this, I would have thought it was an actual authority.

Lisa PALMA: Not really. We are, like other first-responder, volunteer-based organisations, responding to wildlife emergencies every single day. Others respond to other types of emergencies. And our colour scheme is just a function of our brand palette actually.

Jeff BOURMAN: So you used the term 'first responder'. SES uses a lot of volunteers. Do you see yourself on the same level as the SES?

Lisa PALMA: Yes, we do. And just like the SES, Wildlife Victoria is a member of the Emergency Services Foundation, which is comprised of all of the first responders across the state, and that is what our people are doing.

Jeff BOURMAN: I am not sure how to take that. Anyway, we will move on. Once a duck is rescued, presumably it is rehabilitated. How many ducks were rehabilitated in 2023 after being rescued during hunting season?

Lisa PALMA: Zero.

Jeff BOURMAN: How many in 2022?

Lisa PALMA: Zero. One, actually, sorry. There was a swan. It was not a duck.

Jeff BOURMAN: But it was not a game bird.

Lisa PALMA: No.

Jeff BOURMAN: Okay. So presumably you left – the royal 'you', not necessarily you personally – 35 wildlife shelters unattended for all those days for a zero result. 'Unserviced' is probably a better way of putting it.

Lisa PALMA: So all of our wildlife shelters, who are Wildlife Victoria volunteers, have an expectation that we as an organisation will respond to human-inflicted wildlife impacts. And all were very understanding of the fact that we needed to do that, but it was a very difficult decision for us to make.

Jeff BOURMAN: I will take that as a yes. Once dead ducks come into your possession, what protocols do you use to protect the chain of evidence? Because there seem to be a lot of accusations flying around about illegally shot birds, and then there is stuff done to the GMA. I may have a little experience in the chain of evidence myself. To not just make a stunt out of something but to actually try for a conviction, there needs to be a chain of evidence. What does Wildlife Victoria do for that chain of evidence?

Lisa PALMA: So the people that are collecting evidence are veterinarians, who are subject to a professional code and standards. They are also subject to the *Veterinary Practice Act* and regulations. The GMA met with our vets in field and discussed with our vets what information they would need in the form of vet reports. So as the CEO I certainly trust the expert expertise of the specialists on staff.

Jeff BOURMAN: I would not have a problem with them being experts in physiology of animals and such, but a chain of evidence is not that. If you want – again, the royal 'you'; I am unfortunately having to say 'you' – to get a conviction – because there are all sorts of accusations flying around about this, that and the other. If you want a conviction, they find a bit of evidence, a dead or a dying duck, there is a process or a chain of evidence for it to be admissible further down the track. I guess what I am saying is: is this more about proving a point than trying to get a conviction?

Lisa PALMA: No, it is not. And what Wildlife Victoria does experience every year is alleged wildlife cruelty against a range of species. And we are very rigorous in our veterinary notes and X-rays and record keeping because it is not uncommon for us to be asked by the Office of the Conservation Regulator for our

records when investigating wildlife cruelty. It is something that unfortunately does occur on a fairly regular basis for us.

Jeff BOURMAN: That actually has nothing to do with the chain of evidence, but I will move on. I have got limited time. Let us move on to the swans – I have not heard this one – that left the nest, which is obviously a tragedy. Does anyone have any evidence at all that it was a reaction to hunters shooting whatever that they left and left those eggs unattended, or is it just supposition?

Lisa PALMA: So the swans very clearly left based on gunshot. Swans will not leave nests unattended unless they are frightened off, is really the crux of the issue.

Jeff BOURMAN: It is funny you say that, because one gun club I went to years ago – there was a water thing right next to where the clay target was going. And there was a swan there, and it did not move an inch. I do not know if it was deaf or what. But whilst it is a tragedy, there was no actual evidence. This has been brought up as something that has happened, but you cannot point at this, this and this and swear on oath that this is what caused it. We do not know what goes through a brain. I accept to a degree they are sentient, but did it get scared off by shots? Some do, some do not. It just seems to be a story that is being bandied around without any real evidence other than it happened.

Lisa PALMA: I would find it highly unlikely for so many swans to abandon nests at the same time in the normal course of business, and it was very clear there was substantive gunshot in the area at the time.

Jeff BOURMAN: Okay. Thank you. I will not flog a dead horse. You said you heard gunshots in Buloke before shooting time. I have heard from someone – and I am going to end up having to talk to the GMA about this – that was at Buloke at opening at that time, and they and the GMA and the police did not hear a thing. I am going to question the GMA and the police. I do not know how I will question the police – because of different officers. Also, when we were at Connemara I was told there was shooting opening early, and we were there. Is any regard given to the fact that shooting is a regular thing in country areas, whether it is at birds, whether it is at ducks or whether it is a can. You may have heard a shot, but do you know where it came from with actual certainty, or was it just a shot you heard whilst you were at Buloke?

Lisa PALMA: No, I did not hear the shot at Buloke; I heard it at Lake Wooroonook. There was no-one there other than duck shooters.

Jeff BOURMAN: Okay. I think I am now done.

The CHAIR: One last question from me: at the start you mentioned the new animal welfare laws being developed. The POCTA does not apply to duck hunting. Do you think the new laws should.

Lisa PALMA: Absolutely. Yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thanks very much. Do you want more?

Katherine COPSEY: Sorry, I have one more that I forgot. Apologies. When we were speaking about the GMA I was interested in your observations post Pegasus around whether you have seen evidence of any uplift in capability following that fairly damning report on the ability of the GMA to fulfil its statutory role.

Lisa PALMA: No. Again, the crux of our comment was around compliance and enforcement capability, and we have not observed substantive manpower or substantive increases in GMA authorised officers. We engaged with two GMA officers for the whole five days despite the wetlands we were at being quite extensive.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. Thank you very much for coming today and for your evidence. You drew the shortest straw of the slots – 4 o'clock on a Friday – so we really appreciate that. You will receive a copy of the transcript for your review about a week before it is published. That is it for the day.

Committee adjourned.