

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

2021–22 Budget Estimates

Melbourne—Wednesday, 30 June 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr James Newbury

Mr Danny O’Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

WITNESSES

Ms Mary-Anne Thomas, MP, Minister for Agriculture,

Mr Simon Phemister, Secretary,

Ms Penelope McKay, Associate Secretary,

Mr Matt Lowe, Deputy Secretary, Agriculture, and

Mr Paul Smith, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Forestry Plan Delivery, Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions.

The CHAIR: I declare back open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee with Minister Thomas, this time for consideration of the agriculture portfolio. This time we invite you to make a 10-minute presentation, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. Thanks.

Visual presentation.

Ms THOMAS: Thank you very much, Ms Blandthorn. Agriculture is a critical industry for Victoria. As well as providing us with much of our food and clothing, it is a pillar of the Victorian economy, particularly in regional Victoria. It is a significant source of employment, supporting 84 500 jobs across the state. It is an industry where we lead the nation, accounting for \$14.5 billion in food and fibre exports in 2019–20—the largest proportion of any state at 28 per cent of Australia’s total. And it is a sector that continues to grow, with the gross value of the sector reaching \$17.8 billion in 2019–20, an increase of \$1.9 billion from the year before.

As the sector and the state work to recover from the challenges of the past year, the Andrews Labor government is committed to continuing to strengthen, grow and protect the agriculture sector and the people who work within it. This includes supporting the sector through difficult times. As with many people in our community, the agriculture sector has had a challenging year despite some of the best seasonal conditions in some parts of the state.

One effect of the pandemic has been the reduction in the available workforce for the seasonal harvest. We have worked with industry to turn this situation around and together have led programs that have put more boots on the ground. Part of this has involved supporting locals to take up seasonal work. Through the seasonal harvest sign-on bonus we have successfully attracted over 2400 jobseekers into the seasonal workforce in just a few months. We have worked with the Tasmanian government to bring Pacific Islander workers back to our farms for the harvest. So far, nearly 850 workers have been approved to enter Victoria, with more on the way. I met some of these workers as they were picking and packing apples in the Yarra Valley. It was great to see them being their skills and experience back to Victorian farms.

It has also been important to ensure that farmers have enough COVID-safe accommodation for their workers. Through the seasonal workforce accommodation program we have supported 13 businesses and organisations to boost the supply of suitable accommodation. I have visited a number of these projects, such as the Boort Lakes Holiday Park, where they are providing new accommodation for up to 77 additional workers to support nearby farms. These projects are great examples of ideas driven by locals who have the knowledge to meet the needs of local farmers and employers.

The challenges of the past year have not stopped the agriculture sector from being innovative and growing. Our government has provided support across the industry to help farmers and producers expand their businesses, adapt for the future and connect with global markets. We have helped small-scale and craft producers expand and grow their businesses, like the fourth-generation farming family I met from the district of Dean who run AC Hops. They used grant money to build their e-commerce business, expand the size of their hop yard, reduce their environmental impact and improve the quality and freshness of their product.

We have worked with Victoria’s traditional owners to help restore their leadership of the native food and botanicals industry, supporting the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations’ native food and botanicals strategy. I was thrilled to attend the launch of the strategy at the Bush Cafe in Kalimna West, a

business that sources native foods from Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation's production nursery, which is supported by our Djakitjuk Djanga grant program.

We are helping produce from Victoria reach more customers by improving infrastructure through the AgriLinks program, and this has provided funding to 39 rural, regional and interface councils to upgrade vital local road linkages.

Research and technology play a huge role in growing the agriculture sector. That is why we launched new SmartFarms in Tatura, Ellinbank and Mildura, to create innovative solutions for the sector, including making it more sustainable. We have also supported over 350 farmers to upgrade their farms with internet-enabled sensors and technologies, boosting productivity as part of the on-farm Internet of Things trial. And we continue to protect the industry against biosecurity threats, most notably by spearheading the nation's largest avian influenza response, successfully making Victoria free of the disease.

The government remains fully committed to the success of Victoria's timber industry and pleased that we have made substantial progress on delivering the *Victorian Forestry Plan*, which will see the transition to a plantation-based industry. We are proud of the \$120 million support package for this transition and the work undertaken this year, including engagements with forestry businesses and communities across Victoria. We have provided \$11.2 million for timber salvage harvesting operations in eastern Victoria following the devastating 2019–20 bushfires. This funding has assisted sawmills, processors and other forest contractors in maintaining supply over this past year and helped prevent this valuable resource from being lost.

We have also established the Gippsland Centre of the National Institute for Forest Products Innovation through a grant of \$2 million from the Victorian Timber Innovation Fund. This centre is a hub for collaboration across the timber industry and will drive research and development of forestry from genomics and tree breeding to new sawing and gluing techniques. In March we released the *Local Development Strategy Grants Program*. This program is really important as it will help communities come together and plan for their transition to new sustainable industries. Work is already underway in Orbost, and we are working with other communities across Victoria to apply for this program. To assist forestry businesses to start planning for their future, we have issued 23 forestry business transition vouchers, and these vouchers help forestry businesses understand their current position and develop a transition plan for the future.

We have received nine applications under the first round of the timber innovation grants program. This program supports businesses to explore options to switch from native to plantation timber and investigate manufacturing new products. The development of plantations is key to the government's plan for the industry's transition, and in October we released the \$110 million Gippsland plantations investment program to market and have continued to plant trees in the Latrobe Valley, bringing total plantings to almost 500 hectares.

In game, I am proud that we have launched the *Victorian Traditional Owner Game Management Strategy*, which will be implemented under the *Sustainable Hunting Action Plan no. 2*. My department has commissioned an expert panel to review the proposed approach to adaptive harvest management, and this report has now been released alongside the government response. The GMA conducted a trial aerial survey to estimate the total abundance of game duck populations in Victoria, which was the first accurate estimate of the total number of game ducks in Victoria and a key step towards an adaptive harvest model. The *Sustainable Hunting Action Plan*, as I have said, will be implemented this year.

Victoria's farmers are rightly renowned for the quality of their produce. Maintaining that reputation increasingly relies on being able to provide assurances of a product's integrity from paddock to plate, and that is why in this budget we are investing \$11.7 million to transform Victoria's traceability systems.

Our government is also committed to action on climate change, so we are investing \$20 million to deliver the agriculture sector pledge and position Victoria as a leader in low-emissions agriculture. Funding will accelerate a range of projects, including \$3.9 million for research into agriculture, emissions reduction technologies and practices. A \$15.4 million investment will support up to 250 farmers and growers to understand and reduce emissions on their farms.

We are also committed to investing in our agricultural communities, supporting them to become stronger and more resilient. And I hope to talk with you about Victoria's fruit fly strategy, the Victorian Rural Women's Network and the Rural Financial Counselling Service.

Finally, we are providing additional support of \$24 million to continue delivering the *Victorian Forestry Plan*. The additional funding will deliver continued protection of the Leadbeater's possum habitat, bushfire management support, road maintenance and the provision of forest data services, which assist policy development and operational decision-making. This new funding underlines the government's commitment to the success of the *Victorian Forestry Plan*. I look forward to discussing the agriculture portfolio with the committee.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Deputy Chair.

Mr RIORDAN: Just a small point, Minister: I noticed the picture there going with the Leadbeater's possum—whoever put the slide together might use eucalypt forest, which might be a better shot. But I wish to talk today about labour force issues and agriculture, and we touched on that before we started tonight. My first question is—I think you made comment that you had gone for a Cook's tour with Minister Tierney through to Portland recently. Did you use the opportunity to drive past the former Glenormiston agricultural college that is now locked up and abandoned, and did you happen to say to your colleague that that would be a fine spot to have an agricultural workforce trained and brought up to spec in Victoria with the current shortage? Did you use that opportunity, Minister?

Ms THOMAS: Thank you very much, Mr Riordan, for your question. I would be very pleased to talk with you about the various initiatives that our government has implemented to address agricultural workforce shortages.

Mr RIORDAN: No, I am going to ask a question. I just asked specifically about Glenormiston. Did you use that as an opportunity to—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, I would remind you to keep your questions to the estimates that we are here to discuss.

Ms THOMAS: I thank you for the question, and as you well know, this is a question that should be directed to the Minister for Higher Education—and I further understand that she has already answered it at length. I would also note that when the Liberal Party was in government in this state they shut down the Glenormiston college.

Mr RIORDAN: No, no. I just asked—Minister, the question was a simple—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you have raised an issue which you know is not the responsibility of the minister before us. You will at least give the minister an opportunity to respond.

Mr RIORDAN: I just asked if you used the unique opportunity that you had to raise with her—

The CHAIR: Deputy Chair, could you please not speak over the top of me.

Mr RIORDAN: To whisper in her ear and say, 'Minister, this would be a grand place to have—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you are out of order. Mr Riordan, could you please keep your questions to the relevant estimates concerned.

Mr RIORDAN: Yes, so we will move on. Minister, in budget paper 3, page 70, speaking to the workforce shortage, it says a little way down, 'Support for seasonal agricultural workforce'. You have budgeted \$19.3 million and then zip for the foreseeable future. How do you justify having no plans going forward for helping with the labour shortages in agriculture going through? How do you plan to manage it with no money allocated?

Ms THOMAS: Thank you for the question, Mr Riordan. As you would well understand, the seasonal workforce shortages that we have experienced have been as a result of the COVID pandemic. I am sure that you would also know that the bulk of our seasonal workforce has been sourced in previous years from travellers here who are on backpacker visas. Now, backpacker visas are not coming back anytime soon, and so what we have done—

Mr RIORDAN: Yes. Nor is money allocated to—

Ms THOMAS: Well, if you do not mind, Mr Riordan, we are still experiencing the effects of the COVID pandemic, but this government is working very closely with industry. I have been focused on supporting industry to secure their workforce, and we have been able to support them to do that with a number of initiatives, including the Pacific Islander scheme, which, as you said, you and I spoke about briefly before, so—

Mr RIORDAN: But I am worried about the forward estimates, Minister. There is no money allocated.

Ms THOMAS: Thank you. What we need to do is understand—as I said, I will be meeting with an industry round table next week—the situation that we are in at the moment. COVID is an evolving situation. You would well know that. We need to work to develop a local workforce. It is premature to predict what funding may be required in the future, and indeed if funding for additional programs is required, then I will go through the budget process and through the expenditure review committee to seek funding to assist the horticulture industry to get the workforce that it needs.

Mr RIORDAN: All right. So you are going to lobby harder for some more money. I appreciate that; that is a good move. But are you also sitting at the cabinet table, Minister? And what are you saying to the Premier, who came out today and said he thinks we should even have less people come into Victoria? When the Premier says he is actually in favour of limiting even more people, that that short-term pain is going to be good for the state, what are you saying on behalf of Victorian farmers, on behalf of Victorian regional abattoirs and factories and fruit growers—

Ms THOMAS: Well, Mr Riordan—

Mr RIORDAN: No, I am allowed to finish my question, Minister. All the various agricultural industries this spring—if the Premier gets his way and even fewer people come in, you have got no money after the financial year for next year to help support. What are you doing to help farmers and regional businesses get the workforce they need?

Ms THOMAS: Mr Riordan, you are mischaracterising the government's position in relation to the support—

Mr RIORDAN: Oh no, the Premier was very clear.

Ms THOMAS: that is provided to the agriculture sector.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you have put a proposition to the minister. You will allow her to answer it.

Ms THOMAS: Thank you. As I said, you are mischaracterising the government's position and the support that I have received from government and from the Premier in relation to the issue of the seasonal workforce challenges that we have. The Victorian government stepped outside of its area of responsibility, as it has had to do so often during this COVID crisis, to ensure that we could support Pacific Islander workers here to Victoria. This is a federal government program, and—

Mr RIORDAN: How many Pacific Islander workers have you supported to date over the last 12 months?

Ms THOMAS: What you need to understand—

Mr RIORDAN: Hang on, you just told me you are stepping out and doing a lot, how many—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, could you allow the minister the opportunity to answer the question without interruptions, please? It is incredibly rude.

Mr RIORDAN: Well, the minister has made a pretty big claim.

Ms THOMAS: Okay, so we have committed to bringing 1500 Pacific Islander workers to Victoria, and that allocation is fully committed. Now, what I—

Mr RIORDAN: When are they coming?

Ms THOMAS: Well, we have 850 currently on the ground, and what you need to understand is that this is a demand-driven program. Approved employers need to apply to the federal government through either DFAT or

DESE for an allocation of workers, and the feedback that I have consistently received from farmers, farmers organisations and so on is that the federal government needs to do more to shorten the approval period.

Mr RIORDAN: No, I want to know what you are doing.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, could you—

Ms THOMAS: I will tell you what I have done. I am very happy—

Mr RIORDAN: Minister, where do you plan to get the extra 500 harvester drivers from?

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, the minister is attempting to answer your question.

Ms THOMAS: I am very happy to tell you what I have done. I have facilitated the arrival of 1500—

Mr RIORDAN: No, you said 800.

Ms THOMAS: I have facilitated 1500 workers to arrive in Victoria to support with our harvest. I have facilitated 2400 local workers to take up harvest work, many of whom are doing this for the first time as a result of our very successful sign-on bonus program.

Mr RIORDAN: And you have got them for this year as well?

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, stop interrupting.

Mr RIORDAN: You got them for this year?

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you are interrupting.

Ms THOMAS: 2400 workers are at work now on the ground—or, sorry, 2400 workers who have received our sign-on bonus. So I am working—

Mr RIORDAN: For last year or for this coming harvest season?

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan! Mr Riordan, could you allow the minister to complete her answer, please?

Ms THOMAS: to assist the horticulture industry to source its workforce.

Mr RIORDAN: So do you expect the Premier's decision to cut even more people—

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Riordan. Your time has expired, and the call will go to Ms Richards.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister. I would really like to discuss the seasonal agricultural workforce.

Mr RIORDAN: I was really happy to discuss that issue too, Member for Cranbourne.

Ms RICHARDS: I am delighted that we are on a unity ticket of interest in this really important area of endeavour. I would refer you to budget paper 3, pages 70 and 73, and I am interested in perhaps having you explain how the 'Support for seasonal agricultural workforce' initiative as in table 1.16 is helping the farmers get the workers they need for harvest.

Ms THOMAS: Thank you very much, Ms Richards, and I look forward to the opportunity to outline all that our government has done to support our horticulture industry, and hopefully I will be uninterrupted in the delivery of my response, because it is a complex problem. The \$19.3 million to support locals into jobs and to cover the majority of the quarantine costs for Pacific Islands workers is yet another package that the Andrews government is providing to support fruit and vegetable growers as they address their seasonal workforce shortages. This extra support follows our comprehensive \$57 million package that was already provided to support industry through the coronavirus pandemic, bringing our government's support for agriculture businesses and communities to over \$76 million. Throughout the pandemic we have worked with industry to tackle this challenge from three angles: attracting a local workforce, supporting agriculture businesses and

communities, and securing Pacific Islander workers. This package is no different and is helping to build a strong, innovative and sustainable agriculture industry now and for seasons to come.

In February this year we announced over \$10 million to deliver a sign-on bonus for jobseekers who take up seasonal work. Now, this is funding that I was particularly pleased to be able to deliver, because I think that it demonstrates an important point when it comes to accessing or securing workers to work in agriculture. Now, what our sign-on bonus does is it means that jobseekers can take home almost \$2500 on top of their wage and helps our farmers attract a bigger local workforce to get their produce to market. And the success of the sign-on bonus has been fantastic, as I said, already supporting 2400 jobseekers into harvest roles, and it shows that we can attract a local workforce. This is a really important point and one that I look forward to talking with growers about at my industry round table next week.

The days of relying on backpackers is over for the foreseeable future as the world continues to grapple with the challenges that the coronavirus pandemic has presented us. So to maximise take-up of the sign-on bonus, industry groups that support growers in priority harvest regions have received funding for additional staff and resources through a new \$1 million seasonal workforce industry support program, and this funding bolsters the capacity of these groups to provide dedicated seasonal workforce support to their members, making sure that businesses are well equipped to attract the workers that they need.

The Victorian government is also subsidising the costs associated with quarantining up to 1500 Pacific Islander workers under its partnership with Tasmania through a \$7.8 million funding commitment, with industry contributing \$2000 per worker. It is worth me taking that time again to explain. This is a demand-driven program. It is a program that has previously been led wholly by the federal government. During COVID times the Andrews Labor government has stepped up to find a way to make these workers available for Victorian horticultural businesses, and we have subsidised the cost of bringing these workers here to Victoria. These workers are a critical component of the workforce. And, look, this is a good program, and it is one that I do fully support, because it is a highly regulated program that ensures that the workers are well treated, well paid and can use their time in Australia, or here in Victoria, to bolster their income and ensure that they and their families can live the lives that they want to live back home, and it helps to spread some of our wealth with our Pacific Island neighbours. We have known from the start there are no easy solutions, but unlike others we have not stopped working with industry to find solutions to the challenges that the coronavirus has presented.

This package sits alongside a range of other initiatives to help attract and retain workers, including transport and accommodation support grants to make workplaces COVID safe and a significant advertising campaign called 'The Big Victorian Harvest'. Again, I would like to bring you back to the point that I made and one that I look forward to talking with industry about next week. We have shown, we have demonstrated, that a local workforce can be attracted to the harvest, and we need to be inventive in the way in which we think about how we position harvest work.

And one of the things that I think about as well is, you know, Australian kids are also not able to go backpacking and perhaps we have got to encourage them to take up some opportunities by encouraging them to participate in the harvest trail—recognising that harvest work is hard work. There is no doubt about that. It is hard work, but our sign-on bonus has demonstrated that there can be some significant rewards. I think one of the challenges for industry is: 'How do we create an experience that is mixed in with some good fun as well?', but also how we think about the seasonal harvest as an opportunity to taste a little bit of what agriculture has to offer, because there is incredible diversity of roles that are available in the agriculture sector for young people, and you do not have to own a farm to have a great career in agriculture. That is a message that I am very keen to get out and spread.

Indeed Mr Riordan talked before about my meeting up with Minister Tierney. Well, let me tell you, I am very proud of the work that Minister Tierney and I are doing together to review agriculture qualifications here in Victoria—

Mr RIORDAN: Well, getting Glenormiston open would be a good start, Minister.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan!

Ms THOMAS: with particular reference to our training system. The Member for Buninyong, Ms Michaela Settle, will be leading that review. We want to see more young people in agriculture, we want to see more

young people accessing training and skills development in agriculture, and we want to see our harvest harvested. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Limbrick.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister and team, again. A couple of things from your presentation, Minister: the \$11.2 million to support timber salvage harvesting operations—this on the face of it does not really make sense to me, because I thought the whole point of a salvage operation is to make money, not spend it. So what is that money actually used for?

Ms THOMAS: Well, look, we need to support—the money was used to recover timber from the fires. Now, I understand the point that you are making, Mr Limbrick, but unlike a planned harvest, a salvage operation is a very complex and expensive operation. You salvage timber to get it out of the forest and to maximise its potential. But timber that is salvaged from fires is not going to be comparable in value to the timber that is harvested as part of a planned program.

Mr LIMBRICK: But if it is economic, why would we need to spend this money on it? If it is not economic, why are we spending money on it?

Ms THOMAS: I might ask Mr Smith to provide some further advice. Thank you.

Mr SMITH: With the bushfires, just to give you context of the size of the impact, there was 1.2 million hectares burnt in state forest in Victoria and nearly 6500 hectares in plantation, so there was a lot of timber that was burnt and salvageable for uses. For that reason \$7.5 million was spent—and co-invested in by the commonwealth, I might add—to enable that timber to be recovered, because without that, then there is a lot of fibre going to waste. VicForests and the plantation operators were unable to absorb all the costs to fund their respective salvage programs, and the reason for the salvage programs is to avoid supply gaps if that timber was left in the forests and not recovered.

Mr LIMBRICK: But if they could not fund it themselves, then that would mean it was not economic without government support, and if it is not economic, why do it?

Mr SMITH: I think it is important to be able to say to the mills and to the processors that they have access to an ongoing supply of fibre. Without that investment being provided, that fibre was less likely to have been salvaged and offered to mills, particularly in the north-east, where we have quite a number of jobs that rely on those mills.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. And another question on a similar vein: with the Internet of Things investment, the on-farm trial, I understand the objective here is to increase farm productivity through these new technologies, but if the technologies are going to improve productivity and be economic, again, why wouldn't these people using this technology invest in it themselves if it was economic? Why do we need government interfering in this?

Ms THOMAS: Well, firstly, Mr Limbrick, I do not accept that this is government interfering. I understand your particular political philosophy, and it is one that I disagree with. In fact our agriculture sector is an incredibly valuable sector to our economy, and farmers do a lot on their own. The reason that we are encouraging uptake is you have got to think about how the average day in the life of a farmer is an incredibly busy and diverse one. We want to encourage farmers to take up new technologies, and we see that some of our grant programs provide that stimulus to farmers to take up an opportunity that otherwise they might not consider. That is why we will continue, and I am very proud to continue to support our farmers to innovate, to modernise and to grow productivity. Sometimes it is a grant from government that will be the lever, if you like, that encourages those farms to make greater investments themselves.

It is probably important to understand that our \$12 million for Victoria's on-farm Internet of Things trial has also been invested in enabling technologies so that farmers can take advantage of the Internet of Things. Agriculture Victoria has partnered with the National Narrowband Network Co to establish these IOT networks across the trial regions—those trial regions are Wellington, Buloke, Loddon and parts of the Moira and City of Greater Shepparton shires—for four farm types: dairy, horticulture, grains and sheep, including mixed farms.

We are in partnership with the National Narrowband Network Co, and grants of up to \$30 000 in round 1 and \$25 000 in round 2 have been offered.

Now, look, I will give you an example. When I visited Mr Sam Sorrenti, who is a Goulbourn Valley fruit grower, he was part of our Internet of Things trial program, and the water probes that he was able to purchase with our support were enabling him to use less water. Now, that is a public good and that advantages everyone. If we can use new technologies that enable farmers to farm smarter and make best use of their scarce resources—land, water and so on—then that very clearly delivers a public good. To date, 354 farms have been approved, and as I said, soil moisture probes, weather stations, animal health monitoring collars and automatic irrigation controllers have been some of the projects that have been funded under this program.

Mr LIMBRICK: Were loans considered instead of grants? A loan at lease would ensure that the investment would in the end be economic, because the recipient would not take the loan unless it was going to be economic in that case.

Ms THOMAS: Well, as I have explained to you, we come from different political philosophies.

Mr LIMBRICK: Well, if it is not economic, it is not economic.

Ms THOMAS: Well, no. There is a public good being generated by these investments—

Mr RIORDAN: It costs what it costs.

Ms THOMAS: and I will proudly stand by those and support future grant programs to increase the uptake that enables farmers to use their precious resources more efficiently.

Mr LIMBRICK: So it is about public good then, it is not about productivity.

Ms THOMAS: It is productivity and profitability and there are public good benefits in there as well, which I am very proud of. As I said, it is also enabling farmers to upskill, and it is exciting a new generation of farmers to get involved. As I said, there is a lot of work on farms, and you do not necessarily need to own a farm to be a farmer.

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

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Minister, budget paper 3, page 274 is the ag outputs. I am wanting to know whether out of that funding the government is planning any support programs, particularly for farmers but for anyone in general, for clean-up of fallen trees and rebuilding of damaged fences after the recent storms.

Ms THOMAS: Yes. Look, thank you very much for that question; it is a really good one. The recent storm damage and the flooding damage in South Gippsland has been quite extensive, and indeed I have had the opportunity to travel to Gippsland recently to meet with dairy farmers and beef cattle farmers and to understand the impact of the flood on their properties and their businesses. I would make the point that the farmers that I met with, the Gleeson family, who are dairy farmers—

Mr D O'BRIEN: I went to school with Matthew.

Ms THOMAS: Oh, did you? Well, there you are. Well, you would know they are very good farmers.

Mr D O'BRIEN: They are. We would also like an answer to the question 'Is there going to be support?', if you could just get to that.

Ms THOMAS: Well, I have got to say at this stage we are dealing with an active emergency. We are still in the immediate relief stage of the emergency and still assessing the extent of the damage, so it would be premature to make any announcements. But if I can come back to what I learned on my visits, yes, the Gleesons are very experienced, very good farmers who live on a flood plain, and that is what Matt said to me. I mean, if you live on a flood plain, it provides excellent pastures for many, many years—

Mr D O'BRIEN: And damage in others.

Ms THOMAS: Correct. Can I also point out—because Mr Gleeson made this point to me—that as a dairy farmer it is incomprehensible to him that he would not have a generator, and so of course he had the generator and his business was able to continue. But I do understand the devastation, the number of trees down around our state. As we know, this is the largest single emergency that the SES have responded to, with 9100 call-outs. As I am sure you would also know, Mr O’Brien, in my own electorate of Macedon many communities have been extensively impacted. But I have got to say, whilst I am in a peri-urban environment there are very many remote localities within my electorate, and I was at Korweinguboora on the weekend, meeting with farmers—

Mr D O’BRIEN: Thank you, Minister. I am going to run out of time, so could I just follow up quickly: in past bushfires in particular there has been assistance for landholders who border Crown land to replace fences. Is that assistance available now for tree and flood damage for those on Crown land borders?

Ms THOMAS: The government is still assessing the impacts of the disaster.

Mr D O’BRIEN: Okay. That applies to both. Just quickly, BP 3, page 277 is about game management. Due to the COVID restrictions this year the already shortened duck season basically became almost a non-season, particularly for metropolitan people. Why didn’t you extend the season?

Ms THOMAS: Well, that is quite simple. I act on the advice that I receive from the Game Management Authority in relation to any modifications for duck season, and as you would be aware, both I and the minister for the environment are advised by the Game Management Authority on those modifications.

Mr D O’BRIEN: Did they provide you any advice on extending the season?

Ms THOMAS: Well, the season was set, and the Game Management Authority have been clear that an extension beyond the Queen’s Birthday weekend would impact the nesting and reproductive—

Mr D O’BRIEN: The breeding season.

Ms THOMAS: Yes, that is the word I am looking for—the breeding season.

Mr D O’BRIEN: I am sure you are aware that the GMA actually changed the dates on its website as to when the breeding season is, just before the season started. And Field and Game also had a respected expert undertake an assessment of the GMA’s advice. So, hunters are going to be pretty cynical about advice from the GMA about this season.

Ms THOMAS: Well, look, I understand the points that you are making. My understanding is that there have been very few if any occasions—and if there were, it would have been many years ago—when duck season has been extended beyond the Queen’s Birthday weekend. Am I right, Mr Smith?

Mr SMITH: What I would say is that it would be more the case of it being extraordinary—the season going as it is in the regulations. More often than not it is a modified season.

Mr D O’BRIEN: Yes. Well, certainly in recent years. Thank you, Minister—I am sorry, I have another question on this—last year given COVID, hunters had their licences extended for free for 12 months. Given they effectively got no season again this year, will you be doing that again?

Ms THOMAS: Look, I have not received any advice, and I have not made any decisions, but I did want to refer to a point that you made earlier about a report that was prepared by the Field and Game association. I have had an opportunity to look at that report, and I have got to say, the author may well be a respected crocodile expert, which is what I understand he is, but it is riddled with errors when it comes to the role that the Game Management Authority plays in this state and the way in which we regulate our duck season here in Victoria.

Mr D O’BRIEN: The GMA made changes to the season, or recommended changes to the season, in respect to the bag limit, due to aerial surveys that they undertook—

Ms THOMAS: Correct.

Mr D O’BRIEN: helicopter surveys. Will they be happening again ahead of next year, next season?

Ms THOMAS: So the aerial surveys are part of our move towards an adaptive harvest model, and that is part of our government's commitment to ensuring that we are basing the advice on the duck season on the best available data that is available. And with this year's season—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, I just want to know whether you will be doing it again in future years.

Ms THOMAS: Well, having completed the survey, and with the information that we have—I wanted to let you know that it has been designed by expert biometricians from Victoria's Arthur Rylah Institute for Environmental Research, and they have analysed the data collected during the survey—as I said, it has given us a really clear picture of the number of ducks that are in Victoria's wetlands. We are still working on the development of the Sustainable Hunting Action Plan, and I will have more to say in the future about that plan.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. I have got 9 seconds left. Is it going to be done again next year and in future years?

Ms THOMAS: As I said, I am working on the Sustainable Hunting Action Plan number two.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Yes. I would really like to explore the agriculture sector pledge. If I can refer you to—and I really want to explore this; you know I do—budget paper 3, pages 70 to 72, could you please explain how the 'Accelerating Victoria's agriculture sector response to a changing climate' initiatives, as in table 1.16, will support farmers to take action on climate change?

Ms THOMAS: Thank you so much, Ms Taylor, for this question. I am so proud of the work that we are doing here in Victoria, and I am so proud of our farmers and the agriculture sector and their readiness to step up and take real action on climate change in the agriculture sector. So, as you know, our government has a commitment to zero net emissions by 2050, and this is a commitment that is supported by the National Farmers Federation. It is also supported by the meat and livestock association. Unfortunately though, it is not supported at all by the new leader of the National Party federally, and so I am very, very disappointed. I might say the states have been working along with our federal minister, Minister Littleproud, on the development of some work in the climate change area, but while the states are all on board, we have not been able to get the National Party federally over the line on making any statement in relation to supporting farmers, who are right up for it, taking, as I said, that real action on climate change.

In May we unveiled our ambitious climate change strategy, and at the heart of the plan are ambitious targets to reduce emissions by 28 to 33 per cent by 2025 and 45 to 50 per cent by 2030, putting Victoria at the forefront of Australia's climate change action. Importantly, the strategy is underpinned by strong action across key sectors of the economy, and this includes of course our transport sector—\$100 million we are investing there with zero-emissions vehicles—and a \$1.6 billion clean energy package, making sure government operations from schools and hospitals, police stations and so on are powered with 100 per cent renewable electricity by 2025. But I wanted to talk about agriculture, because for some people agriculture is in the too-hard basket—and when I say 'some people', I mean the National Party. But here in Victoria, as I said, we are totally committed, through our pledge, to working with farmers. Indeed farmers are at the coalface—if you will excuse that pun or that comparison; they really are—when it comes to experiencing the effects of climate change every day. Indeed, as Mr O'Brien was talking about, this windstorm was on a scale that we have not seen before. More extreme and severe weather events are becoming the norm, and of course this has a very deleterious impact on agriculture. So farmers are experiencing it, but farmers are also one of the largest emitters of emissions. Now, it is not the farmers themselves—

Mr D O'BRIEN: I hope not.

Ms THOMAS: No, it is not. It is their—

Mr D O'BRIEN: It is their stock

Ms THOMAS: It is their stock, absolutely. Thank you, Mr O'Brien, but I do not actually need either your encouragement or your support at this stage. But it is the cows and particularly dairy cows that are causing us some real problems. So what I am really pleased about—it is part of the \$20 million—is we are funding research that is already underway with an injection of \$3.9 million into agriculture emissions reduction

technologies and practices. This includes flagship trials to reduce methane on dairy cow farms with feed additives like 3-NOP and seaweed as well as collaborating on a national scale to enhance research and innovation.

Our SmartFarm in Ellinbank—and I would really encourage you, and I am happy to host you, to visit, because having the opportunity to showcase some of our exceptional research here in Victoria is something that I would love to do—is on track to be the first zero net emitting dairy farm in the world by 2026.

Ms TAYLOR: In the world—there you go.

Ms THOMAS: Yes, indeed. I am really proud of that. \$15.4 million will be utilised to provide information, tools and services to support adaptation and climate risk management across the sector so that farmers and growers can measure and reduce on-farm emissions. Now, I know that sounds less interesting, but it is vitally important. We have got to make sure that our farmers have the tools so that they can understand what element or component of their farm practice is emitting emissions. They need to know how it is happening in order to reduce it, so providing farmers with tools to measure change over time is going to be really important. Now, this includes updating the Victorian land use information system and building an agriculture climate spatial tool, which will assist farmers to make tailored decisions based on different climate scenarios, so you can imagine how helpful that will be. Also—and I am very excited about this—we are going to support a pilot of up to 250 farmers developing on-farm action plans. Through these, farmers will assess their climate risks and emissions profile and have access to direct grants to take action to reduce emissions and adapt to the changing climate, kickstarting meaningful action across the state.

The work of our agriculture sector pledge is very closely aligned with our transformational agriculture strategy, which was released in December last year. And I should also at this point just say how privileged I am to work with my Victorian Agriculture and Climate Change Council—some really topnotch people, great farmers—people from across rural and regional Victoria with experience on the land who understand the benefits that will accrue to them from taking real action on climate change. That is something that our government, the Andrews Labor government, is very proud of. And as I said, it is unfortunate that the party that purports to represent farmers is so out of step with farmers aspirations and what they are doing on the ground.

Mr RIORDAN: On a point of order, Chair—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you were not even in the room.

Mr RIORDAN: I could hear her dulcet tones.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan! I will pass the call to Mr Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and team, for appearing this evening. I would also like to ask a few questions about that same initiative. Agriculture I think contributes about 15 per cent of Victoria's emissions, and the initiative that you were just describing comes to about \$20 million overall. Given the significant contribution of agriculture \$20 million seems to be a bit of a drop in the ocean into what is actually required.

Ms THOMAS: Look, thanks, Mr Hibbins, for the question. I think it is important that I be clear that we see this very much as foundational action, and a lot of what we are investing in is gathering the information and building the tools that will help farmers adapt and take action to reduce emissions. So I understand your point, but I would say that many farmers are already taking action. We think that this is an example where government can make investments that will help the agriculture sector ensure they have got the information they need to make the investments that they may need to make to adapt their farming practice to ensure that they are doing what they can to reduce emissions.

One of the things I am sure you would be very interested in, Mr Hibbins, is that Mark Wootton is a member of the Victorian Agriculture and Climate Change Council and the owner of Jigsaw Farms, which is a mixed-farming business but is already a net-zero-emitting farm, and when I was speaking with him and visiting him at his farm he made the point to me that increasingly international markets, the people that we look to to buy our produce, will be looking and wanting to understand the climate change credentials, if you like, of that farm business. So this is a measure that is going to become increasingly important. Our farmers understand this.

They know that the world is changing and that they need to take action. We have seen in our department a great level of interest in a range of programs and grants that support farmers to be more efficient on farm, and one of those of course is our *Agriculture Energy Investment Plan*. This is a great program—\$30 million allocated to the *Agriculture Energy Investment Plan*—and it has been extended as part of the 2020–21 state budget through our new agriculture strategy for Victoria. This is a total commitment of \$60 million. Let me tell you about this.

Mr HIBBINS: Time is of the essence, and I just have some other questions.

Ms THOMAS: Sorry, I will just finish by saying that part of this program is an on-farm energy assessment which helps farmers really make some great decisions about what they can do going forward to reduce their energy usage.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you. Is there a specific emissions reduction target for the agriculture sector?

Ms THOMAS: As I said, the investments that we are making are really part of our foundational action, and the largest cause, as we have heard, of emissions on farm is caused by cattle. So the big breakthrough will be through research, and we are actively engaged in that at the moment. Until we get that breakthrough—you know, that will be the decider and that will be the initiative that really turns things around for emissions on farm.

Mr HIBBINS: And in terms of the Victorian agriculture and climate change statement, what is the time line for developing that statement?

Ms THOMAS: I am sorry, could you say that again?

Mr HIBBINS: In the description of the initiative it says the Victorian agriculture and climate change statement ‘will also be developed’. What is the time line for developing that statement?

Ms THOMAS: I am working with the Victorian Agriculture and Climate Change Council on the development of that statement, and I expect that that will take 12 months. You would be interested to know that when we released the sector pledge I held a workshop at the Melbourne Museum, which was very well attended by our climate change councillors, and they were listening to and connecting with people on the ground. You know, it is important that they understand the actions that are being taken by farmers on the ground at the moment and that they are networking, but they are working on the development of that strategy, and I look forward to its release.

Mr HIBBINS: Will that include anything regarding ensuring that biodiversity values on agricultural land are maximised?

Ms THOMAS: This is a statement that is being developed by the Victorian Agriculture and Climate Change Council, and the biodiversity values are seen as important by many farmers. But in terms of biodiversity strategy, that is of course a question for the minister for the environment.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. All right. Thank you. Thanks, Minister. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hibbins. Mr Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair. I want to move along, Minister, and fly straight into fruit flies. On budget paper 3, page 73, in the output for the Victorian fruit fly strategy—you have got to say that carefully!

Ms THOMAS: Yes, you do—indeed.

Mr RICHARDSON: The budget papers outline that this output will fund the preparedness and prevention activities for fruit fly. For the committee’s benefit, can you provide more detail to the committee about what this funding will go towards and how it will protect regional industries and jobs?

Ms THOMAS: Thank you very much for that question, Mr Richardson. I have learned a lot about fruit fly in recent times, as you would expect, and I am very proud of what our government has done and what previous agriculture ministers—Minister Pulford and Minister Symes—have done working in partnership with our horticulture sector and those that are most impacted by the Queensland fruit fly. What I now know, of course, is

that fruit flies are one of the world's most economically significant horticultural pests, affecting production and disrupting trade worldwide. Indeed it was one of the first issues that was raised with me when I was visiting farmers in January of this year.

So Victoria needs to manage both the Queensland fruit fly and exotic fruit fly species to maintain our market access for many commodities, such as citrus, table grapes and stone fruit. More than \$1 billion of Victoria's horticultural exports are comprised of products that are susceptible to damage from fruit fly, so it is important to reflect and plan for the best way to combat these pests and to target our investment to where we can make the most impact. Our government understands that helping farmers to manage the threat and impact of fruit fly as best we can is critical to the success of our horticulture industry, and so that is why we have developed a new fruit fly strategy that will build on the success of our collective efforts so far. I am looking forward to releasing this strategy in coming weeks, with implementation to commence later this month.

Now, this new strategy is fully funded, with \$6.4 million in new funding in this year's budget. This funding will provide for continued area-wide management programs for Queensland fruit fly over the next four years as well as addressing the threat of exotic species, such as the Mediterranean fruit fly. Around \$5.3 million will be available in grants for Victoria's three key horticultural regions, and they are the Greater Sunraysia, the Yarra Valley and the Goulburn Valley. Funding will also employ three fruit fly regional coordinators and will fund on-ground activities to manage Queensland fruit fly. \$1.1 million will fund Agriculture Victoria staff, including a fruit fly statewide coordinator, to deliver key aspects of the new strategy, including providing support to the fruit fly regional coordinators in the area-wide management programs, ensuring coordination with the national strategy. We will also work with stakeholders to explore new sustainable funding mechanisms, administration of grants and delivery of statewide communication and engagement programs, with an increased focus on the latest research that could support on-farm activities. So, Mr Richardson, this funding builds upon millions of dollars in grants since 2015 which have assisted industry and community to take the lead on managing Queensland fruit fly, and we will continue to support local management efforts.

Now, it is important for me to highlight to you that our fruit growers are, you know, acutely aware of the impact of fruit fly and are consequently very invested in taking action. The area that we are probably a little bit more worried about is just regular home owners with a few fruit trees in their backyards. I know that industry is really keen to ensure that we have a whole-community approach to the management of fruit fly. And it is probably also worth me pointing out that I use this word fruit fly 'management' very deliberately. It was under the previous Liberal-National government that we saw the former minister for agriculture, the Member for Murray Plains, who gave up on eradication of fruit fly and shifted to a management approach.

Mr D O'BRIEN: You have cut the program—

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien.

Mr RIORDAN: I want to know—

Ms THOMAS: So as I said, once—

Members interjecting.

The CHAIR: Sorry, Minister. Mr O'Brien and Mr Riordan, if you could please cease interrupting.

Ms THOMAS: Thank you. Once a decision has been made by a government, as the previous Baillieu-Napthine government made—

Mr RIORDAN: On a point of order, Chair, we are bringing in things not relevant to the current budget.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you are out of order. The minister is attempting to answer the question and is being interrupted constantly. Could you please refrain and control yourself.

Ms THOMAS: Thank you, Ms Blandthorn. But I think, Mr Richardson, you take my point. So this is new money, \$6.5 million. I am really proud to deliver this commitment. Indeed if you travel through any of these fruit-growing parts of our state, you will see that community-wide response. You will see some pretty innovative ways in which communities are trying to come together to manage Queensland fruit fly. Thank you.

Mr RICHARDSON: I want to take you to the topic of trade, Minister. Victoria is obviously well known for its wonderful, excellent produce.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Can't do that—not her portfolio.

Mr RICHARDSON: It is in the fruit, Danny. Let me just get my question out. At this time of the year, Danny O'Brien or myself would be smashing out oranges that we are so lucky to have, coming from the shelves of the Sunraysia region. This produce is not just sought after locally, though, it is also highly valued internationally. Does fruit fly pose a risk to these exports?

Ms THOMAS: Thank you, Mr Richardson. Although pests like Qfly, as we call it in the trade, are an ongoing concern, what is really pleasing is that in spite of it becoming established in Victoria, our horticultural exports are going from strength to strength. Fruit fly is certainly a challenge for accessing interstate and international markets, but it is a challenge that we have demonstrated here in Victoria that we are able to meet. Effective management of fruit flies is essential to gaining and maintaining access to premium markets, and that is why we are proud to invest this \$6.5 million.

We also have strict protocols in place to provide assurance to our trading partners, including for interstate trade, and so at the interstate level facilitating trade of quality produce from Victoria across Australia is delivered under a number of protocols as part of the nationally agreed interstate certification assurance program. Now, ICAs are used by producers as a means of treating plants and plant products in accordance with state biosecurity requirements. So I can assure you, Mr Richardson, that we are doing all that we can to ensure the trade of our beautiful fruits.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Mr Smith, can I ask you a question. The minister's presentation referred to the \$110 million plantation program which went to market in October. How many hectares of plantations will be planted this year?

Ms THOMAS: I might just interrupt for a moment if I may—

Mr D O'BRIEN: It was actually a question to Mr Smith, Minister.

Ms THOMAS: Well, if I may, I just wanted to give some introductory comments on the program.

Mr D O'BRIEN: No, I do not need introductory background. I have asked the question to Mr Smith, Minister, and I would like him to answer the question if possible.

Mr SMITH: Just for the benefit of the committee, we are talking about the Gippsland plantations investment program—

Mr D O'BRIEN: The \$110 million, yes.

Mr SMITH: Yes, which is part of the government's broader commitment to support the sustainable growth of Victoria's plantation estate and transition away from native forest harvesting. In line with the *Victorian Forestry Plan*, which was announced in November 2019, the program is targeting different types of plantation development to generate wood supply where there is a market demand and willing buyers. It will do this by leveraging private investment to ensure value-for-money outcomes while supporting Gippsland as the strategic hub of plantation development, with a lot of flow-on effects associated forestry industries in the region will benefit from. So there are a number of enabling activities: \$15 million is being allocated over the coming years to deliver a farmed forestry program—

Mr D O'BRIEN: I am sorry, Mr Smith, it is a fairly simple question. We had it referenced in the presentation and we also had questions about this answered in previous estimates where the previous minister said there was pretty competitive interest in the program—that is the market program—and I am wanting to know when that is going to happen and how many hectares will be planted this year.

Mr SMITH: The market-facing process for that commenced last year. We have had many delays, as you would expect, as many industries across the entire economy have experienced them because of COVID. We have also had an industry deeply affected by bushfires. The market-facing process is well advanced. We have had program design workshops with our shortlisted companies, and we are talking about international, large multinational companies here, not nickel-and-dime companies. We want very reputable companies here in Victoria to plant new plantations for our fibre industry going forward.

Mr D O'BRIEN: We all want that. We have heard again in the presentation '500 hectares' since this was funded. That was what we heard last year, so when is it going to happen?

Mr SMITH: We are very close to putting our guidance material forward to the short-listed investors, and from that period on through to probably late in this year we will be striking contracts to enable winter plantings in the middle of next year.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Minister, I can see you are just champing at the bit to answer some questions. This funding was allocated by this government—the \$110 million that you have referenced again tonight—

Ms THOMAS: Correct.

Mr D O'BRIEN: This is now the fifth year that that funding has been in the budget. In 2017 it was first allocated. We do not have any more plantations in the ground.

Ms Thomas interjected.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes, it was 2017, Minister. Trust me. We do not have any more plantations in the ground. As I am sure you are aware, we have got a shortage now of building materials from plantations. How is the failure to get more plantations in the ground and the decision to close the native timber industry going to impact the price of building a new home in Victoria?

Ms THOMAS: Thank you, Mr O'Brien, for that question. Look, it is a really important question. As you would well know, currently five out of every six trees harvested in Victoria come from our plantations, and we are, as Mr Smith has described, working hard in the face of some significant adversity—specifically the fires in East Gippsland and the north-east—to get our Gippsland plantation investment program—

Mr D O'BRIEN: It has been going for five years, Minister, and nothing has happened.

Ms THOMAS: going and get those trees planted.

Mr RIORDAN: They would be a third of the way to harvesting if you had got them in.

Ms THOMAS: But what I wanted to say to you is this: that you need to understand that this bears no relationship to the current shortage of building materials—

Mr RIORDAN: It is going to exacerbate the shortage in 10 years time.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan!

Ms THOMAS: which is a worldwide phenomena, and what we have seen is that many countries, including our own, have put in place stimulus packages and building programs in response to the significant economic impacts of the COVID virus.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So how does cutting off our native supply help that? All that is going to do is mean more imports from Malaysia, from Indonesia, from Brazil.

Ms THOMAS: No, no, no. No, I am sorry, but I have to correct you there. It is softwoods that are preferred for—

Mr D O'BRIEN: I am aware of that, but you know that hardwoods are used in the furniture and the building industry as well.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien!

Ms THOMAS: building materials. It is softwood that is the preferred material. You know that.

Mr RIORDAN: Not for floors and windows.

Ms THOMAS: And we have an issue where—

Mr D O'Brien interjected.

Mr Riordan interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan and Mr O'Brien!

Ms THOMAS: the COVID pandemic and the response to that by many governments—and indeed, in the US, President Biden announced I think a multitrillion-dollar stimulus package—

Mr D O'BRIEN: On a point of order, Chair—

Ms THOMAS: But what I wanted to tell you—

The CHAIR: Sorry, Minister. Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Chair, I asked a specific question about costs of housing. We have been going a minute and a half now and the minister has not even gone close to that, so I would like to move to a further question on this issue.

The CHAIR: I sense that the minister was attempting to come to the answer to your question without your answer.

Mr D O'BRIEN: She was talking about President Biden.

The CHAIR: You put a question. Does the minister feel she has had the opportunity to answer the question?

Ms THOMAS: Well, I just wanted to pass on one more bit of information that I am sure Mr O'Brien would find useful. Victoria's Commissioner for Better Regulation—who I am sure is well known to many—Ms Anna Cronin, is undertaking an analysis of the issues in relation to the shortage that we are experiencing in the construction industry. But, as I said, this is a worldwide issue. We are certainly not alone. It has nothing to do with Victoria's forestry plan. That has had no impact whatsoever.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Minister, on a completely unrelated issue: the commonwealth government has made \$50 million available for the on-farm water rebate scheme. Why has Victoria not signed up to this scheme when numerous other states have, particularly in a situation where Victorian farmers would like to waterproof their farms when it is not a drought?

Ms THOMAS: I will be very happy to answer that question for you.

Mr D O'BRIEN: For your info, the rural finance website says at the moment that it is closed and negotiations are taking place between the commonwealth and Victorian governments regarding a new program. When is that going to be available?

Ms THOMAS: I am sorry, if you could just bear with me for a moment. I am sorry about that, Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I am happy to take it on notice because we are going to run out of time.

Ms THOMAS: No, no, no. Not at all. The federal government's announcement of the additional \$50 million to extend the on-farm emergency water infrastructure rebate scheme came without any consultation with state governments and no acknowledgement of the federal government's failure to acquit the first round of the rebate scheme that closed mid last year. So this is very poor performance by the federal government in relation to this scheme.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Farmers actually do not care. They just want—

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien, I am allowing the minister to answer your question.

Ms THOMAS: If suitable arrangements to support Victorian farmers are agreed to, then the Victorian government is open to co-investing in a second round of these rebates with a focus on the specific areas that farmers are focused on, drought and bushfire recovery. So I have been working with the federal minister for water to get this additional assistance to Victorian farmers and look forward to finalising these arrangements soon.

I might use this opportunity. I am sure you would agree with me, Mr O'Brien, that it is very disappointing to see that the water portfolio has been shunted from the federal cabinet—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Nothing to do with the question I asked, Minister.

Ms THOMAS: Well, it just goes to show, I think. You are asking me about a federal scheme. Well, water is no longer in the federal cabinet. That sends a message to farmers about how little valued—

Mr D O'BRIEN: What sends a message is you not accessing federal funding for farmers.

Ms THOMAS: their water needs are.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. Thank you, Minister. Mr O'Brien's time has expired. I will pass the call to Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Minister. As we bring this final session home I would like to turn to the topic of domestic pets—of course a favourite topic of mine.

Mr RIORDAN: A big issue in regional Australia, I think, and Victoria!

Mr MAAS: Well, indeed it is a very big issue. If you go to page 274 of budget paper 3 you will see the performance measures there, and in particular you will see the performance measures against the responsible pet ownership program. Minister, I was hoping you would be able to elaborate on what this program involves and whether it was able to operate at all during the COVID period. Thank you.

Ms THOMAS: Thank you very much, Mr Maas, for that fantastic question. I can assure the committee that across rural and regional Victoria there is a great interest in all of this government's commitments in relation to the better care and welfare of all animals, including domestic pets. Can I take this opportunity to thank you for being part of the task force looking at the rehoming of pets, which is undertaking very important work. The responsible pet ownership program is a terrific initiative undertaken by Animal Welfare Victoria, and it is an extremely popular program for schools and kinders, as you can imagine, with a great track record over the past 20 years. Indeed in that time the team has visited over 59 000 preschools and schools, teaching more than 3 335 000 students. In fact it has been so successful that it has been taken up by other states. The program teaches children how to safely interact with pets, and typically visits over 800 primary schools and 2000 kinders per year. I am sure that the committee fully understands how important this is.

Mr RIORDAN: All the agricultural businesses looking for staff would love to know that the pet handling in kinders is first class!

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan!

Ms THOMAS: If Mr Riordan is not interested in programs that are in place—

Mr RIORDAN: In pet programs in schools, when you cannot tell us about how you are going to get staff for agriculture, I am not particularly interested. That is right.

Ms THOMAS: to ensure that children are safe around pets—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, can you please stop interrupting.

Ms THOMAS: then I am flabbergasted, because we know that every year a number of children are injured by dogs—

Mr RIORDAN: I will take you out on a walk in any country town in Victoria, Minister, and we will see what rates more: staff and labour or pet classes in kinders.

Ms THOMAS: because they do not know—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan! Mr Riordan, can you please stop yelling?

Ms THOMAS: how to appropriately manage domestic animals. It is quite extraordinary—I mean, quite extraordinary—that this program, which as I have said is about the safety of children around animals, is being treated with contempt by Mr Riordan. But back onto describing the program and answering your question, Mr Maas. You appreciate how important it is for children to have this awareness and to experience animals in a safe environment so they know what to do. A large number of dog attacks involve children, Mr Riordan, in the age range of up to 8 years, and over the past year in particular we have seen so many families bringing new pets into their family and spending more time at home with their pets that this is more important than ever before. This comprehensive integrated curriculum package is available to all Victorian primary schools and it is supported by highly interactive resources, including picture storybooks and multimedia activities.

The program of course had to be paused due to coronavirus restrictions, and this is reflected in the performance measure. However, I am pleased to say that we were able to resume visits to schools and kinders from the start of March and that in that time the program has been booked to capacity. I am really pleased to report that despite remote learning the program was able to adapt and continue in an online format, and in August last year the program moved online, ensuring lessons could continue for schools and students while stay-at-home directions were in place. Animal Welfare Victoria has created an online learning hub for primary school teachers to help them deliver safety messages through activities that can be completed at home and online and also in class. We also developed Victor and Victoria's Pet Town, an animated interactive tool for children based on the program's safety messages. Children can play games in Pet Town with Victor the dog and Victoria the cat. A tablet version of this game has also been developed and is free to download from app stores.

As outlined in the budget papers we have a performance measure target of 3100 school and kindergarten visits for the responsible pet ownership program, and we currently anticipate reaching about half of that target, or 1420 visits. This does not include any use of the online materials which were developed. These curriculum materials, such as videos and workbooks, were provided as an assistance to schools during lockdown. While it does not contribute to the performance measure, we do have data on how many times these materials have been accessed. It is difficult to say how many students this reached, but I am pleased to report that in total the materials were viewed over 1600 times.

Mr RIORDAN: Minister, what is the app called?

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan.

Mr Riordan interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, Mr Maas has the call.

Ms THOMAS: Mr Maas, thank you very much for the question. I would like to—

Mr Riordan interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, could you please stop interrupting.

Ms THOMAS: I would like to add for the benefit of the committee, and for Mr Riordan in particular, who wants to suggest that farmers have no interest in animals or being safe around animals, but he might also be interested to know that at the Casterton kelpie auction this year—

Mr Riordan interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan!

Ms THOMAS: Safety programs, Mr Riordan.

Mr RIORDAN: It is a disgrace.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan!

Ms THOMAS: But you might be interested to know that at the Casterton kelpie sales this year a new record was set, with a kelpie sold for \$35 000. So that tells you something about farmers' interest in dogs. Farmers care very deeply about—

Mr RIORDAN: Yes, but it is not a pet app for kids in kinder in the middle of the city.

Ms THOMAS: Mr Riordan, this is a safety program to keep children safe from domestic animals.

Mr RIORDAN: And this is agriculture, not education, Minister.

Ms THOMAS: I have responsibility for animal welfare and safety programs, and I am very proud to carry that responsibility and everything that this government is doing in animal welfare.

Mr RIORDAN: I am glad you can answer how kids can get an app on their phone, but you cannot tell us how you are going to get labour into the workforce to help save farmers in agriculture communities.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, control yourself.

Ms THOMAS: I look forward to repeating your responses, Mr Riordan. You care nothing about the safety of young children. You should know—and you do know full well—that children on farms are also particularly at risk of injuries from animals.

Mr MAAS: I think we might leave it there. Thank you very much, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Maas. Thank you, Minister, to you and your officers, for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on questions on notice in writing, and responses will be required within 10 working days of the committee's request.

As this is the final hearing for the consideration of the 2021–22 budget estimates, I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to the estimates hearings in a positive way, particularly witnesses, the PAEC secretariat and Hansard—all of whom, I might add, have had to endure some of the most unprofessional behaviour I have witnessed anywhere, let alone in a workplace, including people sitting with feet on the committee table during proceedings, banging hands on the table and screaming at and over the top of people. The behaviour of the Member for Brighton was amongst some of the rudest I have encountered professionally, indeed anywhere, and was most unparliamentary.

I am also extremely concerned at the reckless and irresponsible way in which parliamentary privilege has been used as a veil for casting aspersions on people and in such a way that could cause victims further hurt—again, particularly by the Member for Brighton. I will be raising all of these matters with the Presiding Officers and seeking their advice, but on behalf of the committee I now apologise to witnesses and staff as well as those observing proceedings who may have been upset or distressed by this behaviour, particularly that of the Member for Brighton, during these hearings.

I also thank the attendants and catering, cleaning and security staff for all of their efforts in supporting the committee in its deliberations. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Committee adjourned.