

# **ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land**

Mansfield — 20 October 2016

### Members

Ms Bronwyn Halfpenny — Chair

Mr Tim McCurdy — Deputy Chair

Mr Simon Ramsay

Mr Tim Richardson

Mr Bill Tilley

Ms Vicki Ward

Mr Daniel Young

### Staff

Executive officer: Dr Christopher Gribbin

### Witness

Mr Robert Rosicka.

**The ACTING CHAIR (Ms Ward)** — Welcome, Robert. Before we get started, I would like to acknowledge that the mayor of Mansfield, Paul Sladdin, has been here all morning, and I thank him very much for his support and interest in this inquiry.

Welcome to the Environment, Natural Resources and Regional Development Committee's public hearing in relation to the inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land. The evidence today is being recorded. All evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat these things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Robert, have you got a presentation that you would like to give us?

**Mr ROSICKA** — I do have a short presentation. Basically I am a hunter, but I am also a conservation pest control accredited person, so it is within that realm. Barring some miraculous technological breakthrough, pest animals will be with us for the foreseeable future. The question is: how do we keep their numbers reduced to acceptable levels to minimise the damage on the environment and reduce the impact these animals have on our biodiversity and primary production? I think most rational people would agree that whatever solution you come up with must be humane, safe and cost effective, involve all stakeholders and conform to best practice.

To conserve an invasive introduced species is not in the best interests of native flora or fauna and is an ecological time bomb for natural biodiversity and water quality. It will, however, serve a few individual clubs and organisations to further their hunting agenda. If an introduced species is deemed to be invasive — and the definition is quite clear on this — it should be classed as a pest animal and able to be hunted at all times of the year.

Tasmania and Victoria are the only two states where deer are not classed as pest animals. Why? All pest animals should be able to be hunted in areas currently approved for any hunting — and that is any hunting at all. Deer will always be here. There is no way they can all be culled or hunted. There are just too many of them. There is too much area that they are in. A possible exception to this could be hog deer. Changing the status to pest animal will mean less restrictions and more animals harvested, which should be the goal. This applies to all invasive pest animals, not just deer. This may not sit well with some organisations like the Game Management Authority or the Australian Deer Association and that sort of thing. But as I have already stated, there is little chance of deer going extinct through hunting pressure alone.

Parks Victoria have run controlled culling programs using accredited volunteer shooters, mainly from the sporting shooters association but from other organisations also. Safety to the public is a priority. Utilising this volunteer pool of shooters is done at little cost to parks as each shooter is unpaid and looks after their own fuel and food costs. Shooters undergo intensive training in pest management and are tested for accuracy, humane shot placement ethics, suitability and safety, just to name a few subjects. It would appear that parks prefer this system of volunteers, but I get the impression that a lack of funding reduces the frequency of programs and the number of programs they can organise.

Parks are facing increased workload with less funding and fewer staff. I am also informed that weekend overtime is an issue to get authorised for parks staff. This can be a problem as most of the volunteer shooters work during the week. Remember, volunteers do this for the conservation value and love of the great outdoors. A weekend operation could cost a volunteer upwards of \$150 out of his own pocket. Parks could or should encourage adjoining landowners to make use of the volunteer shooters that they deal with to help with feral pest control where a problem exists that farmers cannot deal with or are reluctant to let strangers onto their property. There is a shooting organisation that has just started a Farmer Assist program in Victoria. This can also be beneficial.

Two more unhelpful regulations that need looking at are the use of sound moderators and D-class licences for the experienced and rigorously trained volunteers. The D-class licences are currently available to professional shooters, and it is no stretch to put the hardworking volunteers into the class of professional shooter. The only real difference is one gets paid, one does not, essentially.

On the use of class 4 scent-trailing hounds to hunt deer, although very effective, no trial has yet been undertaken by parks to ascertain if this activity will comply to the best practice requirements of animal control. There are many comments regarding ground shooting as ineffective. The number of shooters in Victoria and visitors that hunt here for an animal would be effective by sheer weight of numbers, so there needs to be a change to the status of deer, the opening up of more areas and the removal of ridiculous regulations protecting invasive pests. There also need to be other control methods found for invasive pest animals; shooting alone will never be the ultimate answer, but at the moment it is the only answer that is cost-effective, selective and humane when carried out by competent and disciplined shooters.

As for the trials by parks up into the High Country, Bogong and Falls, because of the difficult and heavily timbered terrain and the high population numbers, even F-A-S-T or fast shooters would struggle out of the helicopters. I also have a quote by a parks ranger on the Falls Creek-Bogong shoot that is concerning.

I have a disclaimer here. I am a member of the sporting shooters association. I am accredited for the CPM programs. I have been on numerous culls and have helped a friend, whose property backs onto a forest, deal with invasive pests, including deer. The opinions I express are basically just mine. They are not to do with any club. I have never purchased a game licence, and I only hunt feral and invasive pests where allowed by regulation and law. Thank you very much.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — Thank you. I have just got one question. Can you outline for us or give us a bit more information about the conservation and pest management program to which you are a member?

**Mr ROSICKA** — I believe it was started about 18 years ago. It was a joint initiative between the sporting shooters association and Parks Victoria. I think they just made a submission and they thought they would trial it out in a few areas. From what I can tell and what I can read it has been successful. We are vetted pretty thoroughly.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — How do you get accredited?

**Mr ROSICKA** — We have to undertake a course which goes through animal welfare, safety, bushcraft. A sporting shooters member is attached to a firing range, a shooting range. We do train and we do keep up and make sure that all our guns go exactly where we want them. We are also trained to know when to shoot and when not to shoot. I mean, the animal might be there, but it might not be safe. It might be on a ridge line et cetera. We know when we can and cannot shoot. We do not want to wound anything.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — Do you think the way the program works is effective?

**Mr ROSICKA** — I think it is, but I just get the feeling, as I have said, that there is something with parks. Whether it is to do with regulation or whether it is to do with money or whether it is to do with individual rangers or someone who makes the decision for that particular area, maybe they might not want to run a program, I do not know, but there is certainly something.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — How are you taught to maintain the safety of other park users when you are out shooting?

**Mr ROSICKA** — When we do an operation the area is closed off. As far as practicable every single road leading into that area has to be closed off, which takes a lot of manpower in some cases. Generally I think parks go through. They do a good job. They will go through, they will put up signs and they will close it off well before. Then they will do a trip through, make sure there is no-one there.

**Mr RAMSAY** — Thank you, and I do acknowledge the work that the shooters association and field and game do in relation to managing some wetlands and creating environmental pods, if you like, so we know they do a lot of good work in that realm. I just want to get back to the argument about game and pests. I must say I get a bit confused, because it has been said to us by different stakeholders that if you change the game species to pests, it then creates some problems — with the current legislation that is — in relation to, one, the private landholder has certain responsibilities then to rid their properties of the pests, whether they be deer or anything else, and two, that it restricts I think the timing of being able to use the

current state forest and national park, which I do not think you can use at all in relation to hunting pests. Can I seek clarification on what your knowledge is of the impact of moving, say, sambar deer from game species to pest in relation to what then would be the responsibilities between the two, the owners of the land and the hunters?

**Mr ROSICKA** — If they were classified as a pest, which they should be, I think there probably needs to be some sort of a regulation or a dispensation on the farmer themselves. You have actually heard farmers talk. Some farmers do all they can to control invasive pests, but quite often they work — I used to work on a farm — 12, 14, 16, 18 hours a day. I mean, where are they going to find the time? They cannot. Now if there is a requirement on them legally after that 16 or 18 hours work to then go and control pest animals, I mean it is not really realistic, is it? So there has to be some sort of regulation or some sort of dispensation there for them, but by the same token there are some farmers who would be quite happy to see the animals on their land, and I know this personally from experience. Some farmers are quite happy to see invasive pests on their land, and they are probably more the ones that are the problem.

**Mr RAMSAY** — I cannot imagine who would want to see wild dogs, thousands of deer — —

**Mr ROSICKA** — Wild dogs we are not talking about here, not wild dogs.

**Mr RAMSAY** — Daniel might follow this up, but from a hunting point of view what are the restrictions or what is the impact of moving a species from game to pest in relation to them hunting on public lands?

**Mr ROSICKA** — There would need to be a change of one ridiculous piece of regulation. Deer hunters can shoot in sections of the Alpine National Park, and I think duck hunters can shoot in certain reserves and swamps. While they are there they can only shoot duck. They can trip over foxes, rabbits, pigs, cats, whatever. They are not allowed to shoot them. The same goes with the Alpine National Park. In the Alpine National Park they can shoot deer, but again they can trip over all these other ones and they are not allowed to legally shoot them. It is reckoned that there is I think 50 or 60 000 or something hunters that have got a game stamp actively targeting deer, or was it 40 000 or something like that?

**Mr RAMSAY** — I do not know.

**Mr ROSICKA** — That is compared to the amount of hunters there are, like me, who just do not target them because we do not have a game stamp. We have got no interest in them. If they were a pest animal, then they would be fair game and the numbers would reduce. Obviously you do not want 200 000, 300 000, 400 000 people scrambling through the countryside discharging firearms willy-nilly all over the place, but the amount of land that has been shut up, changed to national park, roads closed, where people used to shoot anyway — I mean, what difference would it make, especially when we are talking about public land, Crown land, parks land? In winter nobody goes through a lot of these places anyway because the tracks are closed. It may be something that they could open up in certain areas for the hunters.

**Mr RAMSAY** — Can I just get this straight: so ideally would it be a time frame season where you can actually shoot any pest in a locality?

**Mr ROSICKA** — In relation to deer, I honestly do not know why we are trying to conserve something that is basically a rabbit. Look at the damage that they are doing. I was saying before, on the trial up there, the concerning comment from a ranger that they do not actually do anything at all until there is major damage done to an area. They cannot do anything. They are breeding, especially sambar and fallow, out of control. The numbers taken are huge, and that is only the numbers that are reported. We came here yesterday. We camped at Blue Range, 15 kilometres away, and there is actually a sambar deer head in the picnic ground. So there is a problem with rogue hunters obviously. There is obviously a big problem with these deer.

**Mr TILLEY** — Robert, like you, I am a member of the SSAA and field and game principally for the eradication of vermin and those things. In short, I do not want to get hung up on a label, but I have got to thank you for what you are saying about this in principle. I am just challenged a little bit. The committee

may have some findings and recommendations to potentially grow industry, potentially grow tourism, potentially grow the economy. It is a bit hard; I do not know how we would go selling a pest meat industry if you classify your hunt.

**Mr ROSICKA** — Look, it is a tough one but those numbers do not actually lie when you look at the amount of deer that are there. If nothing is done about them, they are going to end up worse than a rabbit — and they are a lot bigger than a rabbit; you have seen the damage done to the cars.

**Mr TILLEY** — I think the committee probably has to take some more technical advice on the existing legislation and the effect of reclassifying the species as a pest. I absolutely value your contribution and the work that you do with the programs. Keep it going.

**Mr ROSICKA** — Thank you.

**Mr YOUNG** — I will follow up on what Mr Ramsay said. One thing that has been discussed with the pest versus game argument — and you touched on it yourself as far as the regulations and what farmers have to do when they have a pest — they are actually obliged to do certain things. You spoke about working on farms; after doing 16 hours you do not want to have to go and do pest control. By way of having a game species under a game licence, there is none of that impost on the farmer. What are your comments on that?

**Mr ROSICKA** — That is just a regulation.

**Mr YOUNG** — But the game licence is actually providing that exemption for farmers like you said we should have. It is already there.

**Mr ROSICKA** — It is just a regulation. All that is doing is exempting the farmer. Surely you could come up with another regulation that exempted the farmer if it was a pest species and he could not control it. If he cannot control the problem for whatever reason — it may be health, it may be hours worked, it may be that he does not want to do it — there still should be the onus there that something is done on that property, especially if it is harbouring whatever pest animal.

**Mr YOUNG** — So we have a regulation that is doing a job, and you want to remove that and replace it with a regulation to do the same job?

**Mr ROSICKA** — By removing the regulation that conserves the problem. You need to remove the regulation that conserves the problem.

**Mr YOUNG** — Just on that, can you explain how it is conserving it?

**Mr ROSICKA** — The whole game authority, how it is conserving it?

**Mr YOUNG** — Yes.

**Mr ROSICKA** — It reduces the amount of places that they can be hunted. I think there are time frames for certain organisations for where they can hunt, such as hounds. They have only got a short window of hunting. That is probably necessary. But whether or not the time frames that the areas are available to shoot are realistic, maybe they can be expanded — that sort of thing.

**Mr YOUNG** — That is nothing to do with them being a pest though; that is to do with the land management. Anywhere where there is a time frame is somewhere that is a national park, so that the time frame — —

**Mr ROSICKA** — If you make them a pest animal, I can shoot them wherever I am legally allowed to go in and shoot them.

**Mr YOUNG** — Which is less places than a game species.

**Mr ROSICKA** — Perhaps that regulation needs to be looked at, because there are more people that are out there. They are just not shooting deer.

**Mr YOUNG** — So how are those people who are not shooting deer being stopped from shooting deer?

**Mr ROSICKA** — I guess it just depends on whether or not they want to go through the process of buying the game stamp, because it may be you do not want to outlay that cost because you might only go out once a year.

**Mr YOUNG** — It is a one-page form and it is about \$50.

**Mr ROSICKA** — Yes. But you may only go out once a year, if at all. So why do it?

**Mr YOUNG** — That money goes into supporting the GMA, which is the regulating body, and another big factor you have talked about in your submission and mentioned today is poachers and rogue hunters doing the wrong thing. They are the regulating body that manages that. They are funded by game licences. So by removing that income you are going to have a regulatory body that has less capacity to actually impact on rogue hunters and poachers, which is another one of your major concerns.

**Mr ROSICKA** — Who is the policeman for that sort of thing? Is it the Game Management Authority?

**Mr YOUNG** — The GMA has a big role in that, yes.

**Mr ROSICKA** — So the farmer that was just speaking, when he had poachers or whatever on his property, he rings them?

**Mr YOUNG** — He can. If you have got poachers on your property, you might want to ring the police. They also have got a regulatory role.

**Mr ROSICKA** — From speaking to the few farmers that I have spoken to, they do not even ring the police because they know that 3, 4, 5, 6 hours later a car might come out. So if the GMA were actually actively policing it, they would have people in the field, and I have never seen anyone in the field — never. I do a lot of four-wheel driving, not only shooting. I go fishing, I go four-wheel driving. I have never ever seen anyone from the GMA. I think I have seen one police officer in probably 20 years out bush and I have seen maybe three rangers.

**Mr YOUNG** — So can I get this straight: if we nut out all of the restrictions that are apparently provided by a game status, if we change all the rules in national parks to allow a hunting element, not prohibited by game status — same on state game reserves and all those other places — and we take out all those restrictions, we come back to your only problem with a game species status is signing a one-page form and paying a fee. Is that true?

**Mr ROSICKA** — Yes and no. Is it a protection? Is what you are doing now protecting them?

**Mr YOUNG** — That is what the committee has been investigating.

**Mr ROSICKA** — I am not saying you; I am saying the government. Is what you are doing right now working? Is it working?

**Mr YOUNG** — That is something that the committee has been investigating.

**Mr ROSICKA** — And that is basically what I am saying, it is not working.

**Mr YOUNG** — We have had a heap of things identified as potential ways that they are being protected. But if they were removed, and that has no bearing on whether they are a game or a pest species, do you still have an issue with it?

**Mr ROSICKA** — Can you repeat that for me, please?

**Mr YOUNG** — We have had a heap of things identified as ways that they possibly are being protected: you cannot hunt them in some national parks, you cannot hunt them here, you cannot hunt them there, you cannot hunt them on state game reserves sometimes. If they were all removed, does it then matter if it is a pest or a game species?

**Mr ROSICKA** — Possibly not, but it still comes back to that argument: why do you want to conserve something that is in plague proportions?

**Mr YOUNG** — It was very hypothetical. But hypothetically, if we remove all these things that conserve them and the only thing left is whether they are a game or a pest species by name, is there an issue?

**Mr ROSICKA** — If we have to get a game stamp to go out and shoot in public forests or whatever, that is fine.

**Mr RAMSAY** — Can I just ask: is it the ideology that if it is a game species, there will be some protection within the species — because it is seen as game and not pest — when it is not a free-for-all total eradication? So the recreational shooters will say, ‘We want to keep it game species because we still want a few deer to be running around so we can shoot them whenever we want and use it as a sort of sport and rec purpose’.

**Mr ROSICKA** — It is only vested clubs, I think. It is only clubs that are specifically that game animal. There are quite a few. My own organisation has a branch for deer hunting and deerstalking as well. It is not a gentleman’s sport, but to me it has that sort of mentality. It is like an elite thing.

**Mr RAMSAY** — But the council tell us they are raking in \$48 million from the — —

**Mr ROSICKA** — And that will not stop.

**Ms DIXON** — Fourteen million dollars.

**Mr RAMSAY** — Fourteen million dollars, sorry.

**Mr ROSICKA** — That will not stop. As a matter of fact it might actually increase.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — Thank you very much, Robert. Thank you for taking so much time out of your schedule to come and talk to us and have input. We really appreciate it.

**Committee adjourned.**