

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Budget estimates 2020-21 (Symes)**

Melbourne—Friday, 18 December 2020

### **MEMBERS**

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

Ms Bridget Vallenge



**WITNESSES**

Ms Jaelyn Symes, MLC, Minister for Agriculture,

Mr Simon Phemister, Secretary,

Ms Penelope McKay, Associate Secretary,

Mr Matt Lowe, Deputy Secretary, Agriculture,

Mr Nathan Lambert, Executive Director, Forestry and Game, Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting. We pay our respects to them, their culture, their elders past, present and future and elders from other communities who may be here today.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2020–21 Budget Estimates. Its aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

Note that witnesses and members may remove their masks when speaking to the committee but should replace them afterwards.

All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

We welcome Minister Symes, in the first instance for the consideration of the agriculture portfolio, and we invite you to make a 10-minute presentation, which will be followed by questions from the committee.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Just a note: Ms Vallence has a prior engagement and will join us as soon as she can, just for the record.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Thank you, Mr Riordan. Ms Symes.

**Ms SYMES:** Thank you, Chair, and good morning, everyone. You have been doing a stellar job. I know it is the last day. You actually look remarkably fresh, so hopefully—

**Mr D O'Brien** interjected.

**Ms SYMES:** So thank you for having me and my amazing team today, and we will take you through the agriculture portfolio to begin with.

**Visual presentation.**

**Ms SYMES:** As many of you would appreciate, agriculture is a critical industry for Victoria and continues to be central to our way of life and our economy, particularly as we recover from the pandemic. Victoria's farmers and agribusinesses feed us, clothe us and export our products to the world. Ag creates essential jobs in our regions and supports the productive management of our landscapes. The sector contributes \$15.9 billion to our economy and supports 81 000 jobs, many of which are in our country areas. We certainly continue to punch above our weight when it comes to exports. Victoria's successful ag industries contributed \$14.5 billion in food and fibre exports in 2019–20, which is 28 per cent of the nation's total and an increase on the year before.

The Andrews Labor government is certainly backing our agriculture sector with a new strategy for the sector. I launched this on Wednesday, and I think there are copies available for members along with the presentation. It

is about helping the industry to grow in the face of constant change so that it remains a cornerstone of the state's economy and delivers better returns for farmers. We need to ensure the whole industry can take advantage of new approaches that not only protect our industry and our state's enviable position as a leader in ag but also help it grow to its full potential.

In the recent budget we announced \$115 million in funding to develop and deliver on key initiatives contained in this strategy. Using the themes and commitments in the strategy as a starting point, this funding will be used over four years to grow and modernise Victorian agriculture, aid the sector's recovery from the impacts of the pandemic, build resilience to future shocks, such as bushfire, drought and variable conditions, and support the vision for agriculture to continue to be the cornerstone of Victoria's regional economy. You can see in the slide the particular initiatives that are being funded. As it comes to the strategy, the government will work in partnership with industry to ensure our work aligns with their future plans, building on the regular engagement with our industry reference group, which we established in March and have been meeting regularly to deal with the challenges of 2020.

Obviously it has been a difficult year for many people in our community, and the agricultural sector has not been completely immune. There have been significant challenges, including bushfires, drought, COVID and a serious avian influenza outbreak and also ongoing dry conditions impacting our farmers. We supported Victorians during and after the bushfires in the north-east and Gippsland, leading efforts to deliver animal welfare relief, agricultural loss and damage assessment and recovery services to primary producers. Agriculture Victoria engaged with over 1400 farmers across the impacted areas in the immediate aftermath of the fires, and they continue to support farmers on a range of issues, such as fencing and stock water management.

We continued to roll out our drought packages, helping to ease the burden of dry conditions on farmers, including household relief, on-farm infrastructure grants, technical farm management support and mental health initiatives. We worked with industry and community to provide first-rate biosecurity and emergency response, which was to Australia's largest avian influenza outbreak. We responded quickly to farmers' and producers' needs throughout the pandemic, with info, pivoting opportunities, market access support and continuous exchange of ideas. We have committed to supporting Victoria's agriculture sector to grow, modernise and recover from the impacts of COVID, and fortunately for many farmers and growers this year it is proving to be a bumper year. It is great to hear positive stories from our farmers, and they love sending me footage of their harvest crops from their headers, which is a delight.

COVID obviously did create challenges, and we needed to ensure that the industry could keep operating and supporting our food supply chains. From the beginning we made sure that where health restrictions heavily affected industry we proactively reached out and provided support to make sure they could keep operating. I was also responsible for leading a national response to border challenges for ag workers, including bees that had to cross the border for almond pollination up in the north. In response to the challenges created by the pandemic for our ag sector we launched the \$50 million agricultural workplace plan, which has supported businesses through business adaptation grants, job matching and facilitation, and skills development. A particular component of direct job creation included more than 140 roles created with catchment management authorities and DELWP to implement projects particularly targeted at those things that are important to agriculture, such as control of pests and weeds, fruit fly and revegetation. We also developed e-commerce and marketplace transition support. In September I announced a targeted package of support to help address seasonal worker shortages brought on by the pandemic, boosting efforts of our Ag Workforce Plan, including continuation of business adaptation grants, temporary solutions to increase accommodation for seasonal workers and \$1 million to have targeted support, including seasonal workforce coordinators and CALD engagement workers to encourage people into the job vacancies.

Something that probably would have got a lot of attention if it had not been 2020 was a very large avian influenza outbreak. Since 31 July this year there were three different strains of AI detected across six farms in Victoria. Agriculture Victoria had to move very quickly and effectively to contain this threat. Ag Vic is still undertaking activities to eradicate the disease, working closely with property owners and industry since that time. All infected sites have now been depopulated and decontaminated, while infected properties continue to be under quarantine and movement controls remain in place for declared areas. An incremental approach to removing the remaining restrictions is underway. This is an enormous effort. It really showcases the strengths in protecting biosecurity, which was made possible through last year's budget. Some of you may remember

there was a massive boost to this sector, and it was an enormous effort from Ag Vic to ensure that poultry and egg producers were protected.

The budget also contains a pest management program—\$6.271 million over four years to reduce the impacts on agricultural productivity, biodiversity and communities through the continuation of the current fox and wild dog bounty. The fox and wild dog bounty rewards eligible Victorian hunters for their efforts in contributing to fox and wild dog management with \$10 payments for foxes killed and \$120 for each wild dog. These are incredibly popular programs, and it is good that we have been able to extend them in this year's budget.

As you would know, last year we announced the *Victorian Forestry Plan*. This is a 30-year forward-looking plan to support a more sustainable future for the forest industry and provide the sector's workers with much-needed certainty. The plan provides \$120 million of dedicated funding to support the transition of the industry, workers and communities over the next 10 years. We are supporting existing native forestry business to take advantage of new opportunities, and we have already had 12 mills and harvest and haul contractors take up our business transition vouchers to undertake financial assessments of their businesses and identify their strengths and opportunities for change. We also have the Victorian Timber Innovation Fund, which is now offering grants of up to \$100 000 to businesses eager to progress exciting new ideas or ways of doing things differently. The *Victorian Forestry Plan* is about positioning our timber industry as a leader and innovator in the sector as we transition away from native forest harvesting.

In exciting initiatives, we have partnered with the commonwealth to fund the creation of the Gippsland centre of the National Institute for Forest Products Innovation. The centre will support transferable research and innovation projects over the next four years. The projects include areas such as plantation management, timber processing, wood fibre recovery, advanced manufacturing, things like genomics in tree breeding and new sawing and gluing techniques.

Precious timber that was burnt in the fires is being saved from going to waste thanks to investment from our government. There was significant damage to softwood plantations and native forest particularly in eastern Victoria, with more than 1.2 hectares of public native forest estate burnt as well as 6400 hectares of pine plantations, so salvaging and storing timber is way that we can ensure that that resource does not go to waste and it also reduces the amount of logging in unburnt areas.

Animal welfare was a feature of the budget as well—\$11 million for the RSPCA, \$2.9 million to support organisations that provide desexing of cats and dogs for disadvantaged Victorians, \$5.2 million to help pounds, shelters and rescue groups with rehoming pets and also a focus on horses.

Finally, Chair, I just point out that in the budget also we are delivering another sustainable hunting action plan, which will build on the previous one. There is \$5.3 million committed to the delivery of this plan, which is about ensuring safe, responsible hunting to those who partake in game animal hunting but also pest management measures.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. I will pass the call to Mr Richard Riordan, Deputy Chair.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Thank you, Chair. Welcome, Minister. It is good to have, for Danny and me, the most important industry up for the last day to bring us home with the PAEC hearings. And one of the most important parts of the most important industry in the state, agriculture, of course is the workforce issue, which I am sure you are well aware of. The Working for Victoria initiative allocates \$87.5 million in 2021 in budget paper 3, page 83, and that is on top of \$500 million allocated the year before. As we are now in sort of peak harvest time, this scheme is intended to link jobseekers with farm jobs.

The *Weekly Times* reported on Tuesday the 15th that 91 per cent of agriculture roles advertised have still not been fulfilled. Certainly with the amount of emails through my office I absolutely confirm that. How can your government rationalise continued expenditure on a program that delivers nowhere near the 15 000 to 20 000 workers that we need in agriculture in Victoria?

**Ms SYMES:** Thank you for your question, Mr Riordan. You are certainly correct: it is an issue that I am well versed in, and it is something that we are addressing every day. In the Working for Victoria program we carved out \$50 million for agriculture through the Agricultural Workforce Plan right at the start in April, because obviously with the border closures and knowing the heavy reliance of the industry on international workers, we

forecast that there were going to be worker shortages. In fact worker shortages and difficulty attracting labour in agriculture—particularly in the horticultural sector—is not new, so knowing that it would be an additional challenge this year, it was important to start to identify ways of attracting perhaps a new audience into that workforce.

When we announced the Agricultural Workforce Plan it was just ahead of the federal government's JobKeeper and JobSeeker initiatives, which I would argue have had a positive impact for people who are looking for work but perhaps created a bit of a disincentive for displaced workers to take up opportunities in the agricultural space. So we have continued to think about new initiatives. In my presentation I referred to the CALD coordinators and the seasonal workforce coordinators who are on the ground working with industry, thinking of ways to attract new people to industry. We have had some success with school leavers and also the CALD community in continuing to identify and promote the amazing opportunities that are available.

You may have seen our Big Harvest campaign, which is about using real workers to promote the jobs that are available for this season. And also we have got a lot of financial supports, which we are hoping will provide greater incentives for workers. So you can have your accommodation and your travel paid for if you take up a seasonal workforce position, which is really important because, as we know, with a lot of those positions the hourly rate might have their accommodation deducted by their employer, which is appropriate but with our incentives it means that people are getting more money in their pockets. So we continue to create a lot of attention on this issue. We want more people to come and work in agriculture. We are encouraging farmers to put their jobs that are available on the Working for Victoria platform, because there are a lot of people that are on there—jobseekers looking for positions—

**Mr RIORDAN:** Minister, just for the time that we have got, many, many farm enterprises that contact me tell me that there is no shortage of people prepared to come to Australia—there are people that generally annually come out to work on the farms—but the government has done nothing or put no mechanisms in place to support a quarantine program to enable the necessary labour to come. We have talked about it, you have sold us, we have identified it, we know about it, but what have we actually done to ameliorate the problem?

**Ms SYMES:** Sure. Sorry—I thought your question was predominantly around the Working for Victoria platform. As I identified, the farmers rely on a mixture of workers. If you look at the pre-pandemic harvest workforce make-up, of 20 000 workers 13 000 were international backpackers, so not many of them are left and none of those are coming. Three thousand people were made up from the South Pacific Islander workforce program, which we have opted into, and then the remaining workforce was around 4000 locals. So obviously we are not going to meet the same ratio this year as we have met pre COVID. We acknowledge that a core base of international workers is something the industry is calling for and something that we want to help facilitate.

I am pretty sure you had Lisa Neville this week; I am sure you have gone through some of the quarantine issues in our hotel program in relation to the fact that we have just stood that up. I think we are about 10, 11 days into that program, which is prioritising the repatriation of citizens. When it comes to the seasonal workers that we have opted into, obviously we have been progressing opportunities to bring South Pacific Islanders to the state of Victoria. We started negotiations with other states because we did not have a quarantine program when we opted into the South Pacific program, so we been working with other jurisdictions to identify opportunities for people to quarantine in other states. There is a facility in the Northern Territory—

**Mr RIORDAN:** But we still have not been able to deliver the workers into Victoria through any of those initiatives, have we?

**Ms SYMES:** Those efforts continue, Mr Riordan, and I really hope that I have got more to say in coming days.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Okay. Minister, on Monday, 14 December, it was revealed that the Andrews government poured \$150 000 into a farm jobs scheme to be run by the VFF. The website, which cost \$100 000 to test and build, was only live for six weeks and generated eight jobs. With \$87.5 million allocated towards the Working for Victoria initiative and nothing to show for it, can you advise or table for us exactly how much of the \$87.5 million is or has been slated for expenditure on the following two items: website establishment and ongoing maintenance, and social media and associated marketing costs?

**Ms SYMES:** Just with the VFF's program?

**Mr RIORDAN:** No, with your Working for Victoria initiative.

**Ms SYMES:** Just to be clear, the Working for Victoria initiative is a broad program where we are encouraging farmers and displaced workers to come and connect, so that is one opportunity for farmers to identify workers and indeed workers to identify available harvest jobs. That is not the only platform that people can use—

**Mr RIORDAN:** But is that figure of only eight jobs generated—

**Ms SYMES:** I think you are referring to two different programs. The Working for Victoria platform has been successful. I have got a case study with Bimbimbi Organic Berries; they are a company near Mansfield. Working with the Working for Victoria platform, the owners found all 20 of their workers that they need from now until May next year. There have been lots of examples of workers connecting through the Working for Victoria platform and the federal Harvest Trail platform. Or indeed they might use the platform as an opportunity to connect but then it is not necessarily facilitated through our platform; we cannot really capture the data of how that happens. I went to Koala Cherries in Yarck just the other week, and they also have been identifying workers through the Working for Victoria platform.

**Mr RIORDAN:** In terms of that specific question of identifying the website establishment and ongoing maintenance costs and social media and associated marketing costs, can you—

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, Mr Riordan—a point of order.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Just a really quick one: I just wanted that budget paper reference. Did you give it at the beginning?

**Mr RIORDAN:** Yes, I did, as always, just for you, Member for Cranbourne—we always tell you. It is budget paper 3, page 83.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Great; thank you.

**Ms SYMES:** Well, I think, Mr Riordan, in relation to the infrastructure of the Working for Victoria platform, I guess I am a beneficiary of that platform. I do not administer the platform, I just encourage farmers to sign up to it with their jobs so that potentially misplaced workers can identify the opportunities that are available.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr Gary Maas, MP.

**Mr MAAS:** Thanks, Chair. And thanks, Minister and departmental team, for your appearance this morning. Minister, if I could take you to budget paper 3 at pages 14 and 15, there is reference there to the government's investment in agricultural colleges. Would you be able to tell us more about what that investment will include?

**Ms SYMES:** Thank you, Mr Maas, and that is a great investment and announcement as part of the Victorian budget. Obviously you have got a copy of the new strategy that we have released, but one of the important things for the future of the sector is being able to attract the future workforce. Agriculture is very diverse and has traditionally been often confined to generational farmers. You want to make sure that it is not just the sons and daughters of our existing farmers that are attracted to the industry, and you cannot attract people to the industry if educational facilities are not up to scratch, so in this budget we have allocated \$50 million for the agricultural college modernisation program, which will help attract more Victorians into exciting careers in agriculture. We plan on delivering this over four years to help existing agricultural colleges but also other training providers to upgrade the facilities that they need to ensure future farmers and agricultural professionals get the very best offerings. There are three agricultural colleges that have been allocated funding out of the bucket. The University of Melbourne's Dookie campus, Longerenong College and Marcus Oldham College will share in \$20 million of the funding for upgrades of predominantly student accommodation and teaching facilities, and the remaining \$30 million will create a Future Agriculture Skills Capacity Fund to enable other institutions to access funding to provide agricultural services, whether they are TAFEs or other higher ed.

**Mr MAAS:** Great. Thanks, Minister. So how does the investment assist those mentioned colleges meet their educational needs in the coming years?

**Ms SYMES:** So with the three colleges that have been particularly called out, they are pretty clear on what they want. They have got future plans, so they are pretty thrilled that we have been able to provide direct

funding for them. So if we start with Dookie, they have got more than 450 students that are studying agricultural courses on campus each year, and they also hold training events, particularly around activities such as shearing and wool handling, and they have really awesome career days. They will receive \$11 million to build staff, student and conference accommodation for up to 130, so expanding their offering and their ability to generate their own income, and the total costs of those projects are estimated to be \$22 million.

Longerenong College has more than 100 full-time students, with 90 who are currently living on campus. They deliver courses for more than 40 apprenticeships and targeted training events for universities and high schools, and over the past four years enrolments in residential student numbers have increased by 30 per cent. It is really important to make investments in this growing college, so they will receive \$6.5 million to build student apartment accommodation for 33 people to certainly address current shortages and meet the accommodation needs for their projected growth.

Marcus Oldham College offer higher education qualifications in ag, agribusiness and equine management, and they have diplomas through to masters-level qualifications. They are also currently experiencing growth, which is fantastic for the industry. They are going to receive \$2.5 million to support the construction, again, of accommodation, so 30 new student bedrooms at their Waurn Ponds campus.

**Mr MAAS:** Terrific. Thank you. How will the investment enable us to meet the demands of Victoria's growing agricultural sector?

**Ms SYMES:** Well, as I guess Mr Riordan's question identified, we have always got worker shortages in agriculture, whether it is meeting the demands of harvest or indeed attracting and retaining quality workers, particularly in some of our remote regions. If you go out to the Mallee, for example, probably the biggest message I hear from the agricultural sector is the difficulty to attract workers. So we want to expand that pool. We want to have champions in the industry to encourage other predominantly young people to explore these options. But again, the standard that people expect for their educational offerings can be a deterrent if they are not up to scratch, so it is really important to make these investments in colleges and facilities. One, students deserve it, but, two, it makes the experience much more attractive and therefore potentially attracts a broader audience to what is an industry that we want to continue to grow and thrive.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you. If I could take you now to the topic of the Agriculture Energy Investment Plan extension and specifically budget paper 3, pages 83 and 85, these show the successful Agriculture Energy Investment Plan programs being given a \$30 million boost. What will this boost deliver?

**Ms SYMES:** This is a great outcome in the budget as well—a really popular program. The agriculture energy investment program is part not only of our government's commitment to tackling climate change but our commitment to partner with industry to build a more resilient, energy-efficient and internationally competitive ag sector. The plan provides investment that supports enhancements to energy efficiency and energy productivity, and this \$30 million enables the program to continue and to indeed meet any unmet demand. When you announce programs in government you always want them to be popular; you want people to take them up. But this one was pretty popular and oversubscribed, so it was important to make sure that we could meet that demand. An additional \$30 million means that we can progress any of the grants that are in the pipeline but also ensure that new farmers can access the grants as well.

They are pretty exciting. I have been to a lot of farms where they have shown me the technology that they have brought on farm. Just recently a fodder-producing farmer in Mooroopna was very excited to show me his electricity bills and how they were reducing with the about \$100 000 investment in solar panels to run his irrigation system. He could see month by month the dramatic impact of that investment that we contributed to, which enabled him to make that investment which he will get back on returns. It not only makes his job easier and more profitable but ensures that the next generation can take over from him. He is a 72-year-old farmer. This technology was also making his job a little bit easier.

**Mr MAAS:** Terrific, thank you. I think with the time remaining I might just leave it there. Thank you.

**Ms SYMES:** No problem.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Maas. Mr Sam Hibbins, MP.



**Mr HIBBINS:** Thanks, Chair, and thank you, Minister and your team, for appearing this morning. Our environment and particularly our native forests have already suffered so much through the bushfires, and we know the evidence that going in and now logging burnt forest is just even more devastating for our native species. How on earth can you justify spending now \$11.2 million on logging our burnt forests?

**Ms SYMES:** Thank you, Mr Hibbins—and it is not an unexpected question from you. It is certainly something that we discuss regularly in the upper house, and it is a divisive issue with varying views about what is appropriate and what is not—but the \$11.2 million is certainly warranted to facilitate timber salvage operations following the bushfires.

I visited Corryong just the other week to see firsthand the harvesting of those damaged forests and what would go to waste and effectively be unsalvageable. It is pretty important work that they are doing, because if not, the trees would be left to deteriorate, and it would mean that we would have to look at harvesting unburnt areas to make up our timber supply commitment. The funding will leverage also \$7.5 million from the commonwealth, because they have got a program of transport and storage of salvaged timber. So it is a concerted effort to make use of this important resource.

There were, I think I said in my presentation, 6400 hectares of plantation that were burnt in Victoria last summer—and that is just in our region. Obviously across the border in New South Wales they had devastating losses as well and are also undertaking recovery of burnt timber operations.

**Mr HIBBINS:** When you say it would go to waste—it would go to waste for the logging industry, but those burnt forests are actually critical to the environment.

**Ms SYMES:** Mr Hibbins, this is a contentious issue with varying scientific experts that argue various points of view. I would point out that salvage harvesting is a standard practice with established environmental protections developed to mitigate the risks specific to harvesting in fire-affected landscapes and has previously been implemented post bushfires in our state. The recovery of burnt timber will enable VicForests to continue to meet our forestry plan in terms of our supply targets and maintaining a supply to mills, which as you know will be phased out by 2030.

VicForests is currently salvaging in the north-east and Tambo forest management areas, where the trees are dead and the forest has very low biodiversity value. VicForests is also harvesting in East Gippsland in lower biodiversity value burnt areas following extensive habitat surveys, and salvage operations are only being conducted in areas that were already going to be harvested, meaning that the harvest of unburnt areas of forest can be deferred. There is no harvesting in unburnt areas inside fire footprints this year, and as you might appreciate, VicForests works closely with DELWP and the Office of the Conservation Regulator with regard to all of those operations in those areas. You may recall that there were six months before we started salvage operations, and that was to enable those important works with the OCR to ensure that the appropriate harvesting could be completed.

**Mr HIBBINS:** You have indicated that there are a range of views. Are you able to provide the committee with any scientific evidence that refutes the much-canvassed public evidence that salvage logging is actually incredibly damaging to the environment?

**Ms SYMES:** It would be in conjunction with the OCR. So I can certainly furnish more information on why salvage harvest logging is a policy that the government supports.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Okay; thank you. You have just indicated, ‘Oh, well, if we weren’t logging the burnt forest, you’re avoiding logging unburnt forest’. Now, is that because of existing contracts that you have got, or is that because of the legislative requirement that you have?

**Ms SYMES:** We want to meet existing supply contracts. We have a commitment to industry to do so.

**Mr HIBBINS:** So the fact that vast quantities of forests have been burnt does not change those contracts?

**Ms SYMES:** Not when you can use the burnt timber as a resource.

**Mr HIBBINS:** VicForests have lost in their annual report \$7.5 million, and now you are giving them another \$11.2 million. How much of the \$11.2 million has been spent already?

**Ms SYMES:** Mr Hibbins, I might refer to Mr Lambert in relation to the specifics of the figures.

**Mr LAMBERT:** Just to check, sorry, Mr Hibbins, you are referring to the \$11.2 million that was the salvage support?

**Mr HIBBINS:** Yes.

**Mr LAMBERT:** I think \$4.2 million of that is being made available to VicForests for native timber salvage. We would have to take on notice the exact number that has been spent to date, but I think it would be about a quarter of that amount.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Okay; thank you. How long have I got left—a minute. The *Sustainable Hunting Action Plan*, is that promoting or regulating hunting? What is the aim of that plan?

**Ms SYMES:** The plan is about facilitating legal recreational hunting. So it is about ensuring that it is safe, sustainable, and that those appropriate practices are promoted, but it is also about regulating and promoting good behaviour.

**Mr HIBBINS:** So it is both.

**Ms SYMES:** It is more about appropriate behaviour than the promotion of the activity.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thank you. Back to forestry, you talked about in your presentation the *Victorian Forestry Plan*. Given the bushfires that have occurred, given the loss of our native forests, was there any environmental consideration given to actually bringing the transition plan forward?

**Ms SYMES:** The forestry plan had built in a buffer per se for fires. We still have not exhausted all of that buffer. It is a plan that we are committed to. It has not changed because of the fires. Salvage logging operations are an important component of that.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Hibbins. Mr Danny O'Brien, MP.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Minister and officials. You will be not surprised I have a similar question but from a very different angle. With respect to the salvage logging, page 14 outlines the funding for timber salvage operations, but there is no indication of the timing. When will coupes be available for that salvaged timber?

**Ms SYMES:** We are salvage harvesting now.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Have the coupes all been released, identified?

**Ms SYMES:** It is the existing coupes from the timber release plan.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** How many coupes have been identified?

**Mr LAMBERT:** We would have to take on notice the exact number, but certainly there have been, as you would be aware, a second timber release plan that was released in the middle of the year and then one that has just come out or is currently up on the VicForests website.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Sorry, can you just remove your mask altogether?

**Mr LAMBERT:** Yes. There have been two timber release plans that have come out after the bushfires that occurred in summer, so those timber release plans reflect the changes in the harvest environment that occurred because of the need to do salvage.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Are there any burnt coupes that are earmarked for salvage that have not yet been released to industry?

**Mr LAMBERT:** I think maybe the best way to explain it is there is not a preconceived list of salvage coupes necessarily. VicForests work their way through the supply commitments that they have got from the coupes that are there, and where they need timber from salvage operations to support a certain mill—for instance, if they are trying to support the Brodrigg mill out in East Gippsland—then they would go to the coupes that supply that mill. There is not a predefined list.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. Minister, the \$100 million Gippsland plantations investments project is part of your transition plan. How much additional plantation timber will be planted over the next four years—the budget out years?

**Ms SYMES:** Lots, hopefully.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** We do not tend to do budgeting by saying 'lots' or 'not much', Minister. Could I have an exact figure?

**Ms SYMES:** I cannot give you an exact. There is a range of variables when it comes to land identification, seedling availability, weather conditions—I cannot give you an outline of exactlies.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** How about I go back? You announced last year 250 hectares had been planted, and it was actually planted on land that had already been plantations.

**Ms SYMES:** We have had this argument. It was previously plantation land, which went back to Crown land. If not for our investment, it would not be a plantation now.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** But it is not new plantation, though, is it?

**Ms SYMES:** It is.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** So if you harvest a plantation and then replant it, it is a completely new lot of plantations.

**Ms SYMES:** No, it was a plantation that was harvested by private industry, who gave back the land to the state as a Crown asset.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** How much land was planted to plantation this year?

**Mr LAMBERT:** There has been no land planted for plantations this year?

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** No land planted to plantation?

**Mr LAMBERT:** No. As you and the minister know, those initial plantings were made. There have been some learnings from that. The focus of the program has moved now to a market engagement strategy and the broader rollout of the funding that has been committed.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** So 250 hectares planted last year that had already been plantation, none planted this year—is that 'lots', Minister?

**Ms SYMES:** It is an ongoing program, Mr O'Brien. The Gippsland plantations investment program, as you know, was released this year. That is about ensuring that we can attract private investment for new industrial-scale plantings, particularly in Gippsland. That is the \$110 million investment in plantation development, and we really want to leverage state government investment with private investment so that we can grow our plantation stock to the greatest possible number.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Will VicForests be planting any more plantation, or will it all be done by the private sector?

**Ms SYMES:** No, there will be a combination of private sector, VicForests and farm planting.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** So how much of the \$110 million will go to VicForests?

**Ms SYMES:** We have got separate buckets, so the \$110 million investment is for the variety of programs. I do not have the breakdown for you, because we do not—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. Well, are you able to provide that on notice? Presumably VicForests needs to know how much money it is going to have.

**Ms SYMES:** Yes. It is subject to the market engagement, so once that process is completed, I will have a more accurate reflection of the—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** So do I read into that then that if the private sector only comes forward for, say, \$50 million, then the rest will go to VicForests?

**Ms SYMES:** There has been pretty competitive interest in the program.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. Where is that at at the moment? Have the applications closed?

**Ms SYMES:** The EOI has finished, and with those that have expressed an interest the department will engage with them on next steps.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** How many hectares as indicated by the EOI process will be planted?

**Mr LAMBERT:** It is still too early in the process to announce anything on that.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Minister, the \$110 million that you are spouting in this year's budget was actually announced in the 2017 budget. Why has it taken three years for that project to get anywhere?

**Ms SYMES:** I am not announcing it in this budget. We are just referring to it.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Well, you referred to it in—

**Ms SYMES:** The presentation.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** The question stands, Minister. It is three years since this money was set aside for plantations in the Latrobe Valley, and nothing has happened. We had 250 hectares planted last year on what used to be a plantation. We have had zero planted this year. What has been going on?

**Ms SYMES:** Well, we have just closed the expression of interest for private sector engagement. We have had VicForests purchase a nursery to establish their own seedling production line. This is an ongoing transition plan with lots of elements. The work does not stop.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** So if VicForests has purchased a nursery, surely you have got some idea then of how much new plantation is going to be planted.

**Ms SYMES:** The nursery will provide 5 million eucalypt seedlings per year, and as I have explained, there will be a range of planting operations, whether they are through forest regeneration, DELWP, VicForests plantations, private industry plantations or on-farm plantations. We are continuing to look for available land—I do not care if it has been previously plantation or not—to ensure that there are adequate places to plant more and more trees.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** So it has taken three years to actually spend any of the money on plantations. It is going to be another two years before you even get one of those seedlings in the ground—

**Ms SYMES:** Not necessarily.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** You announced the closure of the native timber industry by 2030. There will not be a single extra sawlog tree available in 2030 from your plantations program, will there?

**Ms SYMES:** Mr O'Brien, it is not a case of a tree-by-tree replacement transition. We of course acknowledge that the trees that we plant now will not be ready for harvest by 2024 or 2030. It was never intended to be so. That is why we are investing \$120 million under the *Victorian Forestry Plan* to support communities, businesses and workers to transition and to capitalise on opportunities that come from economic diversification. We want to ensure that there is a take-up in new technologies to access—we have got vast amounts of plantation timber here in Victoria. There are some pretty—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay, can I put it this way: what is your expectation of the increase in timber imports to Victoria in 2030? There is simply not going to be the timber available, but the market will still be there.

**Ms SYMES:** As I said, we are investing in new technologies, new innovations. I continually refer to—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** New technologies do not create a new supply of timber, Minister.

**Ms SYMES:** No, but you can use the existing—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** What is the estimate—

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, could you allow the minister to answer the question, please.

**Ms SYMES:** You can use the existing timber supplies for new technologies, for new materials. It is happening every day. It is exciting. It is why we are partnering with the federal government on the innovation hub in East Gippsland.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** You still need the supply of primary product—

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, your time has expired. I will pass the call to Ms Pauline Richards, MP.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and officials, for your time here on a Friday morning. I would like to take you to budget paper 3, pages 83 and 85, and explore a little bit more the questions that Mr Maas had earlier, or the topic around energy investment plans and this *Agriculture Energy Investment Plan* specifically. I understand that it was oversubscribed. I am interested in getting an understanding of how the boost that is outlined in the papers will benefit those that missed out in the previous round.

**Ms SYMES:** Yes. As I said, it is a good problem to have, when you get oversubscription, because it means that you have got your policy settings right. So we know that there are many excellent energy efficiency projects that are out there and continue to seek funding and support from government, and, as I said, it has been wonderful to see such enthusiastic take-up from our farmers, because it not only helps their productivity but helps the environment. So it is a win-win and so therefore definitely a great investment from government.

The funding boost directly will enable applicants for tier 1 and 2 grants to have their applications assessed. The plan is informed by a survey of industry and therefore directly targeted to their needs. AgVic been working to have all the grants assessed and to get funding to the farmers who applied earlier this year. Just this week I announced another 58 successful recipients from the applications that were pending; they will share in \$1.8 million, as I said, reducing their energy costs, becoming more energy efficient and productive and quite regularly making their job just that bit easier.

**Ms RICHARDS:** So you alluded to climate change at the beginning—or the effect of the environment—so I am interested in exploring how the extended program assists the agricultural industry in Victoria to meet the changing climate.

**Ms SYMES:** Yes, the agricultural industry are a real leader in climate change adaptation. I see it every day. It is one of the best parts of my job, going and learning about the importance of new technology and adaptation to productivity and the commitment to protecting our planet.

So the agricultural investment plan does assist industry to meet the challenges of climate change. As I said, it has been very popular. The plan includes free on-farm energy assessments, a three-tier grants program and technology demonstrations, as well as a skills package and a research program. To date we have received over 800 applications, valued at about \$7 million. But what is important is that not every farmer goes on to take up a grant opportunity. So they get an assessment which might identify ways to make their on-farm systems more efficient. So we effectively can save farmers money without them even having to go on to make those investments. That is why it has been a really great tool and really important that we have extended it. So we do hope to open the next round early next year so that farmers can take up these opportunities.

I think the one thing you learn from farmers is they will talk and say, you know, 'Farmer Mary's going all right with her new gadget', and then neighbour farmer Joe will be pretty interested in that. So the more that people

take it up, the more word gets out there, and the sectors support each other by proving particularly these energy efficiency programs.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thanks, Minister. I would like to take you to AgTech investment—and again the same budget paper reference, so budget paper 3, 83 and 85, the same line item. I am interested in understanding our new agricultural strategy, what it includes in terms of continued investment in AgTech in Victoria and how this year's funding will be spent.

**Ms SYMES:** Yes, absolutely, good question. So the budget has got \$65 million to support the strategy, and I have given you a copy of the strategy—page 15 is where it talks about AgTech, if you are interested. What it is about is responding to the challenges and ensuring that there are gadgets and systems that make products more efficient and systems more profitable. Some of the areas we know need immediate attention, but a lot of it is also about long-term planning.

I think—sort of similar to my answer to Mr Maas's question—attracting and retaining workforce is important, and this is the stuff that many young people are interested in, whether it is the robots on farms or the drones and things that make farming, which is traditionally really hard work and always will be, easier through tech. So ensuring that farmers have access to—

Probably one of the most obvious ones is: rather than having to walk around the farm and turn off taps, there are apps now so that you can do it from your lounge room. So it is saving farmers time, making them more productive and making it more attractive. If you speak to young farmers, they want to spend more time with their families than perhaps their parents did and the like. So this is not only about the modernisation of agriculture; it is about ensuring that it is a fantastic industry for anyone to explore.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Actually, on that skills development area, we heard earlier about how we are supporting the skill development of farmers. What is this AgTech investment going to do to help further this?

**Ms SYMES:** Well, it is important for meeting the skills and demands of the future that we invest in AgTech, obviously I think combined with the accommodation and the education-type areas, because we want farmers to be well positioned to take advantage of new skills, technology and farming methods so they can deliver higher quality products—get more yield, for example—but also meet consumer demand and, all importantly, receive higher financial returns.

We want to grow on-farm adoption of technology and innovative production methods, so we need to ensure that research and development has a really strong connection and practical application. We want farmers and businesses to know about what is available, so we have got our Smart Farm demonstration farms and the like. I think, coming back to my example of the two farmers, it is about talking to each other about what is making your job easier, what is ensuring that you have got a product that might be more drought resilient or an animal that has got better animal welfare outcomes because of particular new technologies and the like. I do not really know what the future skills development AgTech will look like because if you have seen what has happened in the last five years, what this area is going to look like in the next 10 I cannot predict, but I think it is a really exciting area. There are some really smart people that are working in this space. It is about identifying solutions to complex problems and we want to be a state that harnesses that talent, entrepreneurship, startups and the like to ensure that that technology translates on farm and ensures that the industry can thrive.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Just in the little bit of time I have got left, we want to keep Victorian agriculture at the cutting edge of technology. Just in a short amount of time, can you explain how this investment will keep Victoria in that position?

**Ms SYMES:** Yes, I think just continually supporting the industry in this regard. The AgTech regional innovation network is where some of the \$50 million is going to and it is all about translating cutting-edge research into useful on-farm applications. So what we want to do is ensure that we have a network of agricultural service specialists actively engaging with the sector and researchers to understand on-farm priorities and connect proven and emerging technologies, and again, just making sure that people know what is available and they can get the support and guidance to translate some fancy new tech onto their on-farm practices.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr Sam Hibbins, MP.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thank you, Chair. Minister, can you give the committee an assurance that VicForests' logging operations are complying with the law?

**Ms SYMES:** Well, I certainly expect all VicForests' practices to comply with the law, Mr Hibbins.

**Mr HIBBINS:** The courts found otherwise earlier this year, and in fact Bunnings is no longer taking VicForests's timber because it has been found to be illegal.

**Ms SYMES:** It is very difficult for me to comment on specific legal cases, particularly because many of them are ongoing, and the specific case that you are referring to is subject to appeal from VicForests.

**Mr HIBBINS:** The \$11.2 million—now, VicRoads, sorry, VicForests—

**Ms SYMES:** I do that all the time too, don't worry.

**Mr HIBBINS:** We had Minister Carroll in here last night, so I am still in that zone. VicForests is already on a pretty good wicket. They are a loss-making entity. Why do they actually need the \$11.2 million? What is that actually going towards?

**Ms SYMES:** In relation to the payments for VicForests, Mr Hibbins, they do receive income from government grants for specific purposes. They also provide a lot of services to DELWP. You may be familiar with their practices post the fires in ensuring that roads were safe and that unsafe trees were dealt with and cleared, for example. Their grant income has remained relatively stable from last year. As I said, some of that money was received for undertaking bushfire salvage activities, management of community forestry activities and undertaking activities relating to the new farm forestry initiative. It is appropriate for government to ensure that VicForests is adequately supported to deliver their important work.

**Mr HIBBINS:** But the \$11.2 million?

**Mr LAMBERT:** Just to clarify, Mr Hibbins, I know there is a \$12 million payment to VicForests in its financial report.

**Mr HIBBINS:** The salvage logging initiative?

**Ms SYMES:** That is the \$11.2 million.

**Mr LAMBERT:** Yes, as we discussed earlier, \$4.2 million of that is going to VicForests. We took on notice to give you a more exact number of what has been spent so far.

**Mr HIBBINS:** But in terms of the timber salvage operations, what is that actually going towards?

**Mr LAMBERT:** Effectively the nature of the scheme is that salvage harvesting is more expensive on a unit-cost basis than normal harvesting. As is the case with most state-owned enterprises, where there is a non-commercial decision required to be made because of government policy, there is a procedure to make the state-owned enterprise good for the cost it incurs as a result of government policies.

**Ms SYMES:** Just to expand on that, certainly when I was in Corryong talking to the harvesters that were doing the salvage timber, I asked the specific question, 'What is the difference to you as a worker in harvesting burnt timber versus unburnt timber?', and it is more complicated harvesting burnt timber in particular and more dangerous.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Can I gather from those answers that the value of the timber harvested from salvage operations, that you will actually attract for its use on the market, is actually less than the \$11.2 million that is being provided to undertake those activities?

**Mr LAMBERT:** That certainly would not be the case. The amount of timber generated by that program would sell for a much higher amount than \$11.2 million.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Well, the \$11.2 million is additional. It is not covering the entire cost of the activities; it is just the additional cost that that actually—

**Mr LAMBERT:** The marginal cost, yes.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Yes. Okay. All right, thank you. I have no further questions.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Hibbins. Mr Tim Richardson, MP.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister, for joining us today, and your department representatives. Minister, I want to take you to COVID support. In your presentation you talked about how throughout the pandemic Victorian agriculture has remained open, ensuring Victoria has the food and fibre it needs. How has this funding and support from the Victorian government achieved this?

**Ms SYMES:** Thank you, Mr Richardson. It has been really important that as a government we have helped to support critical food supply businesses to continue through the pandemic and to continue support for obviously what are, for many, different practices in a COVID-normal world. As I demonstrated in the presentation, back in April we launched the \$50 million Agriculture Workforce Plan, which was all about, and continues to be, supporting agricultural food businesses during the pandemic, and it is part of the Working for Victoria broader initiative. The plan has been matching workers who have lost their jobs with employers in the agricultural sector and has helped agribusinesses and primary producers meet their labour and operational needs.

Importantly, it has provided grants for worker induction and retraining, worker relocation, transport and supporting the transition to online markets. As we would all appreciate, agricultural businesses and food producers have shown tremendous resilience in supplying quality products and in keeping people in work through the pandemic. We really wanted to just make sure that we could support them in any way to continue producing food for kitchen tables and supermarkets. We have established a really good relationship with industry. We have been meeting very regularly throughout the pandemic to identify ways that they think the government can support them, and a lot of our initiatives have been in response to ideas generated directly from industry.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Minister, going to industry support, throughout the pandemic businesses have had to rapidly adapt to the ever-changing situation during the first and then the second wave of course and to find new ways to undertake their vital work. Minister, how has the government assisted industry to adapt during the coronavirus pandemic?

**Ms SYMES:** Yes, I guess similar to the ag energy grants, you always know when you have got the policy setting right when you get a very large take-up of a program that you announced. The business adaptation grants that we launched back in May have been incredibly popular to support businesses through the pandemic, particularly in changing their practices to be more safe. The grants are between \$10 000 and \$300 000. So an eligible business can match the funds to make changes to workplaces or indeed their employer-supplied accommodation—things like meeting hygiene needs, physical distancing requirements, things that obviously have been placed on us due to the COVID-19 restrictions. Business adaptation grants have certainly been beneficial to capitalise on the strengths of the agricultural system, ensuring that they can remain stable throughout the pandemic, but indeed they are going to be pivotal for leading the economic recovery post pandemic, supporting domestic and international food security.

We have approved nearly 200 adaptation grants to employers worth \$14.4 million, and applications continue to come in, particularly in relation to the harvest needs that have been well canvassed this morning. Applications, for example, have included staff facilities for additional washrooms, lunch rooms, upgrades to packing rooms, modifying entries and exit points, opening up just more outdoor area and the like and indeed new machinery needed to adapt to business operations, particularly to enable workers to spread out more in a packing room, for example, rather than being right next to each other. It has also been particularly popular in the meat industry, for instance. Obviously they were subjected to pretty heavy restrictions on their workforce, so this is ensuring that they can adapt to make it more safe. To ensure the safety of their workers and the continuity of their workers has been really important. Again, they have shown incredible resilience, but it has been great that there has been appropriate support from government to ensure that they can do what they do best.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Absolutely, and supporting Victorians during the pandemic as well to keep those industries running is so very critical. Minister, I know you covered it off with I think the member for Polwarth



around seasonal workers, but one of the major challenges for farmers during the pandemic has been having enough workers on farms to assist with harvest. How did the Agriculture Workforce Plan assist farmers to ensure labour demands were met, and is there anything else you want to expand on in that space?

**Ms SYMES:** Yes. Look, this is an ongoing effort. We know, I think as I explained, that with the pre-pandemic workforce make-up we always knew this was going to be difficult when you have got a lack of backpackers. You go to a farm now and talk to them about where they used to get their workforce needs: a cherry farm in Yarck, for example, is using our Working for Victoria platform now, but previously they would just put a post up on a backpacker website and people would just come, because there were lots of people in the country travelling around, taking up work where it was available. And it was not that difficult, which I assume is why it blew out to such a heavy reliance on backpackers, because it was pretty easy to get people at short notice without the requirement for permanency and the like, which meets sort of the harvesting needs. So obviously we wanted to make sure that we could provide as much support as possible to identify filling those gaps.

As part of the Agriculture Workforce Plan we really wanted to make sure that we could activate Agriculture Victoria to support industry directly. That is why we have employed new seasonal workforce coordinators. They are on the ground not just working with farm businesses but having communications with local industry groups, schools, tertiary institutions, labour hire agencies and local governments to just try and encourage people to have a go at picking or packing, for example.

There have been some connections made through the Working for Victoria platform. I continue to ask farmers, if they have got labour needs, to put them on that website, because there are a lot of people looking for work at the moment, as we know. There are currently 15 000 regional people registered on our Working for Victoria platform. So the more jobs that farmers make sure people know about, the better, and obviously labour hire providers are certainly also encouraged to register their employment opportunities.

To raise even more awareness we launched the Big Harvest campaign to inform people about the numerous seasonal job opportunities, and I guess our target market there is, I guess, your school leavers, who perhaps have not got as many opportunities to travel as they previously did. We are getting some success with the grey nomad cohort, who are pretty keen to help. I think that is one of the key messages here: this is not just about an opportunity to put some money in your pocket, but this is a critical industry for Victoria. They need help with workers. So if people have got the capacity to go and help them, we are certainly encouraging people to go and have a go. As I said, we are supporting industry with financial incentives so that people have got better take-home pay coming into their pockets if they take up this work.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Thanks, Minister.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. Mr O'Brien.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Chair. Continuing, Minister, on some forestry stuff—the budget reference is page 282, the forestry output of budget paper 3—have outstanding court costs owed by MyEnvironment from a court case in the Supreme Court in 2012 of, I believe, just over \$1.2 million ever been paid to the government or to VicForests?

**Ms SYMES:** Sorry, Mr O'Brien, I caught most of that, but was it about MyEnvironment?

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Yes.

**Ms SYMES:** The outcomes of the proceedings against VicForests commenced by MyEnvironment Inc. in the Supreme Court in 2011 and any decision to pursue costs arising from these proceedings or any other matter is a commercial decision for the VicForests board. I am advised that the option remains open to VicForests and I understand that VicForests is considering actions it could take to recover the costs, noting further legal action would be required to recover any of the outstanding amount.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** The 2014–15 VicForests annual report indicated about \$30 000 of \$1.23 million had been paid. Has anything since been recovered?

**Ms SYMES:** No.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Why would the government not want to recover \$1.2 million in legal costs?

**Ms SYMES:** As I indicated in my previous answer, Mr O'Brien, this is a matter for the VicForests board.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Well, Minister, you are responsible for VicForests. VicForests reports to you; you are one of its two major shareholders. Does it not concern you that there is a \$1.2 million outstanding debt and you have done nothing about it?

**Ms SYMES:** I stand by my answer, Mr O'Brien.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Are there any other court cases currently underway by MyEnvironment against VicForests?

**Ms SYMES:** There is lots of court action underway, but I am not aware of anything further from MyEnvironment Inc.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** That is a good segue. I was going to ask if you could advise how much the legal costs initiated by green groups have impacted on the profitability of VicForests.

**Ms SYMES:** Not at hand, Mr O'Brien.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Could I get on notice then the legal costs paid by VicForests for the past two years?

**Ms SYMES:** We will provide what is in the annual report, Mr O'Brien.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Sorry?

**Ms SYMES:** We will be able to provide you what is in the annual report.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. Thank you. Can I move on. Minister, in July you committed \$900 000 to the VFF as part of a campaign to stamp out negative messages about the agricultural industry and, notionally at least, to support farmers affected by farm invasions by animal welfare activists. Given the government has effectively gone soft on animal welfare activists invading farms and indeed forestry coupes as well, how will you measure the success of that program?

**Ms SYMES:** I definitely refute the connotations of your question. But in relation to the specific arrangements that we have got with the VFF, we are supporting them to develop a campaign. I have been briefed on the initial concepts of that and we will have more to say shortly.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Well, the question remains, Minister: how will you measure the success of that campaign?

**Ms SYMES:** Well, I guess I had not really thought about measuring the success of the campaign. I think it is a good thing to do. We partner with the VFF on a range of items. If you are talking about the benefits of the industry—why it is important, where your food comes from—I think that the benefits will speak for themselves in ensuring that people have a greater understanding of the importance of the industry.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** There is a whole section in budget paper 3 about performance outputs and measurement of that success. Surely there is at least a survey of community opinions with a benchmark at the start and something at the end that says whether it has been successful or not.

**Ms SYMES:** Mr O'Brien, we are still developing up the contract with the VFF, and there will be performance measures that we will be considering as part of that process.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. So that was allocated last year. When will that contract be finalised?

**Ms SYMES:** I had a briefing only a couple of weeks ago on where things have got to, which is very well advanced. We just put a pause on it while the VFF elections were being completed so that we could pick it up with the new leadership. So that is certainly a priority for me to take up with the new president.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. Minister, in previous years the department and the former DEDJTR had an ongoing contract to the value of \$8500 per month for PR services in China, which was provided to us under freedom of information. Is that contract ongoing?

**Ms SYMES:** That particular question is not a question that is part of my portfolio responsibilities. It would be more appropriately directed to the Minister for Trade, Minister Pakula.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. There was another invoice paid that was also released under freedom of information for \$1520 for a photographer to spend half a day with the Chair of PAEC for animal welfare photos. Was that part of the \$19.1 million animal welfare plan you mentioned in your opening presentation? These are the photos, for the record.

**Ms SYMES:** Whereabouts in the budget are you referring to—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** I am referring to your presentation. You talked about \$19.1 million for animal welfare. That contract has been released under freedom of information. I am wanting to know whether that was part of the animal welfare plan spending that you have alluded to.

**Ms SYMES:** The animal welfare plan that I alluded to is in relation to the allocation of this year's budget. I outlined the initiatives that are included in that, including \$11 million for the RSPCA—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Yes. I am just wanting to know, Minister, whether these photos, paid for by the taxpayer, were part of the animal welfare plan that you are promoting at the moment.

**Ms SYMES:** Not the one that I outlined in the presentation.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. So a Google search shows the only photos I could find were actually on the Chair of PAEC's Facebook page. Was this a \$1500 bill just for political purposes, or did the department actually use them?

**Ms SYMES:** As I have indicated in my substantive answer to your question in relation to the animal welfare provision in this year's budget, they are well documented, the initiatives that are included in this year's budget. Would you like me to go through them again?

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** No, but that does not answer the question, Minister—or perhaps it does. Are you saying that these were only ever paid for and used for a Facebook page—\$1500 of taxpayers money—and not used by the department ever?

**Ms SYMES:** I think you will find that that promotional activity, which was really important to promoting the government's work and our commitment to animal welfare practices, was before my time and therefore not part of this budget, let alone the previous budget that I have been responsible for.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** I am out of time. Thank you, Minister.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr O'Brien. Ms Nina Taylor, MLC.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Minister, department officials. In your presentation you stated that this year Victoria had experienced a significant biosecurity event with the avian influenza outbreak, and I have to admit, looking at those numbers, it is quite a virulent disease indeed. Can you please explain how this outbreak has been managed and where we are now at with our response? So expanding on your presentation.

**Mr LAMBERT:** Just while the minister is answering—sorry, Chair—is it possible just to provide a slight clarification to an earlier answer to Mr O'Brien?

**The CHAIR:** Sure.

**Mr LAMBERT:** When you asked, Mr O'Brien, about the plantings of the plantations, I was answering in terms of this budget year and funding from that, but just for absolute clarity, within this calendar year there have been the winter plantings that you and Minister Symes have discussed previously and then in the previous winter was the other 250 for a total of 500 hectares. I just wanted to make sure—sorry, Chair—that that was—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** So, sorry, it was 250 hectares this year?

**Mr LAMBERT:** Yes, funded from the previous budget year, but in terms of this calendar year, that was the planting—the physical plantings.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay, thank you.

**Ms SYMES:** Thank you, Ms Taylor. It is a good topic to talk about, because although it was a really big deal it is just that there was a lot going on at the time, so it probably did not receive as much attention as it deserved. It was an enormous operation for Agriculture Victoria and indeed other parts of government who were called to help with the emergency response.

The team has been working tirelessly towards eradicating AI from six properties, and luckily there have been no further detections since 25 August. Bizarrely, there were three different strains of avian influenza detected across six infected properties in July, including three farms near Lethbridge, which was the highly pathogenic H7N7 strain; two turkey farms, one near Lethbridge and one near Bairnsdale, with the low pathogenic H5N2 strain; and one emu farm near Kerang, with the low pathogenic H7N6 strain. As you can imagine, this is quite unique. I learned a lot about something I did not previously know a lot about, during particularly July and August. These are three separate events where the virus has moved from wild to domestic birds, predominantly ducks, which is highly unusual—to see these events so close together. There was no evidence that the three outbreaks were linked in any way, but all three strains did pose a risk to our domestic poultry industry. As avian influenza can be highly contagious, achieving eradication is critical in protecting other bird populations in the state and indeed the country.

The humane depopulation of birds and careful decontamination of sites has now been completed on all of the infected properties. The movement of birds, product and equipment into, out of and within declared areas surrounding infected properties continues to be restricted for containment purposes, but we will be having an incremental approach to removing restrictions. A comprehensive surveillance program has been undertaken to provide confidence that the disease has been eradicated and to ultimately support a case for Australia being declared disease-free, which is important for market access. There are national cost-sharing arrangements in place under which state and national governments and the national poultry industry will share the cost of this significant biosecurity response.

I am incredibly proud of the efforts of Ag Vic in relation to dealing with this. It is not nice work, and doing this work in a COVID environment was particularly difficult, but the response was exemplary. It has been recognised nationally as a stellar effort, and I hope we do not have to do it again anytime soon.

**Ms TAYLOR:** No. Three strains—a trifecta, but not a good one.

I was just wanting to shift gear a little bit and ask about something that I think is close to a lot of Aussies—pets. We love our pets. If I can lead you to budget paper 3, page 83, 'Supporting pets and animal welfare', specifically how much of the \$19 million is being provided to the RSPCA and for what purpose?

**Ms SYMES:** Thank you, Ms Taylor. It is an important component of the agriculture portfolio—pet support and indeed domestic animal support. We did commit to animal welfare outcomes at the last election, and it is something that continues to be incredibly popular, our effort as a government. People love their pets, and it is important to have the policy and funding parameters around to support those endeavours.

Of the almost \$11 million for the Protecting Our Pets initiative, \$5.9 million over four years and \$1.3 million ongoing will support RSPCA Victorian regulatory activities, which is a really important component of making sure that inappropriate behaviour is stamped out and the promotion of animal welfare practices continues to be important. We also want the RSPCA to be better equipped to respond to unfortunately increasing numbers of cruelty reports. This initiative will provide additional ongoing support to its inspectorate to enable them to continue to provide vital enforcement services, and it will deliver the first increase in ongoing funding to the RSPCA since 2011–12, when ongoing funding was first introduced.

Actually I caught up with the RSPCA earlier this week, and this makes a really big difference to their operations because it gives them certainty. They have obviously, like a lot of not-for-profit organisations and charitable organisations, seen a downturn in public donations, so it has made their practices difficult, so to have this surety means that they can really concentrate on the important work that they do. They are going to keep me updated, but they did indicate that this year they have got less dogs than they have ever had before requiring rehoming, which is a great outcome for animal welfare across the state. There is still a bit of a problem with cats, but they are working on some practices there. But it is really good to see that there are less homeless dogs this year than in previous years.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Excellent. Can you provide more details about how this funding will actually help rehome cats and dogs, just on that point that you were talking about?

**Ms SYMES:** There is the \$5.2 million to support animal rescue rehabilitation and rehoming services. Obviously the RSPCA do a great job in this regard, but there are a lot of organisations that take on this important work, and in my capacity as minister I have had the pleasure of visiting lots of these places that do God's work to ensure that there are appropriate people to take on the important job of being a fur parent. So it is really good that we can help those organisations to have the appropriate facilities. Also a lot of them reach into their own pockets to provide those services, so supporting them is something that we were very pleased to deliver in this year's budget.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Taylor, and thank you, Minister. That concludes the time we have available for consideration of the agriculture portfolio at estimates this morning.

We thank you and your officials for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within 10 working days of the committee's request.

The committee will now take a short break before moving into consideration of the regional development portfolio. Thank you.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Witnesses withdrew.**