

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Impact of Animal Rights Activism on Victorian Agriculture

Melbourne—Monday, 23 September 2019

MEMBERS

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WITNESS

Superintendent Peter Greaney, Victoria Police.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege; therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Before we start, please state your name for the Hansard record.

Supt GREANEY: Certainly. My name is Peter Greaney. I am the Operational Support Superintendent for Western Region. My portfolio areas involve road policing, crime, intelligence, community engagement, and as a secondary portfolio I am the Head of Practice for Livestock Theft and Farm Crime. I have been in this position since October last year. Prior to that I was the divisional commander down in the south-west in Warrnambool for a couple of years. I have also worked in other rural locations: Ballarat, Bendigo, Maryborough and Geelong. My policing career is over 34 years, and I have worked in crime investigation, intelligence, training and general duties and, in my current role, as a superintendent with Victoria Police. I guess just in regards to animal activism, my role as being the Head of Practice, Livestock Theft and Farm Crime, was basically to advise farmers and various industry groups in regards not so much to animal activism but what they can do to protect themselves from a crime prevention perspective.

The CHAIR: Superintendent, I believe there were the farm crime reforms announced earlier today by the Minister for Police. Can you describe that in more detail, please?

Supt GREANEY: I can, yes. As of today Victoria Police has established a Farm Crime Coordination Unit that will be staffed by a full-time detective inspector with administrative support—both admin and analytical support. That will be based in western region headquarters in Geelong. It will be a statewide coordination unit, and it will come under my particular division and that operational support. I guess that takes the pressure off me somewhat now, having a full-time person to coordinate Victoria Police's response to all things around farm crime and livestock theft.

The role of that particular unit will be around: intelligence gathering and disseminating intelligence across Victoria to the various work units and locations; obviously stakeholder engagement with various stakeholders, both public and private; and engagement with farmers, of course. I guess some people in the room would be aware we have got 71 agricultural liaison officers across Victoria. That is a secondary role for them as well. Part of the coordination unit will be actually looking after those particular members who will now be called farm crime liaison officers. So I guess the four main areas that that particular coordination unit will look after are: our response to livestock theft; our response to farm crime in general, so not just the theft of livestock but the theft of equipment, firearms and the like from rural locations; our response around animal activism; and biosecurity. I will say that certainly from a Victoria Police perspective animal activism and the issues around biosecurity are relatively new areas for us, so we will be looking at that.

Mr FINN: Superintendent, thank you for joining us this afternoon. I have been told by police in years gone by that conspiracy to commit a crime is in fact worse than the committing of a crime. Would you care to comment on that view?

Supt GREANEY: I guess like a conspiracy to any offence that is a pre-emptible offence is a serious offence. That would be my comment in regards to conspiracy.

Mr FINN: Obviously the sort of rage that we have seen on farms in Victoria over recent years has not just occurred out of the blue. There has been a degree of organisation involved. Does that enter the realm of conspiracy?

Supt GREANEY: That is a bit difficult to answer. I would need to have more information in regards to what sort of acts were taking place pre that particular behaviour. That is a little bit hard to answer without more information.

Mr FINN: I am just trying to find out: if people meet or discuss the action that they are going to take and they then take out that action which is against the law, is that regarded—or would you regard that—as conspiracy to commit a crime?

Supt GREANEY: It depends on what they are actually discussing. We have got summary offences and indictable offences, so it depends on the seriousness of the offence and what the later actions are going to be—i.e. conspiracy to commit a murder is quite serious, so if you are organising that, that would be presumed to be a conspiracy. If it is, say, conspiracy to commit a trespass, there is no offence in regards to that particular offence being a summary offence.

Mr GEPP: Superintendent, thanks for coming today and thank you for your 34 years of service to the community. Obviously a key focus of this hearing is around animal activism as it has been described and certain events that have or are alleged to have occurred on farms or on livestock transport and saleyards et cetera. When VicPol respond to any of these events, can you take us through that—particularly the one that is most often referred to as Gippy Goat? I think most people are familiar with that sort of event. What do VicPol do? When you are called to an event such as that, can you take us through a little bit how you respond to that sort of environment?

Supt GREANEY: Could I actually just turn it around a little bit and give a case study in regards to the Dominion process back on 8 April? That might give you a better idea in regards to the police's response to that.

Mr GEPP: Please, yes.

Supt GREANEY: Obviously police receive intelligence with regard to different incidents that might be occurring across the state and plan accordingly in regards to what action they will take in regards to the particular activities that they are aware of. Obviously different protest groups cooperate with the police and tell them exactly what they are going to do, where they are going to meet, how many people will probably be attending and what activities they will undertake, and some do not. Certainly the Dominion protest, I guess, was in the second category in regards to we had very little information in regard to what those particular groups would be doing on 8 April, on that anniversary date.

Obviously we speak amongst our members in regard to the response, whether it be in the city or regionally, and we had the protest in town where there was a blockade of Spencer and Flinders streets. We had sufficient resources to respond to that, which we did using the current laws that we have in place to deal with that.

From my perspective I can actually talk about two particular protests, one at Westside Meats in Bacchus Marsh and the other at MC Herd abattoirs in Corio, which I attended personally myself, where activists basically blockaded the entrances to those particular locations with Thrifty rented trucks and locked onto those trucks and deflated the tyres so that they could not be moved. I attended at both of those locations. We responded accordingly with regard to the number of police that were required, and we were able to actually move those activists on without any harm to themselves or to police. Obviously that takes time and negotiation.

Melbourne was a little bit more difficult in regards to the numbers of people there, and 39 arrests were made in the CBD of Melbourne. Obviously there have to be contingencies around processing those particular offenders, and they were charged with various offences around obstructing police members and obstruction to the roadways and footpaths. Those matters are still pending at court. There were other arrests made at the Australian Food Group in Laverton, where 14 arrests were made in regard to trespass. Those matters are also before the courts. There were other arrests made, I think six, at O'Connor's abattoirs in Pakenham, where five of those offenders received diversions and one received a good behaviour bond. So obviously the police were prepared in regard to activities. We did not know exactly where they would be located, but we did have police on stand-by to respond accordingly.

Mr GEPP: Just one follow-up question if I might, Chair. In those circumstances that you described, Superintendent, is there anything that you would recommend to the Committee, whether it is the laws—is it clear-cut for VicPol, when you are called to those events, about the things that you will undertake in response or are there things that the Committee could and should consider that would assist those circumstances?

Supt GREANEY: Certainly in regard to those particular activities, the laws in place were suitable for Victoria Police to respond, and the key is to ensure that our supervisors and our police managers at these particular events know exactly what powers they have in regards to how they deal with these particular events.

Mr QUILTY: This might be following on a little bit. We have heard reports from witnesses saying that some police have been unwilling to charge trespassers, saying that their only goal was to remove people from the premises. Some report that it was too much trouble to process large numbers of people and they did not have the resources to bring people down from Melbourne to do it, they did not have the resources available, and also why would the police waste their time if the courts just give them a slap on the wrist? Would you comment on that?

Supt GREANEY: Look, police will always respond according to what is going on, so to say that they are brushing it aside and it is not important, I do not think that is the case. Once again, every case is judged on its merits and the evidence of what is going on. I would hope and think that police would always respond accordingly in regard to what is taking place.

Mr QUILTY: Do you think the police responses are what the farmers are expecting?

Supt GREANEY: I would hope so, yes. Certainly my conversations with farmers and farming groups and stakeholder groups is please make sure that you contact the police in the first instance by calling 000 or calling your local police—your AGLOs, now farm crime liaison officers—and they will report what is going on. I think there is a degree of under-reporting, so I encourage our farm crime liaison officers to ensure farmers and primary industry report what is going on.

Mr QUILTY: Just a follow-on from that then: we have heard it stated that there are very few arrests, very few people being charged, therefore there is no big problem. Do you think there is under-reporting going on?

Supt GREANEY: Well, yes, I think there is under-reporting in regard to a whole range of crimes. But certainly I think sometimes the farmer's attitude is, 'We don't want to bother the police. They've got more important things to do'. I guess if you look back at the Dominion, where we have had 39 arrested at one particular location, 14 at another and six at another, that would indicate that police will certainly arrest if the circumstances warrant it.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Superintendent, for all your years of service. Clearly you are the right person for the job, given your experience right throughout western Victoria and rural communities. I just have a few questions. The first one is: when conflicting laws appear to have been breached, such as animal welfare on one hand and property on the other, how do your members prioritise which laws to enforce? You can come back to that one in a moment if you like.

I am also curious about this task force that has been formed that you are part of, and you talked about livestock theft as one of the things there. But I am curious about also the amount of livestock theft that you have investigated or anticipate investigating from a large scale. I hate to use this Americanism but this term 'cattle rustling', for instance. From what we have heard as a Committee, throughout the whole of Victoria this is quite a decent crime, the large-scale theft of livestock, versus what animals might be taken under unauthorised farm access—so sheer numbers—and how that balances up also with theft of equipment from farms. How much of that is happening? How much firearm theft is happening?

Then also just the final two questions: when you have encountered, or your members have encountered, those taking part in unauthorised farm access, have they ever in your experience or their experience reported back to you that these people have ever been violent? Have they been generally compliant—and I mean generally—with police instruction?

Supt GREANEY: There are a lot of questions there.

Mr MEDDICK: Well, it is a very large subject.

Supt GREANEY: As I said before, anything that we investigate, whether it is a protest or a trespass or a theft, it will depend on the circumstances in regard to how we investigate that, so I am not quite sure what you

mean around conflicting laws. Our police know what laws they operate under, so obviously we do operate under state and Commonwealth laws, but generally with issues around livestock theft, farm crime, activism, they are state laws that we operate under and we know what we need to do.

As far as the capture of data goes, it is quite difficult to interrogate the data around whether the theft of a sheep at a farm is actually the theft of a sheep for other purposes or it is the theft of a sheep for the purposes of animal activism to save it. We would need to actually interrogate each incident that has been reported in regard to checking narratives to determine whether it is actually a theft, as in, 'I'm taking a sheep to put on my own farm', or 'I'm taking a sheep to slaughter', or whether it is actually a sheep taken as part of an animal activist task or role, if that helps you at all.

Mr MEDDICK: And the behaviour of on-farm trespassers?

Supt GREANEY: Certainly there is no large-scale violence that I am aware of, but once again I would have to sort of check. But certainly anecdotally there are no large-scale acts of violence from activists.

Mr MEDDICK: Will recorded acts of animal cruelty fall within your task force?

Supt GREANEY: That is an Ag Vic role I guess as far as livestock goes and also the RSPCA. But we certainly have memorandums of understanding in regards to those organisations in regards to assisting them with those particular activities.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Superintendent. It is great that you are going to have a dedicated person in Geelong, but as we have heard, many of our farm enterprises and production facilities are way outside of Geelong and often in very isolated areas. In many of the communities there are no 24-hour police stations, and where there are small police stations you have got the rules that two people have to be on deck all the time, so if you have got to take a person that needs charging off to somewhere else, the station will be closed. So in many instances where these acts occur it could take up to an hour or an hour and a half for somebody to potentially come, especially when activists, as we have heard in other hearings, are coming in the middle of the night. So while you have got this new person in Geelong, how many extra police will be put out into remote areas in Victoria to handle crimes in the area of agriculture? And how do you respond to issues when you are potentially called to an animal activist situation but you have actually got what you might consider to be a more serious crime to deal with, whether it is domestic violence, drug abuse or whatever?

Supt GREANEY: Can I just say that in regard to the farm crime coordination detective inspector's position, it is based in Geelong. That is because that is where the detective inspector is based himself. It is not to say that in the future it will not be based in Eastern at Knox or elsewhere. So it is certainly a statewide coordination role; it is not just for Western Region. Just to clarify that particular point. As I said previously, we have got 71 farm crime liaison officers across the state that we use to assist general duties police and crime investigators around those particular—

Mrs McARTHUR: So are they extra to what previously occurred?

Supt GREANEY: No. They are currently what we have, but certainly part of the farm crime coordination unit's role moving forward would be to look at how those liaison officers are utilised and whether we are getting the best out of them in regard to their response to farm crime. We still expect our general duties members and our investigators, wherever they are across the state, to respond to any crime, whether it be farm crime, animal activism or any other sort of protest, so—

Mrs McARTHUR: So no extra boots on the ground?

Supt GREANEY: I do not have those numbers in front of me in regard to how many extra police will go out into rural locations. There is a staff allocation model, but I am not aware of how many are going where.

Mrs McARTHUR: Could you respond to the issue of farms and production facilities being relatively isolated compared to where the law enforcement officers are?

Supt GREANEY: Yes, certainly. We have got rural locations. I worked out in the south-west, so I had a number of one-member stations that were basically always on call as well. Although communities are remote we have police members on availability and on call to respond 24/7. Sometimes it may take a bit longer depending on what is going on, and it always—

Mrs McARTHUR: We have heard up to days, actually.

Supt GREANEY: I have not heard that. It depends on the seriousness of what is going on as well. So if something needs a very quick and rapid response from police, depending on the seriousness of what is occurring, we will certainly respond as quickly as we can.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Superintendent. There is a view that has been put to me that if a magistrate had not charged a young person with a \$1 fine, we may not be sitting here today.

Supt GREANEY: I am certainly not going to comment on—

Mr BARTON: No, that is just my comment.

Supt GREANEY: Okay.

Mr BARTON: What I would like to understand is what happened in that process. What were they charged with? Was it trespass? I am curious that someone can go to court and not get their property back. Is it that the DPP has to appeal against the level of the fine or can the police actually initiate that—and also, for them to get the property back?

Supt GREANEY: I am certainly not fully aware of that particular case. I am aware of the media reporting around it in regard to the fine. There were I believe charges of theft and of trespass in regard to that particular matter. I do not know the full circumstances to actually comment in regard to the full circumstances of the case, but I am certainly happy to basically provide information to the Committee moving forward, so I will take that on notice. Certainly I am not going to comment in regard to the penalties or the types of penalties put down by magistrates.

Mr BARTON: No, that is fine. Thank you.

Ms BATH: Thank you very much, Superintendent, for coming here today. It is good to have a broad range of voices and understandings from across the board. The Government has put out a media release that talks about Inspector Karl Curran, who will oversee a team of more than 70 new farm crime liaison officers, previously known as agricultural liaison officers, or AGLOs to shorten it down. Can I just get this right in my head: there is just a new branding for the ones that are already there, and their new branding is ‘farm crime liaison officers’?

Supt GREANEY: Yes, that is correct.

Ms BATH: Because it felt like there were new officers coming onto the system.

Supt GREANEY: No, there are not 70 additional there. So the 70, or actually 71, agricultural liaison officers already exist and obviously are now being called farm crime liaison officers. We will look moving forward in regard to whether we need more across the state to undertake that role.

Ms BATH: Thank you for clarifying that. I have another question I have got then that might need to be taken on notice in relation to that. You talked about them being across the state. It would be good to have an understanding as to where they are located. I have an interest in Gippsland. That is my electorate. But it would be interesting to know across the board where those crime liaison officers are based—understanding that spread.

Supt GREANEY: I can answer that for you.

Ms BATH: Okay, good. Thank you.

Supt GREANEY: They are certainly spread right across Victoria. If you actually go to the Victorian Farmers Federation internet page, you will find a list of those now farm crime liaison officers and where they are located. Certainly there are pockets of some of our more remote locations where we need to actually put some liaison officers in place. So they are spread right across Victoria.

Ms BATH: Thank you very much. The other point goes to something that we have started to talk about—that is, I guess the processing of apprehensions or the processing of theft and crime. I will use the example of Luv-A-Duck. We were in Horsham the other day and we heard from the CEO. I have just looked it up on the internet that it was back in December that there was an on-farm invasion. The CEO stated that there had been the theft of some ducks, but there was also, I think he said, thousands in the loss of production. Some of the activists were apprehended, but they are still waiting for the issue to come before the magistrate. I am just wondering whether or not some of these liaison officers will expedite the process, because there is no closure for that farm and farm group at the moment.

Supt GREANEY: Certainly. I have asked the divisional commander in Horsham, which is Western Region, to actually provide advice to me in regard to what the situation is with that investigation. That is certainly ongoing. But hopefully with this coordination we will have a better coordinated approach, so hopefully we have quicker and better outcomes in regard to the whole issue around these particular things that we are talking about.

Ms BATH: Superintendent, I just want to put on record my thanks in terms of the work that people are doing. I know ██████████ in Warragul has worked very closely with police there, and I am hearing those stories that the police have been very supportive of these law-abiding businesses in trying to, I guess, fortify them against action. So I just want to put that on record.

Supt GREANEY: Thank you.

Ms TERPSTRA: Thanks, Superintendent, for coming along today and for your evidence. Just two quick questions: has there been a recent change in the prevalence or severity of animal activism, and also what proportion of animal theft occurs due to animal activist activity?

Supt GREANEY: Yes, so certainly over the last 12 months I think there has been an escalation in activist activities when you look at the number of protests across town and the like. I do not have the exact figures here, but we will take it on notice to provide those. And as I mentioned before, it is very difficult to actually nut down livestock that is stolen in regard to being stolen to put on another farm or slaughter or whatever compared to whether it is an animal-activist-related activity. So we need to actually look at narratives. It is a bit of a longwinded process to do that, but certainly we can do it.

Ms TERPSTRA: Would you be able to provide that answer on notice?

Supt GREANEY: Yes, we could.

Ms TERPSTRA: Great, thanks.

Mr FINN: I only have one question, Superintendent. When your members do their job, they go out and make an arrest, they do all the paperwork and all the work that is necessary to bring a prosecution to court, and that person who is before the court receives a dollar fine, does that send a message to you and to your members, 'Don't bother'?

Supt GREANEY: We will do our job either way. I get asked this question in numerous forums, and it does not matter what the penalty is—we will always do our job. So it is not our role to hand out the penalties, but we will always do the job that we are paid to do.

Mr FINN: But it must have an effect, a psychological effect, on members who are out there working hard, bringing people—miscreants—before the courts, to get that sort of result.

Supt GREANEY: I cannot comment on other members specifically. Over my 34 years of crime investigation, general duties policing and other areas that I have worked in, I have not let that bother me. I do my job and I will keep doing it to the best of my ability.

Mr MEDDICK: Just one final thing, thank you, Superintendent. People who are involved in these incidences often quote that they are doing what they are doing because there is a lack of transparency within the industry or that the laws that currently exist are a bit of a problem and there is sometimes misunderstanding of what constitutes animal cruelty. I have got a little chart here. The *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986* encompasses no less than 14 other Acts, and it is administered by seven different Government bodies, including VicPol. In your opinion as a person on the ground, if all of these Acts and legislation were simplified and brought under the control of, say, an independent office of animal protection instead of all these other bodies, would that simplify matters for you and your members so that you have got one body that you have to deal with who have the law? Then they can work together in tandem with you and your outfit as well as perhaps having people of their own so that there is a direct liaison going on, there is a better flow of information, there are more clear-cut circumstances for you and your members, and then when these things come to court there is perhaps a better outcome.

Supt GREANEY: Can I just answer it by saying that I guess with the creation of our new farm crime coordination unit certainly those aspects are something that we will look at in regard to how we simplify things and whether we need reform moving on. So I guess that is some work that the new detective inspector can do for Victoria Police in consultation with the Government around how we best manage these particular events.

Mr MEDDICK: Cheers. Thank you.

Mrs McARTHUR: I just actually want to clarify: so this new organisation that we have just put in place, announced today, are you confirming that there are no new police on the ground and we have just renamed the 70 officers from one name to another?

Supt GREANEY: Yes. So there is a detective inspector, which is a newly created position. There will be admin support and Victorian public service staff. And these 71 agricultural liaison officers are already on the ground and are now called farm crime liaison officers.

Mrs McARTHUR: They have just got a new name. And if I could, Superintendent, I just wonder if you would like to expand on the difference between a home invasion, a shop invasion, a workplace invasion and a farm invasion, because we have heard from many farmers that they see their farm as their home and their business. What is the difference between a break and enter in a shop or a workplace or wherever else and one in a farm?

Supt GREANEY: Well, there is no difference. If you are breaking into a premises on a farm or a structure on a farm, you are committing a burglary, and if you are stealing property from there, you are committing a burglary of theft—

Mrs McARTHUR: And the police would not see it in any different way?

Supt GREANEY: No.

The CHAIR: Any further questions? If not, on behalf of the committee I would like to thank you for your time and your contribution. You will receive a copy of the transcript for proofreading. Again, thank you very much.

Supt GREANEY: Thank you.

Witness withdrew.