

# ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 5 September 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

### Witnesses

Mr Greg Hyams, chief executive officer, and

Mr Simon Toop, director, game, Game Management Authority.

**The CHAIR** — This is the first public hearing for this inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land. I would like to welcome Mr Greg Hyams, the CEO of the Game Management Authority, and Mr Simon Toop, also from the Game Management Authority. Thank you for coming here this morning.

I will just go through a few formalities before we start with your presentation. The committee is hearing evidence today in relation to the inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land. The evidence is being recorded. Once the transcript is available, you will be sent copies to check for accuracy prior to it becoming public. As you will probably be aware, all evidence taken today is subject to parliamentary privilege. However, if the same comments are made outside this hearing they may not be subject to the same parliamentary privilege — although in terms of this inquiry we would probably expect that there should not be a lot of concern in that area.

I think the secretariat have told you that you have about 45 minutes, 10 minutes to make a short presentation to us, and then we would like to ask you a lot of questions. Over to you, thanks, Mr Hyams.

**Mr HYAMS** — Thank you for the invitation to appear. If I can, I will just briefly start with outlining a bit of a synopsis of what the GMA is and what we do, just to help the committee understand. The GMA was established on 1 July 2014 as an independent statutory authority. It took the regulatory functions out of what was then the Department of Environment and Primary Industries Game Victoria area to separate policy from regulatory activities. Under our legislation the objectives of the GMA are to promote sustainable and responsible game hunting in Victoria. We have a skills-based board of up to nine members. Currently the chairman's role is being advertised; we have an acting chair at the moment.

We are responsible for the regulation of game hunting in Victoria, effectively. We are also able under our legislation to provide advice to relevant ministers on game hunting, game management issues and a variety of other aspects associated with those. Our focus is on compliance, education, research, training and licensing, sustainable resource stocks, management of problem game and overarching responsible hunting.

The GMA does not manage lands and, despite our name, we do not manage game nor do we manage game hunting. We also do not undertake culls or engage others to do so, which is an interesting issue, given your terms of reference. First and foremost we are a regulator and we work closely with the relevant departments and agencies such as Victoria Police, Parks Victoria, DEDJTR and DELWP to ensure that game hunting is conducted in a safe, responsible and sustainable manner.

In terms of the respective responsibilities, our minister, the Minister for Agriculture, is the lead minister responsible for game policy. The Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change has joint responsibility for certain decisions under the Wildlife Act. The Game Management Authority is the primary regulator for game hunting and responsible for operational policy, licensing, education, research and enforcement. The Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources is responsible for pest and game animal policy. The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning is responsible for statewide wildlife and land management policy and manages public land outside the parks estate. Parks Victoria manages the parks estate on behalf of DELWP. Victoria Police are responsible for the licensing, possession, use and trade in firearms and controlled weapons.

The area we play in is highly complex and regulated. There is a lot of policy codified in the legislation and regulations that surround game hunting. A few pieces of legislation and regulation are the Game Management Authority Act 2014, the Wildlife Act 1975, the Wildlife (Game) Regulations 2012, the Wildlife Regulations 2013, the Wildlife (State Game Reserve) Regulations 2004, the National Parks Act 1975, the Crown Land (Reserves) Act 1978, the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986 and the Firearms Act 1996.

So that is the area we play in; and what we focus on in terms of management of game hunting is the licensing and testing to ensure compliance and sustainability. We do some testing to ensure minimum identification, skills and knowledge of the laws for people who wish to hunt. We provide advice on seasons to avoid periods of vulnerability, to capitalise on periods of biological surplus and to avoid

competing with peak-user periods, which is the sort of social aspect of hunting. We look at sustainable bag limits and harvest, which is informed by research and the overall resource sharing.

Some statistics might be of interest. There is a total of approximately 48 000 licensed game hunters in Victoria. There are currently four commercial game bird farms in existence. There are approximately 32 000 licensed deer hunters, and 4000 endorsed to hunt deer with hounds. There are 2500 registered hounds in Victoria. There are approximately 26 000 duck hunters and approximately 29 000 quail hunters in Victoria.

We have a fairly diverse group of stakeholders: from the hunting community, conservation groups, animal welfare groups, public land users, obviously the Minister for Agriculture and relevant ministers, private landowners, farmers, other government agencies — some of which I have already mentioned — and the range of industries that rely on game hunting across Victoria.

That is a sort of potted history and what we do.

**The CHAIR** — Okay, thanks for that. Perhaps I will just start on one of the things you said — that the main role is the regulation of game hunting. In the act it also talks about having the function to monitor, conduct, research and analyse the environmental, social and economic impacts of game hunting and game management. Understanding that you are a fairly new organisation, has there been much work done in that area?

**Mr HYAMS** — We have got a couple of research projects; one underway at the moment is in relation to hog deer DNA research, which is being conducted in conjunction with a university PhD student and is looking at aspects of Victoria's hog deer population. We have one of the largest viable populations of hog deer outside of their native habitat, so it is looking at the make-up of that. That has two aspects to it: one is to understand just where our hog deer came from, what their current make-up is; and the other one is the potential for that to lead to a database of deer DNA which will assist us in the future in terms of our compliance and enforcement work.

**Mr TILLEY** — Can I ask on that — I know this is a work in progress — just what are some of the preliminary findings at this stage of the research?

**Mr HYAMS** — Perhaps Simon, who is more the subject matter expert, might answer that one.

**Mr TOOP** — Yes. So it is early days in the PhD study. We are at about a year of collection and have had a look at 500 samples so far. The early indications are that the species has hybridised with chital deer. The extent of the hybridisation we are not completely sure on yet, but the phenotypic expression — the outward appearance of the animal — is that it is a hog deer. We are not quite sure where that hybridisation may have occurred, whether it was with a dozen animals that were originally brought out from Sri Lanka and India, or whether they hybridised upon release with chital deer that were introduced at Wilsons Promontory around the same time that the hog deer were.

So there are several ramifications of that. They may not be of the same extent of the conservation significance we may have thought they were, particularly in terms of relocations back to their native range, where in some cases they are highly threatened. Will it change the value that hunters place on them? Probably not. Perhaps some international hunters who may want to pay large sums of money — up to \$15 000 — to hunt those animals may think differently about it, but for all intents and purposes there is still a valued hunting resource in Victoria and across Australia. We have interstate hunters that like to come and hunt those animals too.

So there is a little bit of a way to go with verifying those and the strength of the data, but they are the early indications so far. I might say too, just on the research, we also do substantial research into harvest levels. So each year we conduct a series of phone surveys to collect accurate harvest data. That is on the harvest levels of deer, duck and quail, and also on hunter effort and where those animals are taken from. So it is quite extensive research, and that gives us a really good understanding of our harvest levels and where

those animals have come from. And then that can help to inform either management or hunting policy as well.

**The CHAIR** — I just have one other question, and then I will pass on to other committee members. With the submissions, of course, there is a lot of discussion about the use of sporting hunter groups being involved in the control of invasive animals. Do you think that the regulatory environment is there to support that on a larger scale? I know there are a few trials at the moment, but do you think the regulatory regime is fit for that purpose as it is, or do you have any ideas or recommendations about how perhaps there could be changes that might make it more able to cope with widespread programs?

**Mr HYAMS** — I think it is early days yet in terms of the use of hunting groups to assist in that. Of course, I make the point again, we do not actually run or organise these exercises.

**The CHAIR** — But I am asking from the regulation point of view. If you are involved in regulating game hunting, and if we are looking at, for example, sporting groups culling or being involved in, say, trying to reduce the deer population, is the regulation that you have at the moment suitable, or are there any ideas for changes that you might suggest?

**Mr HYAMS** — I am not quite sure I understand which piece of the regulation we are talking about here. Our regulation in terms of hunting is about licensing individuals to go hunting. As I said, there are many thousands of people — —

**The CHAIR** — Ensuring that it is done in a sustainable and safe way, and I think the legislation also talks about providing some advice to government on the regulation regime. So I am really just asking for any of your suggestions, or based on your experience, if you think it is okay for deer, or whether there should be any changes if we are going to look at a broader or greater number of hunters being involved in trying to reduce invasive animals.

**Mr HYAMS** — Well, there is no limitation on the numbers of people who can hunt. It is simply an interest-based issue at this stage. There are more deer than we will have enough hunters for, I would expect, to impact on the population, with perhaps the exception of hog deer, which are a smaller population group and strain geographically. In terms of the use of hunters in cull programs, that is not game hunting. Parks Victoria are an example. The recent ones they have done at Wilsons Promontory, for instance, is not us licensing the hunters; it is Parks having a permit to take wildlife that are causing a problem, and they can engage pretty much anyone to carry out that task. We issued the permit for that authority to take wildlife, and we have insisted they have a monitoring regime in place as part of the issue of that permit so that we can start to have them actually gather information they need in terms of the management of public land to see whether it is in fact having an impact. And that will be taking photos of habitat before and after and monitoring that to see what the result of these cull programs is. I know it is hunting, but it is not game hunting in the sense of our regulation, if that answers the question.

**Mr TOOP** — I think in terms of the regulatory framework it is actually quite flexible and allows a number of different mechanisms to control particularly deer, which is the realm that we work in in terms of game species. There are authorities to control wildlife under the Wildlife Act, and there are deer declared unprotected in circumstances on private land so landowners can go about controlling deer without having to go through the red tape of actually getting an authorisation to do that. As Greg said, we issue permits to land managers to control deer and put on necessary control and permit requirements in terms of monitoring and reporting. So I think the regulatory framework is quite flexible and broad to allow those things to happen. Deer are not declared pests in Victoria, but I do not think that is necessarily a barrier to managing them effectively. I think there are a number of other tools in place that actually allow that to happen.

**Mr YOUNG** — Cheers, guys, for coming in today. We have had a number of submissions with arguments for and against opening up more areas to hunting, especially in national parks and other public lands that we are currently not allowed in. So there are a couple of things that I just wanted to get your perspective on as far as a few of those arguments go. It has been suggested that using dogs, and this is particularly in the context of hound hunting or hunting pigs, is a problem on public land, because dogs can

be an issue when they get out. Can you just run us through the regulatory framework around dogs and their use in hunting?

**Mr HYAMS** — It is quite highly regulated in Victoria. The types of dogs that are allowed are purely scent-and-chase hounds. They are not allowed to be vicious; they are not allowed to attack the animals. I think it is probably well and truly on the record that it is certainly a very effective way of hunting deer and taking large numbers within a very short space of time, and much more than an individual stalking through the bush can. The dogs are generally fitted with tracking collars, so these days there is very little chance of them getting lost in the bush, which I think was an issue many years ago. So I am not sure what else I can tell you about it that you would be interested in knowing.

**Mr YOUNG** — Are there any issues that you see with our current regulations, and do you think that anything could be tightened up to alleviate fears that people have with dogs getting out, or the wrong kind of dogs, or are we regulating enough and is it working?

**Mr HYAMS** — I think the issue from our perspective with hound hunting is it is a very obvious hunting method. It is noisy: dogs bark, people are following dogs through the bush — that sort of thing. But I think overall in terms of the regulations that are in place it is more than adequate. It certainly presents some compliance challenges for us, just in the nature of where hunting occurs with dogs and our resources and the vast quantities of land we have to hunt on in Victoria, but overall I would have to say I think the regulations are now adequate. The dogs were changed from, perhaps shall we say, faster dogs that presented more difficulties in tracking to much slower dogs that are able to be more easily tracked and stay within range of the hunting groups. So I think it has gone through a fair period of reform over the years. Simon has been involved for much longer in that area. Have you got anything else to add?

**Mr TOOP** — Look, I do not think there is much more we can do in terms of regulating. It is a difficult area to enforce because of the nature of the way that hound hunting is conducted. Essentially a pack of dogs is let loose onto the scent of a deer and really it is the deer that dictate where those dogs go, and that creates a problem and a challenge for the hunters to make sure that they comply with the law. I think the biggest issues we have had with hound hunting are antisocial behaviour and an element of non-compliance, and we are working closely with hunting organisation through our Respect: Hunt Responsibly program to raise standards of behaviour and make sure that people are doing the right thing, that they self-regulate. We need to continue to focus on that, and we have done some quite targeted work in consultation with hunting organisations in the last 12 months, and we are going to continue those over the next couple of years.

In terms of the efficacy of hound hunting in terms of controlling deer numbers, Victoria is a large space, and in the areas where particularly sambar deer are found — that is the only species that can be hunted with hounds — some of the remote environment is incredibly difficult to access; it is incredibly difficult for the hounds to be effective in taking numbers out. But I think as a tool in the suite of tools that managers have at their disposal, the use of hounds can be effective in certain locations, and I know Parks is starting to engage hound hunters in controlling deer numbers in particular locations, and those things are being tested in terms of just how effective and efficient it is.

Again in terms of the regulatory framework around hound hunting, it is reasonably sound. There was significant regulatory reform done back in the early 2000s, and the critical thing now is to make sure that people are compliant and aware of their responsibilities. But of course the law can only manage so far and it is really up to the behaviour of people. That is, I think, the thing that is causing some of the issues in some of the complaints we get, particularly from regional centres. So if we can work with the hound hunters to improve behaviour and lift those standards, there needs to be a desire to do that. We certainly are working with them and willing to continue to work with them to improve that.

**Mr YOUNG** — I am glad you mentioned the Respect campaign, the ongoing education that is being provided and that relationship between government agencies and hunters. Another issue that is currently being flushed out is about hunters' attitudes on what they harvest, and it has been suggested that hunters cannot be effective because they only target a particular type — mostly your big stags. You probably are

aware that there has been a lot of research in the USA in regard to white-tail deer. They had different issues — not through them being an introduced species because they are native — where their herds were becoming unhealthy, and so there was a very big campaign to change the way hunters were targeting certain types of those animals to increase the overall health of the herd. That kind of education has proven to be effective because we are seeing really, really great results with white-tail deer in the USA. Do you think that kind of campaign would be effective in Australia as far as curbing attitudes for hunters in not just taking the big bucks but in taking does and other deer for meat to reduce populations, because when we take bucks we are not taking the breeders?

**Mr TOOP** — Yes. If you want to reduce deer populations, you need to harvest hinds or females — it has to happen. If you want to drive the population down, that is where the reproductive power, if you like, is coming from. A male or a stag can service a number of different hinds, so targeting the males does not necessarily drive the population down because there will always be other stags there to take their place. It is really important to do that. You can regulate that, so you can have what they call antlerless harvest in either season, and you can do that in various locations as a strategic approach to dealing with deer management. There could be education. But really recreational hunting is driven by a whole range of values: some people will hunt deer for meat; others will hunt them for antlers and trophies, and that seems to be the main driver of hunting now.

We do through our harvest surveys understand that ratio — the sex ratio — and it is unbalanced and biased towards stags. But through either education or regulation you could change that through targeted control programs. Again we are working with Parks Victoria. A lot of the control they have been undertaking is trialling it, so really in the short term just trialling safety-efficient work practices, if you like — those sorts of things. We have communicated with Parks and into the future, if we are going to continue to issue these permits, we want to see a more focused approach on getting the population outcomes they are looking for, which is really to reduce the density to get the ecological response that they want, which is a more complex environment where deer are not focusing on a particular preferred plant species and then that results in the proliferation of non-preferred plants which changes the whole floristic and faunal composition of some of those areas.

So I think there is a role. I think it has to be targeted. I think there needs to be some communication with hunters and encouragement and education on why it is important to do those sorts of things, but also there are some barriers in relation to the use of deer as well. So as part of a strategic approach to deer management we need to be thinking about removing some of those market barriers in particular, opening up the use, or the commercial use, of deer product and, in doing that, if you can focus on hinds — you could potentially regulate to say you can only get hinds commercially processed, or something like that; some thought would have to be given to that — that is the way to reduce deer densities. Again landscape-scale change may not be achieved doing that, but you would have to see it as a suite of different tools in the toolkit to focus on particular areas, because the problem is large. So you really need to focus your efforts on, in the first instance, asset management where deer are well established. In areas where deer populations are starting to emerge, that is the time to target and get effective control, and particularly targeting those hinds.

**Mr YOUNG** — It is good that we already have a similar framework in the pet food trials that are going on with kangaroos at the moment, so something similar could definitely be set up for deer, I think.

**Mr TOOP** — And we have advised government. Government is talking about developing a deer management strategy, and all those different things from social, economic, regulatory, educative — all of those things have been raised with government. So hopefully as part of that deer management strategy we can incorporate all those things to look at it across the landscape and across all the different sectors, be they economic, social or recreational.

**Mr HYAMS** — I think that is the key. If recreational hunting is going to have an impact on its own, then we need to encourage and make it easier to increase the take of deer, and a number of those things around the commercial use of wild-shot game are critical in my view to that being effective.

**Mr TOOP** — I was just going to say that there are areas where land tenure prohibits hunting from occurring. There is always that tension between is it to provide recreational opportunity or pest control? There is some overlap, and that is where we need to focus our attention, where there is overlap. But all those things need to be considered if we are serious about managing deer as an issue. There are some places where they simply cannot be controlled, so then you may switch to a resource management perspective which actually starts to capitalise on the social and economic benefits they bring. But certainly in those areas where deer are emerging as a problem — and we are starting to see that a lot in the western half of the state and particularly the north-west where there is the opportunity to get in now and start to solve some problems, rather than leaving it too late where those populations become established and then the horse has bolted, or the deer has bolted, and then you cannot control it — you can only fall back on asset management. So land tenure plays a role in all of that as well.

**Mr RAMSAY** — Thanks, Greg and Simon. My notes indicate you said GMA is a statutory authority with a skill-based board and you have primary responsibility as a sort of a regulator for game hunting compliance and research, and I note the act says that your functions include ‘to monitor, conduct research and analyse the environmental, social and economic impacts of game hunting and game management’. I just have two — part A and part B — questions. The first is: how many staff does the GMA have over and above the skill-based board and your two positions?

**Mr HYAMS** — Fifteen, apart from ourselves — sorry, 16. So we are 18 in total.

**Mr RAMSAY** — Eighteen? And you are responsible to the Minister for Agriculture, and you are dealing with DELWP, DEDJTR, Parks Victoria and Victoria Police in the main, as the key government stakeholder groups in relation to meeting responsibilities there. So the suggestion in some submissions is in fact that you broaden some of your responsibilities within the act itself but take over some of the responsibilities of those other stakeholder groups in relation to land management. And if in fact that was the case, or you found that you were being restricted in some of the research that needs to be done in relation to populations of invasive pests, do you have the financial capacity and resources currently to be able to meet those objectives?

**Mr HYAMS** — What we do obviously is a matter for government. If they were to expand our responsibilities, I presume they would expand our budget and resource capacity. We are resourced pretty much to do what we do currently, and there is not much spare change after we have done that at the moment.

**Mr RAMSAY** — Some of the submissions have told us in fact that the deer populations are decreasing, yet the evidence I have seen in a lot of other submissions is that they are increasing. In relation to the data and research you have done in relation to deer populations across Victoria, have they been substantial in the last 18 months given the capacity you have to do that work? Are you able to clearly demonstrate whether in fact deer populations have increased or decreased, if professional hunters are probably best to reduce the number of pests or in fact recreational hunters can do it? How much work has been done under your stewardship?

**Mr HYAMS** — We have not done any research into deer numbers in terms of us initiating research or doing any of that work in the two years we have been in existence. Anecdotally the evidence would suggest that deer numbers are increasing. It is an interesting proposition that they are decreasing, given that Simon has just alluded to the obvious increase in deer appearing particularly in north-west Victoria. We have not undertaken any research into deer numbers across Victoria as such to date.

**Mr TOOP** — We research into harvest take, so that is on hog deer in particular. We have a very highly regulated regulatory regime for hog deer, and then we do our harvest survey data. In terms of deer populations, without having the data to support it, but certainly from strong anecdotal evidence it is clear that deer populations are expanding their range and increasing their density. I do not think there is any question about that. Certainly, if we just look at our harvest data, if we went back to 2001, for example, the state had 7500 licensed deer hunters. We now have over 32 000 and they are harvesting up to 70 000 deer

per year, and it appears that their populations are continuing to expand and increase in density. So I would be very surprised if that was the case.

We are getting many reports and observations from both our staff and also other land management agencies that particularly fallow deer are expanding well beyond their original release sites. Essentially that species was protected as a game species up until 2001, then there was an open season on them. Back in the mid-90s the deer markets, the commercial markets, collapsed and fallow deer were released across the state from deer farms. Those populations sat there. A hunting season was declared in 2001, and we have only seen those populations continue to expand, so much so that they are found essentially across the state now in increasing numbers, particularly in the north-west of the state, which causes us some concern.

Certainly deer are coming across the South Australian border and also down from the New South Wales border. That said, our deer populations, particularly fallow deer and sambar deer, are expanding across the borders and going into New South Wales and South Australia, and we are starting to notice that our red deer populations are starting to become more widespread too — more isolated, but widespread — probably through escapees from deer farms, and outside their traditional range, which was in the Grampians. So I would be very surprised if deer numbers were decreasing anywhere, and that is sort of counter from what our staff experience and the advice we get from other land management agencies.

As I said before, I think the regulatory regime has been freed up so people can control their deer much more easily, but in terms of numbers I would be very surprised if that was the case anywhere in the state.

**Mr RAMSAY** — I was only referencing the Mountain Cattlemen's Association's submission, where it says in part:

It has been reported by our members that some DELWP and Parks Victoria staff are running the line that they think deer numbers have reached their peak due to the vegetation spurt after the megafires and numbers will gradually plateau and even reduce.

**Mr TOOP** — I think there is probably some validity to that somewhat, but we have had constant large-scale fires across the state at frequent periods, and what that does is tend to open the country and disperse the deer; they have higher reproductive rates once the bush has been opened up, so their reproductive potential increases; and then as the forest matures it does see a plateauing of the deer numbers. Whether that has happened since the last major fire, I'm not sure.

Another issue that is worth considering is controlled burning and just what sort of effect that has on deer populations. I think it certainly creates optimum deer habitat because you are maintaining the landscape at those early successional phases which favour deer, so grass and herbage and other low vegetation that suits the deer and their reproduction potential.

Again, it has not been tested, but one we are noticing as an index of condition for deer, particularly sambar, is their antler size. Once upon a time it was unheard of or very rare that you would see a sambar deer achieving greater than a 30-inch long antler set. We are seeing animals pushing into the mid 30s. What they do in a physiological sense is they divert all their energy into body condition and then antlers come last. We are seeing these animals with these huge antler sets; it means that conditions must be pretty good for these animals. So I would agree somewhat with that, but I do not think it has been such a period of time that we might have seen those changes to deer numbers.

**Ms WARD** — Simon, you referred to people being prepared to pay up to \$15 000 to go and hunt hog deer. With your functions — to monitor, conduct research and analyse the environmental, social and economic impacts of game hunting and game management — what work have you done in terms of the environmental benefits of game hunting? You also referred to opening the market or having market restrictions around this. Can you expand on that a bit further, please?

**Mr TOOP** — We do not regulate the regulatory environment that controls the commercial use of deer. That is managed by the department of economic development, but we have had discussions with them about opening, for example, commercial butchering that could happen at any small butchery, but there is a



series of legislative and regulatory barriers that would have to be moved or changed to allow that to happen. It certainly happens in other states, and there is a national code that dictates how game meats are to be processed. In terms of monitoring what people are paying, you cannot actually pay to take an animal because the state owns the wildlife, but you can pay an access fee to farmers, for example, or other landowners to access the land to go hunting.

**Ms WARD** — Would you also be paying tourism operators and things like that to help you coordinate your trip or your hunting activity?

**Mr TOOP** — There are some that do that, yes.

**Mr HYAMS** — And you could expand it. I mean, the potential for things like hunting-led tourism is significant.

**Ms WARD** — So the regional job effects could be quite strong?

**Mr HYAMS** — Yes, we have had a number of discussions with the relevant departments and ministers about the potential to free up the use of wild-shot game. It is interesting: I had a discussion with the new CEO of Parks Victoria at one of our regular meetings and I was giving him my view of the potential for hunters being able to take a deer they have shot to the local country butchers. If you read the press, they are saying they cannot afford lamb and beef to sell to their customers, and yet here you have got this very high-value meat — and if they could process it they could almost become sort of boutique butchers, and it generates another line of business. He had a sort of quizzical look on his face, and I said, ‘Sorry, have I not made myself clear?’, and his response was, ‘That’s the only way you can hunt in Canada. Don’t you do that here?’, and I said, ‘No, it’s illegal’.

That just gives you an idea of where the rest of the world is at in some of these things and the potential for us, in my view. I have to say this is more a personal view — obviously it is not part of our role — in terms of where we see the potential. I mean, some of it is quite simple. There are Australian standards for processing game meat. The trouble is under those standards the definition of ‘game’ is ‘kangaroos, rabbits and pigs’, so we have got legislative misalignment here. We have had discussions and given advice to people about that, about changing the red meat act, for instance, to start to make these sorts of things happen.

You get other situations where if a farmer wants to shoot one of his steers or something and have a mobile butcher come out and dress the animal and cryovac it, he can do that, but if he shoots a 300-kilogram sambar deer, he cannot ring a mobile butcher to get them to come out and do it. So if the farmer cannot do it, he digs a hole and buries the carcass. You are wasting an awful lot of meat. Whether you even go to the extent of a hunting for the homeless type of thing where you could encourage hunters to take more deer and get it processed and handed out across the community in some sort of social program, such as hunting for the homeless — the potential seems significant from my perspective. We just need to get the various policy alignments happening.

**Mr TOOP** — There are a couple of other emerging areas, particularly in the guiding sphere. So people are, as you suggested, paying a guide to educate them, take them either to private land holdings or into those areas of public land that are open to hunting. So there is a guiding base that is starting to develop, and that is another thing that we have to look into: whether they are regulated, whether there is a code of practice, so voluntary versus a regulated approach to controlling behaviour. Also helicopter hunting has been raised, not so much hunting out of a helicopter but using a helicopter to get into more remote locations to take advantage of those deer that are not accessible by car and driving tracks. There are a range of these things that are practised across the world. Victoria is just starting to, I guess, wake up to those opportunities.

**The CHAIR** — I might cross to Bill, and of course if there are questions that we have not had time to ask you, you would not mind if we wrote to you with those questions?

**Mr TOOP** — Sure, that is fine.

**Mr TILLEY** — Exactly, Chair, that is what I was going to mention — absolutely good words. Gentlemen, thanks for leading the batting at this inquiry. There are probably a lot more questions that we need to ask. We are going to see a significant number of contributions from submitters and there will be questions in relation specifically to additional responsibility of the Game Management Authority. The argument in relation specifically to deer itself, not to other species, is the debate in relation to game versus pest. And very quickly, before we close off, I am interested in your view on opening up more parts of Victoria to recreational hunting. Would it need or require more regulation? Would it require resources for the GMA? What would it take in simple terms? What would the GMA need to see this happen?

**Mr HYAMS** — I am going to be honest here. It is not something we have actually focused on. As you can understand, we set ourselves up and two years down the track we have had probably enough work to do just in terms of getting ourselves set up, understanding what we do, looking at the skills we need to do, looking at the areas where we can have an impact within our existing legislation. We really have not given consideration to what we might do or what we should do. Obviously that is a matter for government policy. But it is way too early from our perspective to think we are doing what we should be doing well enough to consider what else we might want to do.

**Mr TILLEY** — Putting aside the authority, do you have a personal view in relation to whether there are more parts of Victoria that could be or should be opened up to recreational hunting?

**Mr HYAMS** — There are plenty of areas in Victoria where I think the conditions and use are probably identical to areas where you can hunt at the moment, so I think, yes, there is potential there on the face of it.

**Mr TOOP** — It depends on what the objective is too. Do you want to control the animals and manage them versus do you want to provide recreational hunting opportunity? There is some overlap there, but they are quite different in the approaches that you would need to take in order to get the outcome that you are looking for. If it is just about creating more recreational hunting opportunity, there are many more areas that could be opened up. It just depends on the underlying land tenure, and that dictates what activities can go on them. But that is a policy matter and that would have to be worked through with the responsible agencies advising government. I think it is really important to focus on what is the purpose of what you are doing. If you are trying to control animals, that needs to be done in a much more structured way. But, that said, recreational hunting can fit into that but so too can targeted strategic removal of animals via hunters and hunting organisations and also using a suite of other tools in the toolkit, because hunting alone just cannot do it unless it was very targeted, very focused and in very small areas really.

**Mr RICHARDSON** — Thank you, gentlemen, for coming in. I have just got a quick question. In May the Chair and I had the chance to meet with the North East Catchment Management Authority and then a range of other representatives in north-east Victoria. One thing that was put forward, and I am keen to get your views, is the notion that recreational hunting is taking tens of thousands of deer out of the wildlife but there is a hundreds of thousands, if not into the millions, range for deer longer term, which has grave economic and social impact for farmers for that area. I am just keen to get a sense of where that balance lies, where the Game Management Authority sees its role and the role in answering submitters who are saying just eradicate all the deer. This needs to be a far more systematic approach rather than have hunting as one of the key sources. I am just trying to get a sense of your thoughts on the balance of those economic challenges.

**Mr HYAMS** — Sure. Again it is looking at the various situations. Where deer are starting to establish, then certainly eradication is a feasible option through intensive culling using the suite of tools that Simon referred to. You just have to hit them hard and intensively to eradicate them. In the north-east I think eradication is just approaching folklore sort of status. There are so many, the terrain is so difficult that it would be impossible to eradicate them. So then you are left with a management issue. So it is about managing the resource. Again it is looking at what the objective is — managing it in terms of game hunting and the potential economic benefits? It does need to be remembered that hunting generates in excess of more than \$430 million per annum to the Victorian economy, and some 60 per cent of that is spent in rural Victoria so it is a significant economic issue for country towns and things like that.

On the other hand, you are managing it to maintain that sustainability from a game hunting perspective. But there are certainly potential opportunities to deal with eradication or keeping a lid on populations where they are establishing, and you just have a look at what the objective is at the end of the day, I suppose.

**Mr TOOP** — I might add too that there has been a lot of energy expended for a long period of time about whether deer should be declared game, pests or, have the same status as wildlife — what they should be. I think there has been a lot of energy and antagonism and arguing among the different sides about that. I would like to think that we need to shift the argument to how they are managed and focus on that rather than what they are called. The advice we are giving government is about looking at different deer management zones. Where they are well established and they cannot be got rid of, let us take some economic advantage and social and cultural benefits out of that. In areas where they are either not present or starting to establish, you get in there and control and contain them, or remove them if that is possible.

So there is a lot of this argument that goes on — a lot of wasted energy and focus. I know New South Wales is again looking at the status of deer. But just changing their status does not necessarily result in on-ground response, and that is the critical thing. You need to start to focus on how we are going to manage these populations, not what they are called. I know what they are called carries some legislative obligations with it, but it does not necessarily mean it is going to, in and of itself, result in the outcome you are looking for.

**Mr RICHARDSON** — So would the Game Management Authority then be supportive of, say, an economic cost-benefit assessment that relates to the interaction with private property as opposed to the economic benefit of the \$430 million, and then the potential expansion of that, that economic benefit — has that work been done by the Game Management Authority or would you advocate for more of that assessment? Because I do not think anyone truly knows what the numbers are. What are your thoughts on those kinds of assessments, and is the Game Management Authority best placed to undertake some of the research and evaluation?

**Mr TOOP** — We have given advice to government, and they have received that advice. As I said, there is a sustainable hunting action plan the government is considering at the moment, and early advice was that that would include a deer management strategy. Our advice to government was that that should focus on deer management zones, looking at what they call an invasive species curve, which is about not allowing populations to establish and, when they do, to remove them. However, where they are well established and current technology does not allow us to get rid of those animals right now, even if that was the desire, the advice was that we focus on that.

I think the contribution of deer hunters to the Victorian economy back in 2013 was about \$180 million, so it is substantial. So the bottom line is they are there, let us take advantage of them in a number of different senses but also recognise that within those areas where they are well established that we should focus on asset protection and focus on high-value assets like threatened flora and make sure that those deer are targeted and densities are reduced. The critical thing in this whole argument is not how many deer are taken out of the system; it is how many remain behind and what the densities are and what the impact on the environment is. So you have to understand the state that you are trying to achieve, understand the density targets that you are looking for to achieve that state, and critically in all of that is conducting research and monitoring. That is very expensive and time consuming, but in order to say that we are actually achieving what we want to we really need to have that understanding.

**The CHAIR** — I think we need to finish up there. Thank you both for coming in today, and as I said, if committee members have further questions, we will write to you. Thanks very much.

**Witnesses withdrew.**