

TRANSCRIPT

SELECT COMMITTEE ON VICTORIA'S RECREATIONAL NATIVE BIRD HUNTING ARRANGEMENTS

Inquiry into Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements

Melbourne – Monday 3 July 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 Corrie Goodwin, Acting Chairperson,

Mr Graeme Ford, Chief Executive Officer,

Mr Paul Stevens, Director, Compliance and Intelligence, and

Mr Simon Toop, Director, Strategy and Research, Game Management Authority.

The CHAIR: Thank you, and welcome. I will declare open the committee's public hearing, hopefully our final public hearing, into Victoria's recreational native bird hunting arrangements. Can I ask everyone to ensure that your mobile phone is switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

Can I begin the hearing by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on here today, pay my respects to elders past and present, and acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who are joining us either today in the hearing or watching the broadcast of these proceedings. I would like to welcome members of the public who are here in the public gallery and those watching, wherever they are camera-wise, at home or at work on the live broadcast, and I would remind those in the room – as everyone has been over the course of these hearings – to be respectful of the proceedings and remain silent at all times. Welcome to the Game Management Authority.

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

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearings. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website. For the Hansard record, could each of you please state your name and any organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Simon TOOP: Simon Toop, I am the Director of Strategy and Research at the Game Management Authority.

Graeme FORD: Graeme Ford, the Chief Executive Officer of the GMA.

Corrie GOODWIN: Corrie Goodwin, Acting Chair of the Game Management Authority.

Paul STEVENS: And Paul Stevens, Director of Compliance and Intelligence of the Game Management Authority.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. I might ask members of the committee first up to introduce themselves.

Katherine COPSEY: Katherine Copsey, Member for Southern Metro.

Georgie PURCELL: Georgie Purcell, Northern Victoria.

Sheena WATT: Sheena Watt, Northern Metropolitan.

Michael GALEA: Michael Galea, South-Eastern Metropolitan.

Jeff BOURMAN: Jeff Bourman, Eastern Victoria.

Bev McARTHUR: Bev McArthur, Western Victoria Region.

The CHAIR: I am Ryan Batchelor from the Southern Metropolitan Region and Chair of the inquiry. Welcome today. We invite you to make an opening statement – I would say for as long as you like, but I will at some point cut you off. We do have 2 hours for this session, and I appreciate you taking the time. Obviously

this is the last day of our hearings. We have got a lot of evidence that we have heard, so there is probably a lot that we will want to get to. But we really open the floor to you now to make your opening statement, and then we will take it in turns to ask you some questions.

Corrie GOODWIN: Thank you. Good morning. Thank you for providing the GMA a further opportunity to engage with this committee. My name is Corrie Goodwin, and I have been on the GMA board since July 2020. I have been Deputy Chairperson since July 2022 and Acting Chairperson from April this year. I am pleased to represent the authority at these proceedings today. I have with me GMA CEO Graeme Ford, Director of Compliance and Intelligence Paul Stevens and Director of Strategy and Research Simon Toop. I would like to make a few remarks before handing to Graeme to cover some issues in an opening statement. I would like to thank members of the committee for the time which you have dedicated to listen to the range of views held by members of the Victorian community with regard to native-bird hunting. The board and I have great respect for the diversity of stakeholder views that have been represented during this process, as they are based in strongly held values, experience and cultural perspectives, including those held by First Nations people.

The GMA is first and foremost a regulator. We provide advice to government on game-hunting-related matters and assist with the implementation of government policy. Importantly the GMA does not set hunting policy, and we do not manage the public lands and wetlands on which hunting occurs. That said, we maintain strong working relations with the government departments that are responsible for these areas and provide recommendations to the minister regarding wetland closures. A high-profile example of advice provided by the GMA to government is the recommendations made to the minister regarding duck-hunting season arrangements. These recommendations are provided for the minister's consideration, and the GMA's role is then to implement the minister's decisions where relevant to GMA's responsibilities. The GMA has also provided advice on other issues, such as reforms to the game-hunting regulations. I would now like to ask Graeme to provide an overview on how the GMA operates today.

Graeme FORD: Thank you, Corrie. Obviously we have kept a close eye on proceedings here and notice that there is certainly a distinction around 2017, pre the Koorangie incident. I would like to give a bit of an outline of what has happened at the GMA since that period and what changes have been made. Over the past five years we have undergone a significant change in both our structure and the way we operate. The Pegasus report was one of the catalysts for that change. I think some people have been suggesting that was a report commissioned by government – it was not; it was commissioned by the GMA. We obviously took those recommendations seriously. The board has then changed some of the management structures. We have created four divisions inside the GMA; prior to that it was really one very flatline structure. We have a compliance and intelligence division, led by Paul, which is all the enforcement work. We have stakeholder and hunting programs, which looks after the education and licensing systems; strategy and research, which looks at how we do our communications and research programs – which was probably very limited prior to 2017; and of course there is the corporate service, the back-office functions.

Since 2018 the compliance and intelligence division has grown from five AOs to 16 AOs. They are structured up into two regional teams, east and west Victoria. They have got offices in Ballarat, Bendigo, Benalla, Traralgon and Lakes Entrance. We have got a much greater geographic footprint as well as additional resources. We have also in that time put in an intelligence analysis capability, which we did not have prior, which has been very helpful in the way we operate, and we have got dedicated staff to carry out that function. In a bit of detail, the stakeholder and hunting program – there are two teams inside that. One is the education – we call them game managers – and they are the education and programs officers. There are five of them dotted around the state based in those offices. They are also authorised officers, so when we need additional authorised officers, they work alongside the compliance intelligence team, which brings our AO cohort up to 21, which gives us a much greater footprint.

The stakeholder and hunting program also looks after all the licensing and testing programs, so all the WITs and – irrelevant to this committee – the hound hunting around deer. They run all those programs as well. The strategy and research division has probably got the broadest remit of all our divisions. That has our communications team. Again, since 2018 we had one officer in comms; we now have two, so we have doubled that. Their role is really about getting the messages about hunting out to not only hunters but also the wider community – so 'This is what's happening.' It is a much greater communication effort we have.

The research team is probably where we have seen the most fundamental change in the organisation since 2018, apart from the compliance division. We have expanded our research effort considerably. It has gone from a \$255,000 spend to a \$1.6 million spend, and some of that is SHAP funding, so some of that is for other government programs rather than just our internal ones. We have put two people inside – a chief researcher, who runs and oversees all the work we do. We do some of the research ourselves, but not a lot of it. We outsource most of it out to the experts. I think you have heard from some of those. This division is also responsible for preparing all the advice we provide to government. It will come through the board, but this division is the one that collates all that advice and provides the base analysis before it ends up at the board.

I will not go over the corporate services. They are just back-office functions, as every organisation has. But as this restructure took place – you know, ‘How will we focus?’ – the board also made some considerable investments in improving the effectiveness and efficiencies of the organisation, and some additional funding was provided by the government at the time. In the enforcement division this led to some new technology we introduced – so body-worn cameras, the same as police wear. They are very effective on the wetlands, particularly when you are dealing with people with guns. The cameras are very good at defusing situations. They are also providing obviously very clear evidence if there is an offence.

We have also put in a case management system which allows much more tracking of what is happening inside these events. I know there has been a lot of commentary around complaints that come in and how they are managed. Well, we have a system now that manages that quite effectively as far as we are concerned. The board in its investments has been very clear that the investments we have made in this division are about ‘How do we identify the priority harms?’, ‘What are they?’ and then ‘How do we target those to make us more efficient in identifying where those harms might be occurring and how we can prosecute the people who conduct those harms?’

The stakeholder and hunting program led to an investment in a new game licensing system. So we spent \$1.4 million on building a new licensing system, which is relatively small for a government technology program. It not only provides an online capability for hunters to manage their own licences but also provides a capability that we can introduce if necessary – which we would recommend at some point – expanding the testing regime so you can actually run testing online, which is much more efficient for things like knowledge testing. The aim for that, for the board, was that the education is not aimed at just simply testing to reap the bare minimum, the black-letter law standard. The board’s direction was that we need to lift the standard to meet what are reasonable community expectations about how hunting is conducted. That is the level we should be aspiring to – to lift hunters to that level.

The strategy and research division – their direction was around ‘How do we improve the robustness of the data that we provide to back up the advice we provide to government?’ It was quite evident. We rely on, for ducks – obviously, being part of the discussion – the Australia-wide survey, which is an index on the abundance. It was very clear that the government had made a commitment to introducing an adaptive harvest model. That required a much more granular assessment of an actual abundance number, so obviously we invested in both the quail and duck abundance. The other priorities have been around environmental impacts, so we have done work on, obviously, lead and looking at those disturbances – you know, what other impacts hunting is having on species that are not the target game species. So there is quite a lot of work going on in that place. This has really been guided, as I said, by the board. It really honed down and spent quite some time defining that objective that is in the Act of ‘promotion of sustainability and responsibility in hunting’. The reading that we applied to that is that it is not about recruiting new hunters or promoting hunting as a practice that everyone should go out and do, but when hunting is occurring, that it must be conducted sustainably and responsibly, and that is the part of the promotion that we adopt.

It might be worthwhile perhaps – just because, again, it has been a key focus – talking about how the advice to government was put together, particularly around duck opening. So any advice to the minister, to our minister, currently the Minister for Outdoor Recreation, must go through the board. The board is the approving signatory to any advice that is provided. What will normally happen for duck season is that in around August we would start providing advice to the board around what the seasonal conditions look like, what the long-range forecasts are looking like and what that might look like as we move into a season in the forthcoming year. This information will get updated periodically to the board between then and December. By early December we would normally have all those key pieces of data, although some of that was delayed last year because of the floods. So that would be the EAWS – the Australian waterbird survey – and the outputs of the interim harvest

model. That would all be provided to the board at that time. It would also be provided to all the key stakeholders, so we would provide that package of information. The same information we provide to the board goes to the stakeholders, and we ask any of the stakeholders if they have got additional data – and we do reinforce it is about data, not opinion, because it is not a policy process – to provide that to us by early January. By early January, we collate all that data and provide it to the board. The board will also receive all of the stakeholder submissions, and we will provide, as management, advice to the board whether the season conditions would warrant that there should be a change away from the regulated seasons in the Act or in the regulations.

The board will make a decision. That advice will be provided to, currently, the Minister for Outdoor Recreation. At the same time, we will provide that whole package of information, so the same information that goes to the board will go to the Minister for Outdoor Recreation. We will also provide that same package of information to the departments that advise the other two responsible ministers, so they get everything that we have to consider. Obviously they go through their processes then, the three ministers will agree, and a season arrangement will be announced and we will implement it and that is pretty much how the magic happens. I think that is probably enough, Ryan, but I am sure that there are many, many questions.

The CHAIR: Yes, I am sure that there are. The way we will do proceedings today is we will give each member about 6 or 7 minutes each and we will do two rounds, just so people have got the opportunity to listen and reflect. Before I do that, and before I get started, I just wanted to check – at the briefing we had at the start of the proceedings, which was exceptionally helpful, and I want to thank you both for that and for the support that the GMA has given to the committee, both in terms of the information you provided, but in facilitating us to do the inquiry, site visits and the like – you had some stats on prior season numbers, so harvest, days hunted, seasonal bag, all that kind of stuff. Do you have that for 2023?

Graeme FORD: No. That is collated through the harvest bag surveys, the harvest surveys. We would normally get that towards the end of the year, I think, by the time it is collated and written up. I do not know if there is any raw data that we can pull out for you, but we can follow that up with ARI who do the work.

The CHAIR: So the standard way you do that will not be available for the committee for the purposes of this?

Graeme FORD: I think unlikely.

Simon TOOP: No.

The CHAIR: That is okay, I just wanted to know, because I did not want to get into this knowing or not knowing whether we have got this year's – like, we are going to have to go off observation rather than stats for the purpose of our report to reflect on this season.

Graeme FORD: We will confirm and let you know.

The CHAIR: That would be useful. One of the things that came up in one of our recent hearings, which would be good to get on the public record I think, is to determine how much of Victoria is open to duck hunting during a season. There was a bit of confusion amongst people providing evidence to us about how much of Victoria game licence-holders can hunt in? What is the answer?

Graeme FORD: Well, it depends on the land classification. It is the whole of Victoria, depending on the land classification. Is this the question about how many wetlands there are, or –

The CHAIR: The question is: if we want to write a report that says, 'Currently in Victoria during the season there are X hectares of public land available to hunt on', what is the X? And then my other question is: I understand from our briefings that quail hunting is mainly done on private land, but how much of duck hunting is done on public land versus private land? That is kind of the bundle of my 'where' questions. What answers do you think you have?

Graeme FORD: So for duck hunting – and Simon will correct me if I am wrong – it is about 50–50, do you think?

Simon TOOP: Yes. Our harvest reports show that about 50 per cent of hunter effort occurs on private land – and equally on public land. That is the hunter effort, but not necessarily the lands open to hunting.

The CHAIR: Sure. But on the first question –

Graeme FORD: I think the land that is open to hunting is a question for DEECA. They are the land managers. We do not have a database of land.

Simon TOOP: You might have heard discussion about the More to Explore hunting maps. Now, those maps are based on public land databases, and it could be a question for DEECA whether they can actually extrapolate from that underlying data as to how much area –

The CHAIR: Yes. They provided us with a big map, which is printed out in a smaller version, so I am aware that exists. The reason I have asked is that obviously you are charged with compliance, so your job is to check whether hunting activities are complying with wildlife and game regulations. What I was trying to find out was: how much of the land that is available and suitable for hunting do you think you cover with your compliance efforts during a season? And that requires, in a sense, a denominator and a numerator to figure out the percentage. From your perspective, how much of the land that is hunted on in Victoria – public, private or whatever; I will come to the distinction in a minute – do you think you cover with your compliance activities in a season?

Graeme FORD: I think it is probably impossible to give you a percentage. I mean, we obviously put the stats up about the number of wetlands that we actually attend. Where we target is where our history, experience and our intelligence tell us that there are higher risks of offending, particularly around those priority harms, and that is where we target our effort. I guess that is what all regulators do. My point would be that our effort is targeted where we think we will need to do the most work to provide the best benefit to the community, based on identifying where there is a risk of priority harms.

The CHAIR: So what do you think your effort was like this season?

Graeme FORD: I think it went fairly well. We did not have a lot of offending that we detected. I think the scrutiny this year on hunting led to probably a greater awareness across the community around how behaviours were going to be perceived. I think that assisted, but the stats are not out of line with other seasons.

The CHAIR: And do you have those compliance statistics for this year?

Graeme FORD: Yes, sure. They are on our website. They are quite public.

The CHAIR: They are on your website, but if you could provide them, that would be –

Simon TOOP: And it is not just the GMA, it is us and our partner agencies. Paul may talk to that later, but we work in conjunction with fisheries, the environment department, Victoria Police of course and others to spread that load, especially during those surge periods.

The CHAIR: How many private properties would you have inspected?

Paul STEVENS: Are we talking for duck hunting only?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Paul STEVENS: It would be minimal, maybe 3 or 4 per cent of our regulatory effort. If we are talking about quail, it would be about 99 per cent.

The CHAIR: That is because most quail is done on private land – is that right?

Paul STEVENS: Correct.

The CHAIR: But duck is 50–50 on private land?

Paul STEVENS: Yes. Again, that effort is really based around our intelligence and where the highest potential harms are and focusing around that conduct so we have that presence there to try and deter some of that conduct.

Graeme FORD: I do not think this is indicative of the geographic cover, but if you look at 2022 – because obviously we have the stats; we do not have them for 2023 yet – our licence checks are for about 11 per cent of active hunters. So 11 per cent of active hunters have their licence checked, and I think it is about 9 per cent that have their bags checked, because you might check their licence before they go on the wetland, so that is why there is a difference.

The CHAIR: And what percentage of licence-holders are active hunters? Do you have any way of telling that?

Graeme FORD: Yes, we do, through the harvest surveys. Most of the time it is 0.55 or 0.66, so 55 per cent to 66 per cent is about –

The CHAIR: So half to two-thirds of licence-holders are hunters.

Graeme FORD: Yes, depending on the season.

The CHAIR: So you are getting about 10, 11 per cent of the active –

Graeme FORD: Of the active, yes.

The CHAIR: Yes. Okay. So it could be about 20 per cent of total holders you would roughly –

Graeme FORD: Yes, because of course if they are not hunting, they are not –

The CHAIR: Sure. Okay. That is truly useful. You provided us with a sort of summary of – I do not even know what it was called – offence outcomes or briefs of evidence forwarded for prosecution in 2021–22. You provided that on notice. A couple of times there were notes about concerns about the admissibility of evidence gathered during compliance activities, which impacted on prosecutions. What are those problems with the evidence that you are gathering in relation to prosecutions? Because obviously if you have got infringements, you are collecting evidence and then you hit a prosecution hurdle – what are the barriers you are running up against?

Paul STEVENS: Sometimes it might be the formal caution is not administered properly. Sometimes it might be just the weight of evidence – there is contradictory evidence and not enough to independently corroborate what has been alleged. Sometimes it might be just a technicality – so it is just about being able to identify, go through and listen to the interviews, weigh up the evidence independently and assess where it is at – and that is why I document in that form some of the concerns that might be there. So the process is – and I will explain the process if it is beneficial. I will keep it short.

The CHAIR: Yes, keep it short.

Paul STEVENS: Basically the staff will do an investigation. They will put together a brief of evidence which goes to their team leader for an independent assessment. The two team leaders are both ex-Victoria Police members. They will then review it. If they authorise it, it will come through to me for authorisation. If I then authorise it, it will go to prosecution services, who are now a member of DEECA, and we will then do consultation in regard to ‘Is it in the public interest?’, ‘Has an offence been committed?’ – and do the normal model litigant process in regard to prosecutions. So a very short summary – that is how the process weighs, and we then talk through the weight of the evidence. Is it in the public interest going through the courts? Are there other alternatives – that is, an official warning, a penalty notice et cetera?

The CHAIR: And those stats that you have got on your website detail prosecutions –

Graeme FORD: We can provide them.

The CHAIR: Yes. That is fine.

Graeme FORD: We can provide them for the last five years – I think we have got – of the stats.

The CHAIR: Yes, that would be useful. My first round is up. Mr Bourman.

Jeff BOURMAN: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for coming in, guys. I have been asking a number of questions of your minister, and the standard answer seems to be, 'Refer it to the GMA.' So here we are. At a recent PAEC hearing Minister Kilkenny was half-drawn on an answer to this question, but it was over what happened on 2 May this year with publications on the website. The GMA published compliance data from the first five days of the 2023 duck season, I think at about 10 am, and by 11 am it was gone. Fortunately some people had done some screenshots, so I got that data. Now, my characterisation, and not yours, is that it did not reflect as badly on hunters as it could have, and it actually reflected possibly worse on protesters than people wanted.

We now have a situation where we have got three ministers overseeing this whole duck-hunting thing, which makes it very difficult. So I am going to ask you – whoever is the correct person that can answer this – did any of the three portfolio ministers or anyone from their offices have any conversation or correspondence with the GMA about that data prior to it being pulled down?

Graeme FORD: The only conversation we had was about whether we would normally put that data up at the end of that opening period – and we have not normally put that up.

Jeff BOURMAN: You do or you do not?

Graeme FORD: No, we do not normally. We had not normally put it up after the opening period.

Jeff BOURMAN: Okay. The first five days?

Graeme FORD: Yes.

Jeff BOURMAN: Okay. Did any of the portfolio ministers or anyone from their offices have any correspondence with the GMA about that data subsequent to it being pulled down?

Graeme FORD: No. Not that I am aware of.

Jeff BOURMAN: Did any of the three portfolio ministers or anyone from their offices express a view or a preference about whether or not that sort of data should be reinstated on the GMA website?

Graeme FORD: No.

Jeff BOURMAN: Moving on from that, we had two witnesses to the inquiry that made it clear that despite there being an objective process in place, their preferred method of effecting wetland closures is direct political interference by ministers via crossbench MPs. Did any of the three responsible ministers or any of their officers contact the GMA this year advocating for wetland closures outside of the objective process?

Graeme FORD: I do not know about advocating, but certainly we were contacted about reports that had come in that had not necessarily come to us, which had gone directly to the ministers, about whether we should be doing some work to go and recheck presence of threatened species, which is what it normally was, on a particular wetland, which we would do and which is not out of the ordinary. That is pretty standard practice.

Jeff BOURMAN: Yes. So there is a standard practice, and this just came around the standard practice, and you did investigate it.

Graeme FORD: No, that happens regularly. It is not just this season.

Jeff BOURMAN: Okay.

Graeme FORD: We have seen that reports will go to a minister or a minister's office, and then we are the ones alongside DEECA who would go out and confirm whether those accounts were accurate, and that is standard process.

Jeff BOURMAN: Okay, thank you. In the GMA's advice to Minister Kilkeny about the 2023 duck season, you included the draft waterfowl wounding reduction action plan – I always trip over that. When this document was released publicly, the minister had redacted all but the front page, including a blank page, which I found kind of funny, and another page that had just a Victorian logo. Does the GMA see that draft as a credible pathway to addressing the reduction of wounding of waterfowl? And if so, perhaps you can give us an explanation as to why the GMA sees that as a path forward.

Graeme FORD: So let us cover off the redaction first. It is standard practice for us now, which I think does not happen – I am not aware of any other portfolio agency that does this, that routinely publishes publicly its advice to the minister. We always do that after the minister makes a decision. That will still go through, usually, an FOI process. So it was not the minister who redacted that. It was us based on experience with FOI, simply because that was advice provided to the minister that the minister had not decided upon, which it is pretty standard practice to not release publicly. Subsequently an FOI application did release that information, so that is the circumstance around how that redaction occurred. I probably –

Jeff BOURMAN: If I may just interrupt a second, Mr Ford, normally do you redact a blank page?

Graeme FORD: Say what?

Jeff BOURMAN: Is it normal to redact a blank page?

Graeme FORD: You would have to ask the FOI unit.

Jeff BOURMAN: Fair enough. Moving on.

Graeme FORD: I will perhaps let Simon talk about this. Simon is our scientist on the panel, and he has the most knowledge of the wounding work.

Simon TOOP: So in terms of the action plan itself, it was a SHAP commitment. So the sustainable hunting action plan committed to doing several things in this space, and that was to develop wounding reduction action plans for deer, duck and quail hunting. Duck was the first that we tackled. We established a working group which was made up of key stakeholders – RSPCA, Sporting Shooters, Field and Game, an industry representative and an expert trainer that had been trained a number of years ago – and with an independent chair, Professor Andrew Fisher from Melbourne University, who is an expert in animal welfare matters. We convened that working group, and based on a draft that we put together with our experience and understanding of ways to both recognise wounding-type behaviours and then ways to address them, put together a draft and worked through that with the working group, and then ultimately that was submitted to the minister back in September of last year.

In terms of do we think it is an effective way to reduce wounding: yes, we do. It has been proved internationally that those actions and activities can lead to a reduction in wounding. We conducted, when I was with another department – the Department of Sustainability and Environment, I think, at that time – two small-scale projects, if you like, where we took people out into the field and assessed their wounding rates pre training and then post training. So that was through practical and theoretical training over the course of six days. We did that twice, once in 2008 and once in 2012, and combined we saw that the wounding rates went from 31 per cent pre training down to 6 per cent. So the evidence before us is that in Denmark in particular these activities have shown there can be a substantial reduction in wounding rates, and that was also reinforced by the work that we have done as well.

Jeff BOURMAN: All right, and that is my time.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Bourman. Ms Purcell.

Georgie PURCELL: Thank you, Chair, and thanks very much for appearing today. I am wondering how many of your staff or directors currently hold a game licence or have in the past?

Graeme FORD: I do not know about in the past – obviously we do not ask them about their history – but there is currently one director that holds a game licence, and I think about 16 of our staff hold game licences of various types.

Georgie PURCELL: And who is the director that holds a game licence?

Graeme FORD: That is Owen Cavanough. I think that is publicly on the –

Georgie PURCELL: Who is that, sorry?

Graeme FORD: I think that is Owen Cavanough.

Georgie PURCELL: Okay, great. And Mr Toop, had you held a game licence in the past?

Simon TOOP: Yes.

Georgie PURCELL: And were you a GMA officer present at the Koorangie Marshes in 2017, for the massacre?

Simon TOOP: I was present. I am not an authorised officer and have not ever been, but I was present.

Georgie PURCELL: You were present, yes. And did you go out and shoot at Kerang that afternoon?

Simon TOOP: No.

Georgie PURCELL: Thank you. You said that you cannot give us a per cent of wetlands that are monitored per season, but your compliance summary from this year states that authorised officers took 469 patrols at 216 individual wetlands across Victoria. Do you not know what this is as a percentage of wetlands open to shooting?

Graeme FORD: Well, what is a wetland will vary significantly year to year, depending on rainfall. There is, I think, 450,000 farm dams in Victoria. Shooting or hunting is allowed on creeks and streams. I am not sure how you would define a particular number of a wetland out of that sort of messy piece of data.

Georgie PURCELL: Yes. I am glad you mentioned farm dams because I want to talk about private property. At our briefing at the start of this inquiry, when we discussed the fact that a lot of shooting happens on private property now, you explained to us that that was not a concern to the GMA because you have the powers to enter private property. How many private properties did you enter during the 2023 duck-shooting season?

Paul STEVENS: None.

Georgie PURCELL: And what are the reasons for that?

Paul STEVENS: We had no intelligence to support staff going there.

Georgie PURCELL: So we heard from a witness at Sale that they believe that the best form of monitoring compliance and stamping out poor behaviour is so-called peer pressure. Do you really believe that duck shooters will report on each other from private properties?

Paul STEVENS: We have had history of that already. To what extent, I do not know, but we do get reports from hunters reporting other inappropriate behaviours.

Georgie PURCELL: And why isn't the Game Management Authority actively seeking out known private properties to monitor for compliance where shooting takes place? I mean, as a rescuer myself, I can even find out private properties where shooting is happening. It is regularly discussed among shooters online. Why isn't the Game Management Authority entering those properties without a tip-off from the public or shooters?

Paul STEVENS: We have focused our regulatory effort around the areas that cause the greatest harms. That is generally where there is water, there is birds, there is a congregation of hunters and protesters plus rescuers, and from the public safety aspect, that consumes our regulatory effort.

Georgie PURCELL: We heard from a former GMA officer last week, and he explained to us that there was quite a significant culture within the Game Management Authority of targeting rescuers out on the wetlands. Do you believe this is the case?

Graeme FORD: No. It is 22 per cent, I think. Paul, is it?

Paul STEVENS: Over the last five years, of all offences detected by the GMA staff during those five duck seasons, 72 per cent of regulatory effort or outcomes was against hunters.

Georgie PURCELL: What per cent was that, sorry?

Paul STEVENS: 72 per cent.

Georgie PURCELL: When you look at the number of game licence holders in Victoria, as opposed to duck rescuers, that it is still a pretty significant focus on duck rescuers. That is 28 per cent on duck rescuers. Can you explain why the Game Management Authority is so regularly fining animal rescuers who are ultimately out there doing the job that the regulator is not doing?

Graeme FORD: It is a public safety issue.

Paul STEVENS: And the law applies to everyone.

Graeme FORD: Yes. We do not set the laws, but we apply the laws. We think we apply them very fairly.

Georgie PURCELL: On the note of applying laws fairly, just this season gone we saw a duck rescuer fined for failing to dispatch a wounded bird. You would know that duck rescuers take these birds in to a vet tent for treatment, and sometimes they can be rehabilitated. Why did you go after the rescuer and not the shooter who wounded the bird?

Paul STEVENS: The facts of that situation: regulation 51 under the wildlife game regs – any game that is recovered must be immediately dispatched. So the person in question had the bird in her possession for quite some time, and so if it was a hunter in the same circumstances, they would have got the same outcome, and so that bird was –

Georgie PURCELL: Yes, I understand the regulations. My question is: why was the rescuer targeted and not the shooter who wounded the bird?

Paul STEVENS: Who was that? We had the information that the bird was in the possession of this person, and the appropriate action was taken.

Georgie PURCELL: So you do not know who wounded the bird?

Paul STEVENS: Correct.

Georgie PURCELL: Is it common practice to not know who wounds the bird?

Paul STEVENS: Absolutely it is.

Georgie PURCELL: When wounding is such a big problem – we have heard that from basically everyone who has appeared at this inquiry – how do you think that compliance can truly be improved when you are fining rescuers for holding a wounded bird and seeking veterinary treatment and not the person who wounded them?

Graeme FORD: I think our point was that it is not necessarily the compliance effort that is going to make the significant difference there. It is the training and education and standards you set before you allow people to hunt that will make the difference.

Georgie PURCELL: Okay. Is it an offence to refuse a bag inspection?

Graeme FORD: I do not know, actually.

Paul STEVENS: I am not sure.

Graeme FORD: I do not think we have ever been refused.

Paul STEVENS: I have never been notified of a hunter refusing inspection of their hunter bag.

Georgie PURCELL: You have never had –

Paul STEVENS: I have never been informed that that has occurred.

Georgie PURCELL: I know that they are voluntary – I thought the Game Management Authority would know that. How would you manage a situation when someone refuses a bag inspection?

Simon TOOP: It might be an obstruction offence. The officer has the right to go and inspect that bag. It is not a question of 'Can I do it?' The officer is there and can, as part of their duties, do that inspection, and if somebody tried to prevent that from happening, then I presume that would be an obstruction offence under the Act.

Graeme FORD: And I do not think we have ever come across it.

Georgie PURCELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good morning. Thank you for joining us. I would like to ask a bit about section 86 or section 86A, wetland closure instruments. This may not be a complete picture, but I understand year to year there are anywhere from around – from what I can see, two to eight that have been applied over the past almost decade. Is that a fair assessment of how many will typically be applied during a season?

Graeme FORD: It can vary a lot.

Simon TOOP: There have been more than that. I did have a look, because somebody raised these figures the other day of only a maximum of five in the last three years. The year before that there were 10. It just varies on the season and depends on where the birds are distributed and can depend on things like drought conditions. If we have drought conditions, we often get freckled duck in particular who will come and seek refuge in Victoria. We might get very large populations of freckled duck in a year where there is drought and very small populations or no birds in this state when there is lots of water, say, in inland New South Wales. It really depends on the circumstances at the time.

Michael GALEA: Sure. And I understand the GMA has a role in those notices. Is that correct?

Simon TOOP: Correct, yes. Sorry, just to be clear, we can give advice to government on section 86; we are required to give advice to government on section 86A.

Michael GALEA: Yes, understood. Thank you. The majority of these reports – where do they originate from? Do they originate from compliance officers?

Graeme FORD: They can come from anywhere. Usually the section 86s are sort of pre season – that is how most of those occur. A lot of the work is done by the department's priority wetland counts. It gives us an idea of what is happening. Obviously our compliance guys are out doing checks – as well as information from the public.

Michael GALEA: Yes.

Graeme FORD: And the 86As, again, could be anything from departmental staff advising that there is a problem, a potential problem or a potential issue, to members of the public.

Michael GALEA: Yes. So there is a large amount that comes from members of the public. Is that correct?

Graeme FORD: Yes, there is. There are a lot of reports that are usually confirmed by department staff, either us or usually DEECA, going out to check the counts and inspect the wetlands and make a call whether there is an action required.

Michael GALEA: So a member of the public will often raise it, and then one of your officers or a DEECA officer will then go and verify that. Is that correct?

Graeme FORD: Yes.

Michael GALEA: Yes. Can you give a rough proportion of the cases that originate from a member of the public?

Graeme FORD: I do not know. I would think more than half of the 86As probably come through various means. The 86s are mostly the department's.

Michael GALEA: Sure. Thank you. And of those predominately 86As, but in either case ones that come from members of the public, how many of them come from hunters themselves?

Simon TOOP: We had one this year.

Graeme FORD: Yes, we had one this year.

Simon TOOP: They do happen from time to time, because hunters are concerned that if birds are shot in large numbers, then that is a real reputational risk for them. But we certainly encourage everybody to tell us. The more eyes and ears we have out there the better, so we can then assess the situation and then make some sort of response.

Michael GALEA: And how many from animal rescuers?

Graeme FORD: Again, I could not give you a precise – it is one where we obviously get a name who provides some information; we do not know the background of that name.

Michael GALEA: In exactly who they might be?

Graeme FORD: Well, sometimes, sometimes not – because sometimes they come through the minister's office, and we just get 'There has been a report of birds that needs to be checked at Lake Buloke', for example.

Michael GALEA: Sure. And in the event that protesters were further restricted from the wetlands or from the areas altogether, would that reduce the likelihood of those reports being made?

Graeme FORD: I do not think so, because currently the restrictions are only applied till 10 am, and that is only a sample of the wetlands. That is not every wetland where hunting occurs. So the 220 game reserves – I will get to Simon for the number, but I think the game reserves are captured there. Then there are 43, I think – yes – additional wetlands that are not game reserves that are scheduled, and those rules of 10 am apply. So there is obviously – you know, we have talked about numbers – a vast amount of wetlands that do not have those restrictions.

Simon TOOP: It still does not mean people cannot go into those reserves; they can. They just cannot go to within 25 metres of those waters.

Michael GALEA: Of the wetland, yes. In the event that those animal rescuers were not there, though, do you think you would receive less reports?

Graeme FORD: It is hypothetical. I do not know. I suspect not, because BirdLife, for example, often provides reports. I think that they would be still doing their work. It is hard to know.

Michael GALEA: Okay. But the majority of those public reports come from not hunters – but you are not quite sure of the origin?

Graeme FORD: Yes. I would say that is fair.

Michael GALEA: Okay. Do you think that, in the same vein, if there were not animal rescuers making those reports, that you would receive information about such hazards later than you otherwise would?

Graeme FORD: Well, later in the day, maybe. But I am not sure that they would be later in –

Michael GALEA: If there were less reports being made, though, by those people, would it be possible that there would be threatened species that you would not have identified if they were not being reported?

Graeme FORD: It is probably worthwhile understanding section 86A too – the emergency closure. It still takes a period of days, usually, to get them in place, because there is a 24-hour period even after – sorry, it is not 24 hours. It cannot come into effect till the next day. By the time a report comes in and we arrange for someone to go out and confirm whether there is a problem or not – and, look, some of these wetlands can take almost a full day to assess: they are large, you need multiple spots, there are obviously large numbers of birds. So there is not the circumstance where a report comes in and within 12 hours that wetland is closed. There is a process.

Michael GALEA: No, I understand. What, if any, protocols or processes are there for the management of threatened bird species on private land? Because I understand there has not been any compliance activity on private land this year. How would you be aware of threatened birds being present on private lands where shooting is occurring, and what, if anything, could the GMA do to respond to that?

Graeme FORD: Well, it could still go and count. So if a report came in – again, we normally would get a report from someone else, from a member of the public – we would go and confirm. It is the same thing: we would go and confirm – and if warranted, we can close private land.

Simon TOOP: We have advised government in the past to close some private lands, and that has been done.

Michael GALEA: And that is as a result of hunter reports or rescuer reports, or your own?

Simon TOOP: I cannot remember. Sometimes officers or staff will hear from members of the public. It could be hunters, it could be non-hunters, it could be anybody who has a concern. Then we will go and establish whether there is the presence of those birds and then go and advise government what we think the right action should be.

Graeme FORD: So obviously our compliance officers are networked as well, so they get reports that come to them anecdotally as well that they will follow up.

The CHAIR: So just to clarify: you can issue a notice to stop hunting on private land? And have you done that in the past?

Simon TOOP: Yes. So let us be clear: it is government that does that. It is the minister that makes those notices.

Graeme FORD: We provide advice.

Michael GALEA: On your recommendation.

Simon TOOP: So we can give you advice.

The CHAIR: Royal you – the executive.

Simon TOOP: Yes. So sections 86 and 86A can apply to any lands, and they can regulate anything to do with hunting – where, when, how, methods.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Thank you very much for appearing today. Just going to Ms Purcell's questioning, she seemed to be insinuating that it was somehow a crime for GMA employees and board members to hold game licences. I would have thought that having a good understanding of the activity that you are regulating would be a positive thing. It is not a criticism we hear of the VFA, a fishing authority, and their people holding a fishing licence, or even VicRoads and people holding a drivers licence, so can you tell me why you think your board members or staff should not hold shooting licences?

Graeme FORD: Well, the board members are appointed by the minister, and it is in the Act that one of the desirable make-ups of the board – skills and experience – is knowledge of hunting. So that is a question for the minister, actually, about appointing someone holding a game licence. Within our staff, I would agree with what you are saying, Mrs McArthur, that the knowledge that they bring, because they practise it, is actually quite invaluable to how we conduct our operations.

Bev McARTHUR: Ms Purcell also seems to be insinuating that you should be entering private property more often or more frequently. What would be the legal liability of the property holder if an incident occurred where somebody was injured involving protesters?

Paul STEVENS: I think it would be a matter for the courts, to be honest.

Graeme FORD: Yes, it sure would.

Bev McARTHUR: So there would be a very good reason why the landholder would not be wanting protesters or so-called rescuers to enter private property?

Graeme FORD: So can we just be clear. To enter private property to hunt you must have permission from the landowner.

Bev McARTHUR: Correct.

Graeme FORD: So if you were entering private property without permission of the landowner – that would also apply to someone who is not hunting – it would be a trespass offence.

Bev McARTHUR: Yes, exactly, and I would have thought there is a very good reason why landholders would not want these sorts of people on their land. We also seem to hear from Ms Purcell that you are targeting protesters or rescuers far more frequently than recalcitrant duck shooters. But in your experience are duck shooters compliant when you do confront them? Do they open their bags? Do they answer your questions?

Paul STEVENS: So the answer to your question is yes. If you look at the stats, and I am looking at the last two years, we had over 99 per cent of hunters comply with the legislated bag limits.

Bev McARTHUR: That is interesting. Would you also agree that there are protesters and rescuers who may have their faces covered, who are trying to ensure that their identity is concealed – so making it difficult for you when you are ensuring that the rules and regulations and the laws are applied?

Paul STEVENS: That does happen, yes. I cannot talk to their motives, but people cover their faces.

Bev McARTHUR: Concealing their identity would be obvious, wouldn't it? Yes.

Graeme FORD: Some hunters also wear face mask camouflage.

Bev McARTHUR: But do they try and conceal their identity when you are confronting them?

Graeme FORD: No.

Bev McARTHUR: No. Mr Levy, when he gave evidence, told us that none of the protesters had stolen a duck from a hunter since 2009. Has the GMA seen any evidence of protesters stealing ducks from hunters since the GMA was formed in 2014?

Graeme FORD: I think that would be a technical question of what is 'stealing'. If we do not know the ownership of a wounded duck, which is often the case, I am not sure how we would have a stealing offence. I am looking at my –

Paul STEVENS: So we have had an instance where a hunter shot a bird and a rescuer went in and took the bird before they had a chance to recover it. I would not use the term 'stealing', but I will leave that to the committee to decide.

Bev McARTHUR: A moot point. I know you gave an answer to PAEC about the ducks that Mr Levy and his friends paraded at Treasury Place. Wildlife Victoria assured us that they provided you with vet reports

et cetera on these birds. Are you able to tell us what percentage of the birds used at Mr Levy's media event could be proven to have been shot?

Graeme FORD: Well, as we answered to PAEC, I think definitively it is difficult from the work we did. I am just trying to remember – Simon has got the stats there, I think – the number that carried shot. Obviously they were shot, definitively.

Simon TOOP: I can take you through the statistics, Mrs McArthur. Eighty-eight birds were presented; 72 of those were game and 16 were non-game. Of the 88 birds, 53 per cent – 47 – were found to be carrying embedded pellets and 41 were not, so 47 per cent were not. Of those 47 that were inflicted with shotgun pellets, 89 per cent were game and five were non-game. Then with the protected wildlife – so there were 16 of those – there were five that had embedded pellets. For the remainder – nine – we then checked to see if there was any other sign because they did not have any embedded pellets. Two of those we could not inspect further because they were so decomposed. So we plucked all the remaining birds and looked for any sign of skin damage, anything that was consistent with a gunshot wound, and we could not find any signs then. And this was some time of course after the birds had died, so we do not know whether they, from our examination –

Bev McARTHUR: There was a fair percentage that were not even shot that you were presented with.

Simon TOOP: That is what we found. They are not trained vets, and as I said, it was some time after the incident, but that is what we found on inspection.

Bev McARTHUR: How much of your time is spent by your regulatory officers ensuring protesters comply with the safety regulations?

Paul STEVENS: I think it is a combined effort. It is not just focused around protesters and not focused around hunters, it is actually going out and enforcing the laws as they come across, using our intelligence. So I could not give you a percentage, Mrs McArthur, in regard to us not actually doing a breakdown of what that actually means. They go out and do their job in what they are trained to do.

Bev McARTHUR: So do you agree that waterbirds thrive when there are abundant water sources?

Graeme FORD: I think, yes, they respond when it rains.

Bev McARTHUR: So would you also agree that where duck shooting has been banned that the numbers of ducks have not miraculously increased, like in New South Wales? Some evidence that we have heard is that that is due to urbanisation and weather conditions.

Graeme FORD: Well, I think Mr Kingsford in his earlier testimony made the point that hunting if it has an impact, it is minor and it is most pronounced when the population is extremely low, which is when you want to be very careful about hunting.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs McArthur. Ms Copsey.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. I am interested in some of the activities that the GMA has been undertaking to sort of try and improve compliance in hunter behaviour. So I want to ask some questions about windmilling, which has been, I understand, since at least 2019 not recommended by the GMA as a humane dispatch method. Is that around the right timing?

Graeme FORD: I think it might have been 2020, perhaps, but yes.

Katherine COPSEY: The 2020 videos and guides, yes. So we have continued to hear even at this hearing from some shooter groups assertions that they think that windmilling is fine. What is your response to that, as the body charged with educating those that shoot animals?

Simon TOOP: Well, we put together a working group back in I think 2019 to look at ways that are better to dispatch a bird, more humane, and the advice we got from vets was that it was not appropriate. Now, there is a distinction between dealing with animals in a veterinary situation versus those in the field, so we have to bring in some element of practicality as well. But essentially what we are advised – and maybe you could get further assessment from vets – was that by breaking the neck, which is what happens during windmilling, those birds

could remain sensible for some time after that, up to 30 seconds, perhaps. So in light of that the recommendation was not to pursue that and to look at other measures.

Our three preferred methods were using swatter loads, so that is shooting the birds on the water; cervical dislocation; and pithing, but we also make clear in the guidelines that there is no prescribed way to dispatch a bird. There is nothing in law that tells you you have to dispatch it in a particular way, and really there could be a whole range of other methods which might look unsightly but are actually effective and could be considered to be humane. But they are the ones that we identified were appropriate and a better practice.

Katherine COPSEY: So on my reading of the guidelines it is quite clear that windmilling is not a recommended method.

Graeme FORD: That is true. Yes.

Simon TOOP: Correct.

Katherine COPSEY: So can you explain to me why we would still have shooters coming before this hearing and asserting that they think it is fine?

Simon TOOP: That is their assertion. We have already made our position clear on that.

Graeme FORD: I guess there has been a culture, if that has been a practice for a long, long time, and you know, our guide came out in 2019–20. We would place a great emphasis on education around that that practice should be phased out. That is not the preferred or the most humane way of dispatching birds.

Katherine COPSEY: There is a series of specific recommendations – and I am sure it is an ongoing area of effort, as it is for any agency that is trying to communicate standards to the public; I understand that this stuff takes a lot of time – in Pegasus around improving hunter education and guidance. Those are stated to be implemented in the update report, which has been provided as part of your submission today. What is your assessment of the effectiveness therefore of the GMA's effort in this regard?

Graeme FORD: It is probably a bit early to ask us for that. We did the hunter knowledge survey, and I know it has been talked about. There has been some mischaracterisation or some misinterpretation of some of that data, but that gave a baseline for us. We will obviously test that again – well, it depends what happens – in another year or two, and that will give us a feel for what is happening. I do remember seeing video footage of a hunter with a wounded bird, and he was being spoken to by a rescuer. I think he was basically saying, 'Kill the bird,' and the hunter said, 'No, I can't do it that way, with windmilling, because that's not recommended.' That is a sample of one, which is probably not great, but there are some hunters to whom certainly the message is getting through.

Katherine COPSEY: Yes. What would you do if you saw that occurring on a wetland? What would your officers do in a circumstance where they saw someone using a non-recommended dispatch method?

Graeme FORD: I would hope they would perhaps be providing a bit of education and suggesting that is not the right way to do it.

Katherine COPSEY: Three years on from the guideline having been issued, if a hunter was seen to be using a non-recommended method out on the wetlands – and we have had vets come before this hearing and tell us that constitutes animal cruelty – the most likely response from a GMA officer would just be to have a talk to that hunter.

Graeme FORD: It is not an offence. It would be very highly unlikely that we would be able to prosecute a person for windmilling for a whole range of reasons, given how the legal framework works, without being able to provide definitive evidence that says that this bird suffered a particular thing. The rules of evidence apply to us. We cannot just basically say, 'We don't think that looks pleasant. We should prosecute it.' We would have to provide the points of evidence that would stack up to a prosecution, and that would be very, very difficult.

Katherine COPSEY: Moving now to gun safety, I noticed that there was a recommendation also that hunters should be undertaking some form of skills training out of Pegasus. Now, I understand the limit of the GMA's role in this regard and that it actually falls to the department to improve regulation and to state that it is

a requirement for a skills program, but the GMA has implemented the shotgun education program in an effort to increase uptake of this kind of education resource for hunters. How many years has that program been running now?

Simon TOOP: Our shotgun education program has been going for quite some time. I think in the mid-2000s, in terms of the education of hunters, there was a field-based training day that was designed in consultation with an expert in this field, Dr Tom Roster from the USA. GMA, with Field and Game and the Sporting Shooters Association of Australia, designed a program of what a field day might look like, and then those guidelines were made available to both of those organisations to implement those days. So we do not run them ourselves, it is up to those organisations to run those voluntarily, and then hunters can pay to attend and participate in that day.

Graeme FORD: We do promote them heavily though.

Simon TOOP: We certainly promote them.

Katherine COPSEY: I might come back to those questions if I get another round.

The CHAIR: You will absolutely. Thank you, Ms Copsey. Ms Watt.

Sheena WATT: Hello. Thank you so much for being here and for all of the information that you have provided. That certainly has been very, very helpful. I want to ask about littering. It seems minor, but of course a lot of evidence has come in about widescale littering on behalf of hunters and rescuers; it depends who has presented it. I just want to ask: can you actually issue any infringement notices for littering? Who actually has responsibility for that if it is not you?

Graeme FORD: We can. Our officers are authorised under the EPA Act and can issue for littering.

Sheena WATT: Can you – are there any numbers, recently, about littering offences?

Paul STEVENS: So with the change in the EPA Act recently, our staff had to go through training, which they just completed last week. Those authorisations will be signed off this week by the CEO. So any of that littering toll we refer through to the EPA. We have had a number of complaints come through to us, and I can get you the numbers if you like. It would be five or six that we have referred through to the EPA.

Sheena WATT: Okay. So it is around that number.

The CHAIR: Sorry. Just to clarify, you –

Simon TOOP: So okay, we are not quite through the process yet.

The CHAIR: Right.

Graeme FORD: Our guys were, but then the change to the EPA Act removed our authorisation, so then we have only realised, actually, that that occurred – or we realised a while ago, so we actually have to go through the process again.

The CHAIR: So, in this season –

Sheena WATT: Yes, that was my question.

The CHAIR: Sorry. Sorry, Ms Watt.

Graeme FORD: Let us be clear.

Sheena WATT: In this season, did you have powers as authorised officers to –

Paul STEVENS: No. Not for the littering Act, and –

Sheena WATT: Not for the littering Act?

Paul STEVENS: Correct.

Sheena WATT: Okay. That one is good to know. What about the destruction of Aboriginal cultural artefacts and sites? Where do the authorised officers sit with respect to powers on seeing the destruction of Aboriginal cultural sites?

Paul STEVENS: We have not had any complaints about that, and –

Sheena WATT: Do you have powers as authorised officers –

Graeme FORD: No, I think we would refer them to DEECA.

Sheena WATT: They are referred to DEECA. Okay.

Simon TOOP: I think there is a real lack of understanding in that sphere. I mean, a lot of these wetlands contain these really important sites, but nobody really knows where they are or what they are. We have done some information on our website to raise awareness of hunters, but I think there needs to be a lot more done in that space because people just are not – whether they are hunters or campers or fisherpeople or whoever.

Sheena WATT: Yes, I was going to go to that, actually, and the *Summary Report of Hunters' Knowledge Survey Findings* from December 2020, which actually showed that only 25 per cent of those that had responded to the survey, when asked what they should do when they come across a signposted site of cultural significance, answered that one correctly. So there is clearly a lack of knowledge in the hunter community around that. Do you know how many actually signposted culturally significant sites there are on state game reserves?

Graeme FORD: No.

Sheena WATT: No? Is that a question for DEECA, I assume?

Simon TOOP: It is a land management issue.

Sheena WATT: A land management issue, yes. Well then, I suppose the question following up from that, about how many are not sited, should probably then go to them as well. Have you had any reports that have been received about interference with culturally significant sites?

Paul STEVENS: I have not, no. Not in my time at the GMA, which is 4½ years, no.

Sheena WATT: Okay. From, like, individuals or from other agencies, not coming to you?

Paul STEVENS: None whatsoever.

Sheena WATT: Well, okay. I suspect that means there has been no investigation, so I will move on from that one. I want to go then to the Pegasus report. A particular interest of mine – well, actually there is a lot in there – is the training and education piece. I note recommendation 4.3, which talks to the *Australian Government Investigations Standards*. It says here that all GMA authorised offices are required to have, as a minimum, a certificate IV in government investigations. How many of your authorised officers have completed that certificate IV with government investigations or higher?

Paul STEVENS: 21 – all of them.

Sheena WATT: All of the 21?

Paul STEVENS: Correct.

Sheena WATT: Okay. Well, that is a very good one. What about the recommendation 1.1, which talks about the introduction of a permit or ballot system? You stated in there that you have taken preliminary discussions with Parks Victoria as per the, what do you call it, the progress reporting. Is there any further action beyond the preliminary discussion phases of a permit or ballot system with Parks Victoria?

Graeme FORD: It would require regulatory change to be able to do that. Practically it would be I think very difficult, particularly where you have got wetlands with multiple access points. It may be possible to do it on

some of the, I guess, higher risk wetlands, maybe where you would target that rather than a general 'everywhere has to be balloted'. But there would be a significant amount of resourcing required to be able to conduct a ballot system. Our licensing system could effectively do it over time –

The CHAIR: Sorry, what was that?

Graeme FORD: Our licensing system could actually do it, but then how would you – I think the point would be the enforcement arm of that, how would you practically enforce it?

Simon TOOP: And we would probably be distracted doing a whole bunch of administrative enforcement as opposed to dealing with the practice of hunting.

Graeme FORD: The context of that recommendation was around the number of hunters on the wetland. I think other changes that have been made in the regulations have assisted in the dispersal of the concentration of hunters, particularly over that opening weekend. Granted we have been affected by COVID and there have not been great seasons, but we have not seen the concentration of hunters on the wetland that we saw in 2017, for example, at Koorangie. Some of those other steps are providing the same outcome without the administrative difficulties.

Sheena WATT: Okay.

Simon TOOP: The midweek opening means many people cannot get out and hunt. That was part of the intention – to diffuse the situation. The midweek opening and later start times for the rest of that first week have all been things to de-incentivise, I guess, everybody coming together on a single opening weekend, and that is where a lot of the –

Sheena WATT: So other measures have really addressed the hunter density concerns, I would imagine.

Simon TOOP: Yes.

Graeme FORD: Well, so far.

Sheena WATT: So far.

Graeme FORD: It is always a learning experience.

Sheena WATT: Okay, I understand that. I might just leave that one there, I think. I am about done with my time, and I will come back if that is okay.

The CHAIR: Back to me. I want to pick up on the hunter education piece, because I feel like that is the kind of flip side of compliance – we have got to do a lot more on the education side. You undertook this survey in 2020 to obtain a baseline of hunter knowledge of good practice. No-one got everything right, and that is probably to be expected. But there were some pretty low numbers on some key elements, particularly on the duck-hunting side of things, and the matter of controversy around dispatch methods was the lowest. Like 13 per cent of survey respondents correctly answered the questions on how to humanely dispatch a downed duck, which over the course of these hearings has been one of the topics that has occupied a lot of this committee's time. In that, in the detailed findings it said that 49 per cent of survey respondents – half of the respondents – chose an incorrect answer on that. What do we have to do to make sure that hunters know what the correct way is on that measure in particular – on dispatching a downed bird – and more broadly to increase levels of hunter awareness and education?

Simon TOOP: Sorry, I will start off on this one. With the test – it was quite a difficult test, I might say. In many of the questions you had to answer multiple answers correctly in order to get the question correct. For that particular one, 13 per cent chose all three of the correct options out of the four put to them. Eighty per cent correctly chose swatter load, 50 per cent chose cervical dislocation and 40 per cent chose pithing. The issue was that 50 per cent chose breaking the duck's neck, so windmilling it. As we have talked about, there are no prescribed methods for killing these birds. There is no regulatory requirement as long as it is humane. So that is part of the issue. We have been –

The CHAIR: Sorry, just to check on the humane question, though –

Simon TOOP: Sorry?

The CHAIR: On the humane question, though, from a regulatory point of view, is there any way for us to check and enforce that, because we have been told repeatedly that the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act* does not apply to game and hunting. If we have got a problem with people not complying with humane methods of dispatching birds, how do we enforce better practice?

Simon TOOP: Leading on, which goes to your question, one of the recommendations we have made is that people undertake a mandatory knowledge test – all hunters. So that is one thing. They would then have to study and understand what good practice is, and then through a testing regime we could test that and make sure that they had a minimum understanding of that.

The CHAIR: Because currently there is no –

Simon TOOP: There is no mandatory knowledge test.

The CHAIR: There is no mandatory knowledge testing or proficiency testing of hunters in Victoria.

Simon TOOP: Correct.

Graeme FORD: Other than the WIT.

The CHAIR: Other than the WIT.

Graeme FORD: Yes.

Simon TOOP: Which is an identification test – but not their knowledge of hunting, either good practice or the law, and proficiency. We have also recommended to government that people undertake a proficiency test to show that they have got minimum skill standards before they are allowed to go out and hunt any game animal.

Graeme FORD: You could, I guess, proscribe windmilling, but then defining that, I suspect, would be challenging. So how do you define what is windmilling in a legal sense? But that is a question for the vets, I think, not for –

The CHAIR: For the vets, yes. The survey also showed that only 20 per cent of hunters correctly answered all the questions as to why it is important to be able to identify waterfowl correctly. So it does demonstrate that there is not a lot of –

Simon TOOP: Well, I think from memory it was 97 per cent chose the most correct, most important one, which was to identify threatened species. One of the recommendations we did get from the people who conducted –

The CHAIR: But that is not the only reason why we have a waterfowl identification test, is it?

Simon TOOP: No, entirely not. But one of the things that the people who ran the test suggested was that we restructure the questions next time. They may have been confusing for people, but still. So I think there is a general awareness of the most important things, but maybe not around the subtleties around some of these questions, and that is where we can do better to raise the more detailed and in-depth understanding of the laws.

The CHAIR: Interesting. It struck me that this is a topic that has a lot of important detail that needs to be got through, and often it is lost in the headline debate, and subtlety is not a feature of practice in general.

Simon TOOP: And I think, as Graeme said on the windmilling, it has been a common technique. That is just what people do. It is easy – it is one-handed. So there has really not been a lot of opportunity to change that mindset and say, 'This is not on. We can't do this, guys, and we need to do it better and in a different way.'

The CHAIR: It brings me to a bigger question. Obviously Pegasus was pretty damning. You have said that a lot has changed. How do you measure what has changed and whether you are succeeding?

Graeme FORD: A lot of the work we are doing is around setting baselines, so to measure over time. I think that certainly the amount of effort we have put into particularly the research function is about getting a greater

understanding or a more robust understanding of what is happening in the bird populations. Clearly one of the priority activities of ours is the sustainability argument, so we need to make sure that hunting does not impact. I think that work is doing very well. I mean, it is still early days, and we have moved to the interim harvest model, which is a cruder form of the adaptive harvest model, where we need to get to. I think that the increased footprint we have, both in the compliance function as well as the education and the awareness function, is paying dividends, as is the licensing system now, where it is a habit for people to go to our website to access the licensing system so we can deliver messages more effectively. It is not really answering your question –

The CHAIR: No.

Graeme FORD: about specific measures. If anything, we are seeing an increase in the –

The CHAIR: A lot of inputs.

Graeme FORD: Sorry?

The CHAIR: It is a lot of inputs. You are trying a lot of things.

Graeme FORD: Yes. So what is the outcome?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Graeme FORD: Which is always a challenge for a regulator to think, ‘Okay, what’s our real impact?’ We can measure how many people we issue what offence for. Are we changing the mindset?

The CHAIR: Part of our job is to evaluate outcomes. We have had a lot of inputs, and there is a lot of hope that a lot of inputs are going to lead to change, and things have changed over the last few years, clearly. How much of that is internal and external factors we have to make a judgement about. I am just trying to find out how you are determining whether the change program that you say you are undertaking is succeeding or not.

Graeme FORD: Well, clearly the next knowledge survey we do will give us that movement. I would say that on the sustainability argument there is definitely measurable change – the way that system works, the amount of data we now have available. It is not just an input; it is an outcome. It is more accurately measuring what is happening.

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mr Ford – I am taking a bit of extra time here – but the amount of times I have heard in the course of these hearings that government decisions are not following the science demonstrates to me that there is not an acceptance that the processes that are being followed are being science led. So if that is our marker of sustainability, I am not convinced that people believe that that is a robust approach.

Graeme FORD: Simon knows this better than me, but, for example, the adaptive harvest – that has been a function since, I think, 2009 of expert panels. I think there have been a series of expert scientists who have described this as a better way of setting or measuring the sustainability and setting sustainable seasons. We are probably three years away from implementing that. People may have a different view of that, and as we know, this is a very emotive practice – people will choose their sides, and they are very embedded in their sides. But I would say that we are moving towards world’s best practice on that side, and that is being driven by the scientists, not by us. It has been designed. The interim harvest model that we are using in the meantime again has been designed by the scientists, not by laypeople like me. It has actually been designed by them.

The CHAIR: Thanks. I will have to hand over, but it is a challenge for us to try and figure out whether the efforts you are making are being successful, because everything we are being told is that the science is not being listened to on both sides, to be honest. It is not on one side or the other.

Graeme FORD: I would agree. I think on the hunter behaviour you are right; it is difficult to measure that change yet, and what we need to understand is whether what we are doing is effective or how it can be more effective. We have made a number of recommendations to government, regulatory change, to drive that change.

The CHAIR: Yes. Mr Bourman.

Simon TOOP: Sorry, just on that sustainability question, it was not only designed by independent expert panels, it has been reviewed by government independent expert panels as well and reinforced as world's best practice. So the path we are on to achieving that has actually been established.

The CHAIR: Mr Bourman.

Jeff BOURMAN: Thanks, Chair. I want to get back to the 'there again, gone again' data on the website. If it is not normal practice to put it up there, why was it put up there, and then why was it taken down half an hour later? And I think it might even be back there now, I am not entirely sure.

Graeme FORD: It is.

Jeff BOURMAN: But why was it put up and then taken down if no-one asked for it?

Graeme FORD: It was just an administrative error internally. We were concerned that people would reinterpret that data – as actually happened – as, 'This happened over five days. We can extrapolate that rate of offending over the whole period.' It clearly increased scrutiny on the practice this year because of the inquiry. I think it was up for 14 minutes, Jeff, so we were actually rather surprised that someone managed to get a snapshot of it –

Jeff BOURMAN: It was not me. I am not that good.

Graeme FORD: which illustrates, I think, how closely our data of this practice is watched. We were quite surprised, yes. So we did not think any harm would have been done by taking it back down, but clearly some were very focused on it.

Bev McARTHUR: We are onto you.

Graeme FORD: Yes, we are being watched.

Jeff BOURMAN: Thank you, Mrs McArthur. I might say I thought it was just a good idea for transparency, whether it showed good for us or bad for the antis. I personally believe it was okay. But moving on: we had a Facebook page, a bunch of people called the Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting. In their submission they supplied a lot of data, and one of their stories was about wounding rates and quail populations, and both of them they claimed to have gotten off the GMA website. I have had a squiz at the website, and I cannot find any data that even remotely works out like what they were –

Bev McARTHUR: Carrying on about.

Jeff BOURMAN: carrying on about. Did this data come from GMA online? Did they ask for the GMA to give it to them? Because it is not on the website.

Graeme FORD: Quail wounding, I think –

Simon TOOP: Is this data on the extent of wounding in quail hunting?

Jeff BOURMAN: Quail numbers and wounding rates, Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting.

Simon TOOP: We have not done any investigations into the wounding rates in quail hunting. Our abundance data has been available, and that at this last survey put it at 6.7 million quail in Victoria, but we have done no exploration of the extent of wounding in quail hunting.

Jeff BOURMAN: Did the RVOVS people communicate with the GMA about this data, getting it from you?

Graeme FORD: We have lots of communications with RVOVS. I do not recall a specific question from them about quail wounding rates, but it is possible.

Jeff BOURMAN: Or even about quail numbers in general – their numbers seem to be a little different to my understanding of numbers. So I guess the upside is: have they been communicating with the GMA offline? Because obviously you cannot get it off the website if it is not there. Have they been getting it from you guys, whether it is through FOI or just an email or what, I do not know?

Simon TOOP: They had looked at harvest levels as an index of quail populations, and they developed a graph which stitched together two approaches to determining harvest levels, and we said that that was not appropriate. Harvest levels can be used as a proxy for abundance, but it comes with a whole bunch of caveats. So instead of using proxies, we are doing now direct counts of quail. These are our abundance estimates, and in our first year we estimated there were I think 3.1 million quail. We improved the technique because we found through our pilot program that it was inefficient and was not counting enough area. We changed our counting technique and found that that greatly dealt with both birds moving away from the observer and being undetected and also this inefficiency issue that we had. So we revised the technique, and then this year we got much better precision levels and dealt with the repulsion issue and established there were 6.7 million quail in the state. Now, that is a much better way to count the abundance, as opposed to using indexes or proxies of abundance.

Jeff BOURMAN: Their calculations are fairly public. Were the GMA aware of what they had put out as their extrapolation?

Simon TOOP: I cannot remember seeing an abundance figure put out by that group.

Jeff BOURMAN: Okay. Thank you. Animals Australia were in here the other day and made a fairly serious allegation that they provide a dossier of information about alleged offending every year and the GMA fails to act on it. I have heard a little bit about the problems with – and know a little bit I guess about the problems with – evidence. I am wondering if you are aware of the Animals Australia claims and if you can explain to the committee why they do not seem to be getting any joy from submitting this dossier to the GMA on, I am assuming, a yearly basis.

Paul STEVENS: I can answer that. When I first started at the GMA, there was a dossier of complaints that were put through for the 2018 duck season. I started at GMA in December 2018. They brought to my attention that that had not been addressed, so we did a review, went through the process and assessed those, and for a whole range of reasons, including getting legal advice, it was determined that we could not take those matters any further. There have been some other matters which they have referred to us. I have regular contact with Animals Australia and meet with them regularly in regard to their complaints, so much so that once I started at the GMA we set up a process for our intake assessment panel. So any complaint that comes in gets recorded in our case management system. They get notified within three business days that their complaint has been received. They get notified of the date we are going to send it to our intake assessment panel to review. I am the chair of that panel. We have two team leaders who are part of that panel. We call in avian experts or legal people to determine and assess and provide expert information in regard to assessments. We then determine what the next course of action is – is there a prima facie case to warrant investigation or not? All complainants are notified within five business days of that outcome of determination, and if an investigation continues on, it will go on.

Lots of the information we have and evidence comes back in regard to videos that get provided, and to quote some of the advice we got, a lot of the videos:

... do not show sufficient clear and cogent evidence that would give a reasonable prospect of conviction

So there is a whole range of issues that come up, and I am not aware of them raising anything and nothing is done about it. In every complaint where we have details of the person, I correspond with them personally.

Graeme FORD: Jeff, at one point, I cannot remember what year it was – it might have been 2019; there was a great pile of stuff when Paul came on board and started this process – we sat down with Animals Australia and the prosecution services, which was then in DJPR – or where were we? I cannot remember anyway; there are so many acronyms. Anyway, we sat down and went through the points of evidence that are required for us to be able to action. So we tried to assist how they were providing data, and they did change and start to provide a bit more information. But still the fundamental problem lies: we are a model litigant. If we cannot have the evidence, we cannot take a prosecution.

Jeff BOURMAN: Yes. Thanks. I have got one final question before I wind mine up. Anti-hunting protesters in Sale last week told us they have legal advice that getting game licences for the express purposes of getting around the public safety provisions is in fact perfectly legal. Does the GMA do anything to ensure that people who have got game licences are not just doing it to get around the law? I believe in some cases some people are

getting – and I have asked this question in Parliament – firearm licences to avoid prosecution. Is there anything the GMA does to ensure that the game licences they are issued are not just for avoiding prosecution or allowing people onto wetlands before their time?

Graeme FORD: We do not have the power. I think that was a VCAT challenge at one point. Simon.

Simon TOOP: The regulations do not set out anything. You do not have to intend to hunt or anything like that. Simply if you complete the tests and pay your licence fee, then you can get a game licence. That is how the regulations work.

Jeff BOURMAN: It is not something – sorry, Chair, I am only just going down there.

The CHAIR: Okay, last one. That is all right.

Jeff BOURMAN: Is there not something about hunting, taking or the destruction of game being the purpose for the licence, which would seem to me to be fairly narrow reasons for getting the thing and not getting a fine?

Graeme FORD: If someone gave an assurance that that was what they were getting the licence for, that would be a legitimate reason.

Jeff BOURMAN: Okay.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Bourman. Ms Purcell.

Georgie PURCELL: Thanks, Chair. The Game Management Authority is essentially the regulator and the promoter of hunting, in some ways. Do you truly believe you are independent?

Graeme FORD: We would say that we are not a promoter of hunting per se, in terms of hunting for hunting's sake. The board spent quite some time working through what that promotion of sustainability and responsibility in hunting is – and it is 'in' not 'of' – and we are very clear that our job is not to effectively grow the pool of hunters but to actually make sure that if hunting is conducted, it is conducted in a sustainable and responsible manner.

Georgie PURCELL: Do you believe you act independently when undertaking compliance efforts?

Graeme FORD: Independent of?

Georgie PURCELL: I want to refer to a circumstance that actually happened to me personally while on duck rescue, where the Game Management Authority was targeting a group of rescuers, as we find often happens, and borrowed a shooter's boat in order to get to the rescuers. Do you think actions like this are independent or appropriate for the Game Management Authority?

Graeme FORD: I am not aware of the incident, but I do not believe we would do that now – probably.

Paul STEVENS: I am not sure when that occurred, Ms Purcell, but I am not aware of that incident occurring. It is not something I would promote now.

Georgie PURCELL: Yes. Despite being unaware of the circumstance, which I would be happy to give you the information on, do you think it is appropriate to work with shooters to target rescuers?

Paul STEVENS: It is not appropriate to target anyone, unless as I said to you earlier, the behaviours apply, and the laws apply to everyone equally.

Graeme FORD: If we are provided information by a hunter, we might act upon it, just the same as we would act upon information provided by a duck rescuer.

Georgie PURCELL: On that note, I want to talk about how you undertake prosecutions. Would you prosecute on statements alone?

Paul STEVENS: It is a whole range. It is not a yes or no answer, to be honest. There is a whole range of –

Georgie PURCELL: Have you in the past?

Paul STEVENS: Pardon?

Georgie PURCELL: Have you in the past?

Paul STEVENS: Absolutely.

Georgie PURCELL: On statements alone?

Paul STEVENS: Yes.

Georgie PURCELL: On 26 April this year the *Age* published a story titled 'Tonight, Barry Jane will cook ducks he shot. It could be his last supper of this kind.' In the article Mr Jane is photographed with a non-gundog breed standing at the water's edge at Lake Wooroook, and it was pointed out to you in an email on 8 June that he was potentially in breach of state game regulations for having a non-gundog on a state game reserve. Are you investigating this complaint?

Paul STEVENS: I would have to look into that and give you an answer offline if that is okay.

Georgie PURCELL: Thank you. Yes, you can take it on notice. A witness to the committee who is a shooter himself, and I guess who has been branded as a bit of a poster boy for duck shooters, explained self-monitoring and peer pressure as being the current compliance model, and in fact this was published again by the ABC just this morning. Despite making this claim and acknowledging he has seen a whole raft of illegal behaviour from shooters over the years that he has been shooting, he then went on to say that he had actually only reported non-compliance himself one time. We have also heard from witnesses who have been at the wetlands for years, either as shooters or as rescuers, who have never seen a GMA officer. How would you respond to this?

Paul STEVENS: We target the areas from the intelligence, where there is the greatest harm to public safety. I think it is implausible to think you are going to be at every wetland at any given time, so we use a targeted approach.

Georgie PURCELL: And can you please define the 'greatest harm' to me?

Paul STEVENS: Public safety. The issue is where we have hunters and protesters on the wetlands together. As you would be aware, that can be quite a combative situation and we need to be cognisant of that. Hence we work very closely with Victoria Police and use that combined approach, a multi-agency approach, to target those locations and those behaviours.

Georgie PURCELL: But you would be aware that often the worst forms of non-compliance happen on wetlands and shooting areas where there actually are not rescuers because shooters are not being monitored. Why isn't more compliance effort being put into areas where rescuers are not?

Paul STEVENS: Because – I think I have answered that – we focus on the area of the greatest harms, where the public safety issue is the greatest concern for us. They are the greatest harms, and that is what we focus on.

Georgie PURCELL: Do you have concerns that you are missing significant breaches by implementing that method instead of focusing on shooter non-compliance?

Paul STEVENS: I have no intelligence to indicate that is a greater concern than what we already focus on.

Graeme FORD: Your point around culture is a good one, though, and we would agree that the hunting culture could be stronger around peer pressure.

Georgie PURCELL: But it is not an effective enforcement model. Surely the GMA believes that?

Graeme FORD: Well, it can be, absolutely. If the education level and knowledge base lifts and people are reinforcing that with the people they are hunting with or other hunters, I think that is quite effective.

Georgie PURCELL: So would you say your compliance model relies heavily on self-regulation?

Graeme FORD: No.

Georgie PURCELL: How can it not when it is simply impossible for the Game Management Authority to monitor even a tiny percentage of the wetlands where duck shooting takes place? Surely that is self-regulation?

Graeme FORD: Well, I guess it is the same as VicPol with the amount of roads. VicPol is not on every street corner. There is a lot of public pressure or public awareness around the risks. We do the same. We cannot possibly be on every wetland, no.

Simon TOOP: I think in our wounding reduction action plan that is one of the key critical actions. It is the first action: leadership and changing the culture of hunting. So getting that self-regulation is critical, that peer pressure to do the right thing, and then using an intelligence-led and risk-based approach to regulation. Then that can target the places where the harms are occurring. But really our hunters have to have an improved standard of behaviour and they have to be able to pull each other up in the field or challenge each other when they are doing the wrong thing, so that is really critical to getting that good compliance base to start with.

Georgie PURCELL: Okay. Mr Toop, you said you were present at Koorangie in 2017.

Simon TOOP: Correct.

Georgie PURCELL: I was present as well. Do you think the Game Management Authority lost control?

Simon TOOP: It was a situation that was incredibly difficult. There were more than 2000 hunters there. There were police, protesters and our staff. There was really not a lot that the organisation could do to stop what was going on there, and certainly the result and the response from the GMA was to say that it was totally unacceptable, what had happened. We then made –

Georgie PURCELL: Sorry, I am just short on time. I just would be keen to know why the Game Management Authority did not stay for the entirety of the day while the massacre was occurring on the wetlands.

Simon TOOP: Well, we had a whole range of – we had to rest our staff, we were there with multiple agencies, including Victoria Police, so we did what we could with the resources we had at the time.

Georgie PURCELL: And when literally thousands of birds had been illegally shot and, as we heard from Mr Buchhorn the other day, shooters were shooting before time in front of GMA officers, why was the first person arrested that morning a duck rescuer?

Simon TOOP: I am not sure that that is the case. I do not know the specific details, and I do not know that that is correct, but I might say a lot of those birds were not illegally shot. But then we changed. We went to government and said, in terms of recovery, that there is no obligation to recover those birds. So we gave a recommendation to government: you must introduce the regulation to actually make that –

Georgie PURCELL: But you would acknowledge they likely left them because they shot their bag limit already, which does make them illegally shot?

Simon TOOP: Well, either they did that or they could not be bothered to go and get them, and that was the thing that was most concerning. People were shooting birds, leaving them and then waiting for more birds to come in, and that is where you get wounding coming in.

Georgie PURCELL: I just want to pick up from Mrs McArthur's line of questioning. The birds that were taken from opening weekend and assessed by the GMA, you acknowledge that these birds were assessed by people who were not vets?

Simon TOOP: Correct.

Georgie PURCELL: You would know that Wildlife Victoria vets examined every single one of these birds on the wetlands when the injuries were more obvious rather than when they had decomposed after a few days.

Simon TOOP: Yes.

Georgie PURCELL: And I believe that they gave the Game Management Authority that veterinary report. Can you just confirm to the committee, because we are also not vets, that birds can die from pellets entering and exiting the body, and therefore no obvious shot within the body, or from injuries like hitting the ground?

Simon TOOP: Certainly from pass-throughs; yes, that can certainly occur.

Georgie PURCELL: And it would be difficult to determine pass-through based on your examination?

Simon TOOP: Well, that is why we plucked those birds, to see if there was any tissue damage, but because of a whole range of factors we could not identify that any of those birds had been, which might have been because they were so decomposed.

Georgie PURCELL: Do you acknowledge that you cannot say definitively that the birds who did not have shot in their body were not killed by shooters?

Simon TOOP: Yes.

Georgie PURCELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. In terms of the Pegasus report, I note there has been a significant increase in the compliance. Sorry to go back to the Pegasus report, but to go back to that, the compliance budget I note has increased quite significantly since then. I would just like to start by clarifying something. I believe, Mr Stevens, you said there are 21 AOs currently. Did you say there were 16 –

Graeme FORD: There are 16 in the compliance team, but there are another five who are in the game management team – the education team – but they are also authorised officers.

Michael GALEA: Sure.

Graeme FORD: Their substantive job is not as authorised officers, but when we do the duck opening and things like that, they act as authorised officers.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. So there are 16 in the compliance team and 21 who are authorised officers who can perform those functions. Thank you.

Graeme FORD: Correct.

Michael GALEA: How many vacancies do you have in those roles currently – any?

Paul STEVENS: Two.

Michael GALEA: Two. Okay. So you are pretty close to your target.

Paul STEVENS: Yes.

Michael GALEA: How much of an increase is that since 2017?

Paul STEVENS: When I started in December 2018, I had five authorised officers. Four of those left, so one remained. They are all new people since I have been at the GMA.

Graeme FORD: And there are four game managers who are also on the team, so nine, I suspect, nine to 21.

Michael GALEA: Sure. For those five, how much of their work is doing enforcement work?

Graeme FORD: Peak periods.

Michael GALEA: Sure. Thank you.

Graeme FORD: Definitely things like duck opening.

[NAME AWAITING VERIFICATION]

Paul STEVENS: As I have said, I think talking to Zach, who is in charge of that area, about 25 per cent might be around compliance. Both the teams work closely around the compliance but also the education part, so any regulator needs to have that education component as well.

Michael GALEA: Yes. Thank you. The Pegasus report found that non-compliant behaviours and unsanctioned breaches of the game-hunting laws were commonplace and widespread. Do you still believe that is the case?

Graeme FORD: Well, we still prosecute people, so there is clearly offending. Define 'widespread'. I am not quite sure what that would mean. Can it be better? Absolutely, yes. I think that is probably the best – it could certainly be better.

Michael GALEA: Sure. This probably does touch on the Chair's question as well, but how can you establish that you have demonstrated that improvement in this area since the report?

Paul STEVENS: Sorry, are you talking about the compliance area?

Michael GALEA: The compliance aspect, yes.

Paul STEVENS: We sort of track everything we do now. I am really keen around reporting what we do, what we are achieving and how we do that. We track, as you have probably seen from the website, if you are talking about the duck season, wetlands patrolled, game licences checked, hunter bags checked and protestors/rescuers we have engaged with, and then sort of categorise all the offences. If we go from 2019, the total offences were 36. If we go to this year, it was 45, noting some lag in between those years because of COVID and reduced seasons. We are actually trying to track and identify the offences per year and how they carry over from year to year. We are really big around just having all that information publicly available. That is one of the tools we are using in identifying the key themes in regard to offences we identify.

Graeme FORD: It is a bit anecdotal – and again, it is not hard data, so I accept that. Putting aside the COVID years, because there was very little hunting going on, but prior to the COVID years, we were receiving – again, I do not know the exact number off the top of my head – quite a number of complaints and video footage of incidents that we were being asked to investigate. We had very few this year. There was increased scrutiny on it, so that could work two ways: hunters being better behaved because they are aware of the increased scrutiny, but it could also mean increased scrutiny should have led to more incidences of reports of poor behaviour.

Michael GALEA: Could it also mean less hunting in general took place?

Graeme FORD: It could be too, yes. But that is a bit of a feel – there is a shift, but how sustainable and real that is we cannot tell you.

Michael GALEA: You mentioned that sort of awareness – and it was actually my next question too. Is peer pressure an effective tool for compliance?

Graeme FORD: I think it can be, absolutely. We see many regulators use peer pressure advertising to change behaviours. We would say if done the right way, and providing you have leaders in the sector standing up and condemning the poor behaviour, I think it can be, yes.

Michael GALEA: Do you prioritise that in your compliance efforts too?

Graeme FORD: We certainly work with hunting organisations about messaging and about the need to do the right thing and the need to conduct practices correctly.

Michael GALEA: Have you funded programs run by hunting associations with those messages?

Graeme FORD: Some are effective and some are not. I think we are disappointed that the take-up of the shotgun education program is lower than we would like it to be. Hence why we recommend that perhaps there should be more compulsion around that program.

Michael GALEA: Interesting. Has the GMA funded any of those initiatives that were run by hunting associations?

Simon TOOP: We have not – the GMA has not funded it. Government has provided some funding, but we have not directly.

The CHAIR: Through which department? DJSIR?

Graeme FORD: Well, whoever the minister at the time was.

The CHAIR: Yes, right. Okay.

Michael GALEA: I note from the licensed hunters knowledge survey from a few years ago, one of the questions, G13, said:

[QUOTE AWAITING VERIFICATION]

If you are hunting on public land, what is the best course of action if you see another person doing something that is against the game hunting laws?

Ninety-five per cent said, 'Report the incident to someone in authority,' which is good to see. Two per cent said, 'Give them a firm warning,' and 1 per cent said, 'Tell them to leave the hunting area immediately,' so 3 per cent we could categorise as peer pressure. These were marked on the results as an incorrect answer. So can I ask: I guess just in terms of peer pressure, are you saying it is an important tool but also is not a correct response?

Simon TOOP: I think that was more around not taking matters into your own hands – so report it to the authorities, but do not intervene and try and be the law.

Michael GALEA: Yes, okay. Thank you. In your 2021 response to the statement of expectations, the GMA stated that it would conduct a research project into the impacts of hunting on communities and business. Has this been undertaken?

Simon TOOP: No.

Graeme FORD: No, because the department has been doing that work, effectively. We have a small budget and small, limited resources, so we have been targeting where other entities have not been doing that work.

Michael GALEA: Do you expect the GMA to do that, or do you expect the department to be doing that?

Graeme FORD: Well, it is an interesting question, because we have actually seen through this inquiry process that for research like that, which is sort of getting into very policy-orientated outcomes, there is some scepticism about the GMA undertaking that work. That would be a discussion with the department. I think the department in the SHAP program is talking about redoing an economic study as well. But we have actually had conversations with the department saying that should not be just an economic contribution study, that should be a proper economic impact study.

The CHAIR: I am sure they will have something to say about that.

Graeme FORD: Yes.

Michael GALEA: If I can just quickly ask as well: in the same response to that statement of expectations letter it is stated that the:

GMA intelligence analyst provides annual report to GMA management to assist in identifying high risk non-compliant behaviour –

and it conducts –

... 50 compliance operations targeting high risk activities annually.

What does this intelligence analyst suggest is the high-risk non-compliant behaviour, and have the 50 compliance operations been completed, and what was the outcome?

Paul STEVENS: So the focus is and the reports are on the illegal spotlighting of deer, high-powered guns and public safety. That is the high risk. And we use that intel to drive operations but also proactive patrols – so going out targeting the areas that come through that intelligence. So in answer to your question, yes, that work has been done and is done, and it is monitored and reported upon in our annual report.

Further to that question, we get a monthly report from our intel analyst in regard to key themes over the previous month. So we get month on month, and then we get an annual report, which is then put into our annual report as well.

Michael GALEA: Sure. And the majority of that work is not related to native bird hunting. You said that is deer hunting.

Paul STEVENS: Correct.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

Graeme FORD: We are very concerned about illegal spotlighting of deer and at night high-powered rifles.

Paul STEVENS: Yes. If the committee likes, I can give you a breakdown of, over the last four years, a key theme. So if we look at if there is –

The CHAIR: Do you want to give that to us on notice?

Paul STEVENS: Yes, absolutely. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you. Thank you, Mr Toop, for giving us that information on the 88 birds dumped on Treasury Place. If that was not a complete summation, could you take it on notice and give us that detailed report?

Simon TOOP: I think they have actually provided that report to the committee.

Bev McARTHUR: Yes, good. Okay. All right. So of those –

Graeme FORD: If we have not –

Bev McARTHUR: Sorry – yes. Are we right? You admitted that nine of the 14 protected species had not been shot. If these groups are making irresponsible statements in fact without evidence, shouldn't they be called out for doctoring and manufacturing evidence?

Graeme FORD: I think we cannot definitively say that nine were not shot, and that was our point. So I am not sure that we would be in a position to call it out as being incorrect.

Bev McARTHUR: So given there were 88 birds on the steps, Wildlife Victoria only assessed 73 and the Coalition Against Duck Hunting and others supplied the rest, do you believe there is a likelihood the additional protected species had died of disease or other causes but were added to the birds to falsely inflate the supposed non-compliance?

Graeme FORD: Again, I do not think we could give a definitive answer on that.

Bev McARTHUR: If we potentially ban duck shooting, will the GMA be out of business in relation to ducks? They will become vermin then, won't they, and you will have no oversight over them.

Graeme FORD: Well, in other jurisdictions where duck hunting is not allowed as a recreational activity, there are pest destruction programs, so that is not –

Bev McARTHUR: You will just be concentrating on deer?

Graeme FORD: That is not a question for us, it would be a question for government.

Bev McARTHUR: Can we just go to the shotgun education program. It is like a defensive training course, really, isn't it? It is voluntary. It costs around \$250; I am not sure everybody wants to spend that money. So it is purely voluntary. It is clearly a voluntary course – it is not essential. So of those people that completed it, 20 per cent, I am told, got all the three correct answers, but 97 per cent chose the first right answer, but they did not understand that they had three options. So really, was it a valid assessment?

Graeme FORD: I think Simon has been clear about that, that the survey could have been constructed better.

Bev McARTHUR: Right.

Simon TOOP: One of the recommendations, rather than saying 'pick all the right answers', was actually to describe which answer to select – say, 'A, B and D are correct' or 'A is correct'. So a restructuring of the questions may have improved the understanding of the people who undertook it.

Bev McARTHUR: GMA has made efforts to adopt world's best practice, I understand. The committee has been advised several times that the North American wildlife management model is the world's best. Would you agree that North America actively engages hunters and rewards scientists for being engaged in hunting?

Graeme FORD: I do not know. I do not know if that is the case. Clearly there is a very different culture around hunting.

Simon TOOP: There is a different structure. The North American model encourages hunting, and a lot of the revenue that is collected by the state to administer its wildlife programs comes from hunting and fishing through a tax that is imposed. So I guess there is some self-interest from those state agencies to collect that money and therefore promote hunting so they can get the revenue.

Bev McARTHUR: Would it be worth your while engaging with these international world's best practices?

Graeme FORD: We have and we do.

Bev McARTHUR: Great. And you are developing the world's best practice here?

Graeme FORD: Certainly we have looked at the adaptive harvest model, how that is run there. Obviously we have visited Denmark and looked at how they do the wounding work, because we think that is some of the world's best practice around a wounding reduction program.

Bev McARTHUR: What is the comment from GMA about the fact the Pegasus report was leaked to Animals Australia?

Graeme FORD: We do not know.

Bev McARTHUR: You do not have a comment? Do you feel it was appropriate that GMA, upon learning about the Pegasus report, also created a report for Animals Australia?

Graeme FORD: Sorry, I do not understand –

Bev McARTHUR: Upon learning of the Pegasus report, did you create a report for Animals Australia?

Graeme FORD: I am not aware of – no.

Bev McARTHUR: If hunting were to be banned, do you have a view on how the various wetlands that are now managed and supported and enhanced, like the Heart Morass and Connewarre, would be maintained without duck hunters?

Graeme FORD: Again, that is outside – we are not land managers.

Bev McARTHUR: If we banned duck hunting, there would still be the same number of ducks around, but they would become vermin. So what do you say to the people that want to ban duck hunting – where you are involved in a regulatory program of duck hunting, but you would not be able to be involved if it were banned, but yet the same number of ducks, maybe even more, would be shot because they would be declared vermin?

Graeme FORD: Again, we cannot comment on what might happen there, but we would agree that some degree of regulatory effort around compliance of pest destruction would be sensible.

Bev McARTHUR: If protesters were barred from entering the water, would this ease the burden of GMA field staff and improve safety and compliance outcomes?

Graeme FORD: Already that is the law, unless they hold a hunting licence to enter those specific wetlands, which is, again, where the majority of duck hunting occurs, that is currently in place – before 10 am, 25 metres from the water's edge. That is the law.

Bev McARTHUR: So would it be better if they were banned from entering the water?

Graeme FORD: Well, we would always like everyone to obey the law.

Bev McARTHUR: Yes, and clearly they do not.

Graeme FORD: Some do, some do not – on both sides.

Bev McARTHUR: It is your job.

Paul STEVENS: It is indeed.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you. I think my time is up.

The CHAIR: Ms Copsey.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. Just returning to the shotgun education program. I misspoke before and called it a 'gun safety program', but actually it is closer to a proficiency test.

Graeme FORD: We knew what you meant.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. I just wanted to correct that. Does that program run anymore, the shotgun education program?

Simon TOOP: It does. It is administered by Field and Game and Sporting Shooters, and they put out a call for expressions from people who want to come along. They administer it really.

Katherine COPSEY: And what are the numbers? In the most recent round, how many people participated in that?

Simon TOOP: They are low. I do not know the exact numbers now from recent programs they might have run, but last time I looked was maybe 12 months ago or something and it was only about 300 people. That is why we have recommended that proficiency testing be introduced to make sure that people do come along. If you want to have the privilege of hunting, you have got to show that you have got the minimum skills to go hunting.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. Turning now to the experiences of people who are in areas close to where hunting takes place, we have heard some evidence during this hearing of community members having difficulty, essentially, at a point in time when they believe an offence is occurring. Taking probably the easiest example, it was hearing shots that are occurring before they are supposed to be during the season and trying to report that. How does the GMA approach enforcing those requirements?

Paul STEVENS: I think it is important to understand that GMA are not a first responder. Any report that comes through is actually captured and reported upon. So it might be that if we get a theme of illegal hunting or early shooting, we will then target a regulatory response. We will not get a complaint come through and all of a sudden send and divert staff from what has already been identified in our approach for a particular day. That can change, and it is a living document where we change and update it accordingly as required. It is very dynamic, as you could probably appreciate during the duck season. So if we get a number of complaints for particular areas, we will then start to focus on that area or that type of conduct to try to get the regulatory outcome we are after.

Katherine COPSEY: So would it be fair to say if someone reports through the GMA's website and puts in a report that they have heard shots being fired, there is not really a hope that the person who is illegally discharging a firearm is going to face enforcement action?

Graeme FORD: I think without us witnessing that occurring, it would be a difficult offence to prove unless someone made an admission that they shot. But we do prosecute people. We have got one this year I think from early shooting. But just simply with the practicalities even if we were responding, for most early shootings it is minutes rather than hours prior to the legal start time. Any distance you travel would mean that time would pass. Shooting generally occurs in regional areas and rural areas where other forms of shooting occur. So again, without eyewitness testimony I think it would be a very difficult offence to prove.

Katherine COPSEY: What would you suggest that residents who are concerned about this behaviour do?

Graeme FORD: Well, they should keep reporting it. As Paul said, if we continue to build up a knowledge base that this is a particular problem in a particular area, we can target it.

Katherine COPSEY: We have also heard some evidence of people who are concerned that they cannot identify areas in their neighbourhood where people are going to be shooting ducks. What level of confidence do you have that you can provide accurate advice about that to members of the public?

Graeme FORD: Well, the land tenure provides advice, but there are of course other things that overlay that. But again, we would suggest that is the land manager's function in the More to Explore app to provide that advice. We have some general knowledge, but we are not experts in the land classification system.

Katherine COPSEY: So who should they contact instead?

Simon TOOP: I think that More to Explore tool is a very good one. I do not know if you have had the time to have a look at it. But using the land databases that DEECA has, it has developed this tool so people can get on there. It is not there specifically for hunters, so if a member of the public wants to know where the hunting takes place in a particular area and the different forms of hunting, they could certainly use that app to find out whether it is or is not open to hunting.

Katherine COPSEY: We have had some concerns raised, though, that the data available in that tool is not complete. So where would a member of the public go, if they were unable to get information through that app, to determine whether there is going to be shooting activity in an area where they might want to, for example, walk their dog?

Simon TOOP: So a question for DEECA, I think, this afternoon. But the team who administers that app, they are always looking for feedback and there is a feedback function where they can provide that information. My understanding is they do their best to go and verify those things and update the maps as queries come through. So the team has been really terrific in terms of reaching out to communities and saying, 'Let us know your feedback and we will explore those areas for you.'

Katherine COPSEY: I just want to turn now to some general questions about your workload. You do not just work on duck shooting and the duck season, but what percentage of the GMA's time, effort and resources would you say goes into administering the annual duck-shooting season – preparation and compliance and assessments and review and training and education?

Graeme FORD: It depends on the season, but we think that it is probably anywhere between 25 per cent to a third of the effort, you know, if you added up hours and FTEs. But we do not do activity-based rostering or anything like that, or we do not keep records on activity-based – but that is our assessment. But obviously a longer season would require more resources than a shorter season.

Katherine COPSEY: And what percentage, again, of active game licence-holders are just waterbirds? So as a percentage of overall game licences, what percentage are duck shooting?

Graeme FORD: It is 23,000 out of 60-odd thousand licence-holders.

Katherine COPSEY: And what percentage of game bird licences are active in a given year?

Graeme FORD: Well, 55 per cent were, I think, in 2022, but that varies somewhat.

Katherine COPSEY: Do any of your officers work exclusively on duck and quail hunting?

Graeme FORD: No. In the seasons they may, but we have not got officers devoted to a particular function, no.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Watt.

Sheena WATT: Thank you. I think I am last, is that right?

The CHAIR: You sure are.

Sheena WATT: There we go. Okay. I want to start with hunter education. So I have noted the draft wounding action plan says that a minimum standard for hunter skill is required to reduce wounding, yet these minimum standards do not exist, is that correct?

Simon TOOP: No. Part of the action is to develop that program. We know what the Danes do; I do not think that is enough. But that is something we will do in developing that proficiency program.

Sheena WATT: And is there an anticipated time when that may be available?

Simon TOOP: Well, we are still waiting for government to approve the plan, so it is currently with them for consideration.

Sheena WATT: So it is with government for consideration.

Graeme FORD: We would require funding and regulatory change.

Sheena WATT: And there are regulatory changes. Just on hunter education, there are modules that have been made available with yourselves. Do you have any statistics on their uptake and use?

Simon TOOP: They have only literally just been released in the last month.

Sheena WATT: Interest, enthusiasm – where is it at?

Graeme FORD: Perhaps, we cannot give you that on those recent ones, but, say, for the –

Sheena WATT: Any others?

Graeme FORD: dispatch guide, that is our most visited page on the website, the clips around the dispatch guide. Surprisingly, internationally is a large dipper into that program, particularly from the US. As far as we are aware, we are the only organisation that has actually done something like that, around providing advice on the humane dispatch. So I guess they will be taken up, is our expectation.

Sheena WATT: Yes, okay, good.

Simon TOOP: And if we do introduce a theory test, they will be critical to informing people's knowledge so they can pass the test.

Graeme FORD: That is how they have been prepared, on the premise that that may happen.

Sheena WATT: Yes. And so the game licences, they are valid for up to three years, is that correct?

Simon TOOP: It is either a one or three-year licence option.

Sheena WATT: They are a three-year licence. Would you have any renewal rate information? What is the average renewal rate of folks that have one?

Graeme FORD: No, I do not know the exact – so how many new hunters a year versus how many are dropping off; we could probably I think assess that, but I do not know off the top of my head. If you want the information, we can perhaps look to what we can drag out of the database.

Sheena WATT: Look, if that is possible. I am also interested to understand how many hunters in any year would lose their game licence.

Graeme FORD: How many would lose? I think last year we took two, Simon?

Paul STEVENS: Two. We proposed, I think, six, and –

Sheena WATT: So six were proposed.

Paul STEVENS: proposed, and two actually had their game licences revoked.

Sheena WATT: And who is the ultimate decision-maker on that?

Paul STEVENS: The CEO.

Sheena WATT: The CEO.

Graeme FORD: And they can be challenged in VCAT?

Paul STEVENS: Yes.

Sheena WATT: And courts and others if required?

Graeme FORD: Yes.

Paul STEVENS: Yes. We have a committee set up to assess those. So staff will put through a referral, we do an assessment process. Ultimately the decision-maker is the CEO of the GMA.

Graeme FORD: That was duck shooting. There was, I think, a deer hunter as well.

Sheena WATT: So that six included deer – is that right?

Graeme FORD: No, no, I think the six were all around duck shooting.

Paul STEVENS: Yes.

Sheena WATT: Okay. Just on juniors, we have not explored too much around juniors and the provisional licences. So do they need to undertake any WIT before they are able to hold a full licence? What is the transition from provisional to full licence?

Graeme FORD: To hold a full licence, yes, they do.

Simon TOOP: So the provisional licence gives a junior hunter the opportunity to undertake hunting for one season. That is both where there are tests involved – so that is for hound hunting and duck hunting – but then after that, if they want to hunt again, then they have to go through the same requirements as anybody else where they would have to pass the WIT. It is a once-off season –

Graeme FORD: One season only.

Simon TOOP: where you do not have to pass the test.

Sheena WATT: So a one-season-only provisional licence?

Simon TOOP: But you have got to hunt under the direct supervision of somebody who has passed all the testing requirements.

Sheena WATT: Okay. There you go. That is a good one for me. The lead shot: do you have any information about where it is actually permitted?

Graeme FORD: It is quail. It is allowed when shooting quail on private land. It is not allowed on the game reserves, is it? Or it is?

Simon TOOP: Yes, it is.

Graeme FORD: So quail shooting.

Simon TOOP: So for any quail hunting you can use lead shot.

Sheena WATT: Okay. And does the GMA have a position on the use of lead shot?

Simon TOOP: Yes. So we have recommended to government to phase out the use of lead shot for quail hunting and also for all ammunition, including deer hunting.

Sheena WATT: For all ammunition types on all game licences?

Simon TOOP: Correct.

Graeme FORD: Used in game hunting, which is the bounds of our remit, but yes, in all game hunting we are suggesting or we would suggest a phase-out of the use of lead.

Sheena WATT: How long has the GMA held that position?

Simon TOOP: We gave advice to government 18 months ago I think –

Graeme FORD: At least.

Simon TOOP: on lead reform, so maybe two years ago.

Graeme FORD: Again, we prioritise regulatory change. The game regs were due for renewal, so that was when we obviously provided advice.

Sheena WATT: And on firearms, we had heard that one of the particular firearms that is used actually discharges some plastics that are left –

Graeme FORD: Wads, plastic wads. So every shotgun cartridge –

Sheena WATT: That is the term?

Graeme FORD: has a cup that holds the shot as it travels through the barrel, and of course that shoots out into wherever it is being used.

Sheena WATT: And the use of this new one has actually led to some littering about the place. Is that something that GMA has seen?

Graeme FORD: We again would suggest that a change should be made to phase out the use of non-compostable plastics in hunting.

Sheena WATT: Okay. That was what I was going to get to.

Simon TOOP: So we have recommended for the shotgun shells that they be not single-use plastics and for the wads, which cannot be recovered, that they be compostable plastics. And there are some manufacturers in the world – this is sort of gathering a head of steam throughout the world – who are now making the shells, so the overall container, if you like, of the shot, compostable as well. So we are moving away to any plastics into the environment.

Sheena WATT: And who is it that has the ultimate decision on the type of acceptable firearms?

Graeme FORD: Acceptable firearms – it is in the regs that these guns can be used for duck hunting.

Sheena WATT: And who determines that?

Graeme FORD: The minister.

Simon TOOP: It is the minister. The minister makes the regulations.

Sheena WATT: That is the minister. Okay, that is helpful to know. The regulation of the authority to control wildlife permits – is that GMA or is that another agency?

Simon TOOP: No, that is a DEECA matter.

Graeme FORD: No. It is a DEECA function.

Sheena WATT: That is a DEECA matter. I will take my questions related to that to DEECA. I have 4 seconds left, so I will leave it at that, and thank you very much for being here.

The CHAIR: That is it for us. Thank you very much for your participation today and your support over the course of the inquiry. I have got a couple of things if you could take on notice: at the very top of the hearing, Mr Ford, you mentioned priority harms a couple of times. Could you on notice give the committee what those priority harms are?

Graeme FORD: In relation to the native bird hunters?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Graeme FORD: Yes.

The CHAIR: You mentioned 50–50 public versus private for duck hunting. If you have got any advice as to a change over time or trends over time for those figures, that would be –

Graeme FORD: We can do that. It is probably just not a long trendline – a few years.

The CHAIR: More than one data point is useful.

Simon TOOP: Since 2009, we have.

The CHAIR: Whatever it is you can do online, that would be great. One question I did not get to was: we heard from Arthur Rylah about the contracting that you do of people to conduct abundance surveys. Can you give us the cost of that survey work?

Simon TOOP: I can tell you that now if you like.

The CHAIR: Or you could just give it to me on notice.

Graeme FORD: That is all right.

The CHAIR: And any of the stats that you have got about locals who view your educational videos that Ms Watt was referring to. That would be useful as well.

Graeme FORD: Okay.

The CHAIR: There may be other things that people want to place on notice, but those were the things that leapt out at me. With that, we thank you.

We will adjourn for 10 minutes.

Witnesses withdrew.