

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Melbourne—Thursday, 3 December 2020

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Ms Sonja Terpstra—Chair

Mr Clifford Hayes—Deputy Chair

Dr Matthew Bach

Ms Melina Bath

Mr Stuart Grimley

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Andy Meddick

Mr Cesar Melhem

Dr Samantha Ratnam

Ms Nina Taylor

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Ms Georgie Crozier

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr David Davis

Dr Tien Kieu

Mrs Beverley McArthur

Mr Tim Quilty

WITNESSES

Dr Mark Norman, Chief Conservation Scientist and Executive Director of Environment and Science, Parks Victoria,

Mr Hamish Webb, Director, Knowledge and Planning,

Mr James Todd, Executive Director, Biodiversity Division, and

Ms Kylie White, Deputy Secretary, Environment and Climate Change, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Environment and Planning Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria, and as I said previously with other witnesses, please ensure that your mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would just like to again welcome any members of the public watching via the live broadcast today, and just before I introduce the committee members I just want to acknowledge that I am zooming into this live hearing on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

So with us today, in acknowledging my colleagues, I want to acknowledge those people but also acknowledge people who have provided their apologies for not being able to attend the hearing today as well.

All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information that you provide during the hearing is protected by law. However, any comments repeated outside the hearing may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing, and transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

I will now go through and introduce our committee members. With us today we have Mr Clifford Hayes, who is the Deputy Chair of the committee. Also with us are Dr Samantha Ratnam, Mr Andy Meddick, Mr Stuart Grimley, Ms Melina Bath, Mr Cesar Melhem and Mrs Beverley McArthur, and I think that is everybody, yes.

With that we will move to taking your evidence, but as I said, if you could keep your mobile phones on silent and also just have yourself on mute if you are not speaking, that will help with minimising any background noise. And if you could in your opening remarks please keep your evidence to roughly 10 minutes, that will allow plenty of time for the committee to then ask questions. If you do have any technical difficulties while giving your evidence, please disconnect and contact the committee staff using the contacts that you have been provided. So with that we will hand over to you all.

Ms WHITE: Thank you very much, Chair. My name is Kylie White, I am the Deputy Secretary for environment and climate change in the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. With me I have Mr Hamish Webb, also from the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, and Mr James Todd, and from Parks Victoria I have Dr Mark Norman, who will be part of our proceedings today.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak at this hearing. I would like to also commence by paying my respects to the traditional owners of the lands on which we meet today and paying my respects and acknowledging elders past, present and emerging and any who might be with us.

I do have just some brief opening remarks which will cover, if you like, the key aspects of the submission that has already been presented, and I just draw your attention to that submission. It was a whole-of-government submission and was developed with a range of departmental inputs. I would just like to provide a few brief and latest updates that have occurred since we prepared the submission.

As outlined in our submission, Victoria's natural environment has been under sustained pressure for nearly 200 years, since European colonisation. We know that 30 animal species and 51 plants have become extinct in that time. Victoria is the most intensively settled or cleared space in Australia, with over 50 per cent of the state's native vegetation cleared, and some natural ecosystems, including our lowland grasslands, have sustained—greater than 90 per cent of their pre-European extent. This legacy of loss from degradation and fragmentation of habitats is evident, and the lag effects from past clearing, weed and pest animal invasion and species genetic bottlenecks, and the increasing impacts from climate change will continue to cause biodiversity decline pressures in Victoria.

In April 2017 the Victorian government introduced *Protecting Victoria's Environment*, known as 'Biodiversity 2037', and I will refer to it as Bio 2037, which is a 20-year plan to stop the decline of our native plants and animals and improve our natural environment. It was originally released and underpinned by a funding amount of \$86 million over four years and \$20 million ongoing, which was a significant uplift in the funding provided to the state for biodiversity conservation and protection. This investment was on the back of an earlier \$60 million, which was provided in the previous two years, which was for biodiversity on-ground action, including pest and weed control, investment in our parks and reserves in the state and conservation grants to local community groups. Most recently the Victorian 2020–21 budget includes over \$200 million towards delivering better biodiversity outcomes and more than \$220 million for protection and restoration of regional waterways and catchments.

Bio 2037 is an ambitious plan to achieve a net improvement in the outlook across all species by 2037, with the expected outcomes being that no vulnerable or near-threatened species will have become endangered and that all critically endangered species will have at least one option available for being conserved ex situ or re-established in the wild where feasible under climate change, should they need it. Bio 2037 uses the best available and peer-reviewed science to set targets to ensure actions to improve biodiversity and to ensure that our actions are targeted toward priority areas and are also cost-effective.

DELWP collaborates with partners and stakeholders using biodiversity response planning to increase investment and strategically align our conservation management to maximise progress towards the targets in Bio 2037. An example of Bio 2037 targets is the target for pest predator control, which is currently 400 000 hectares per annum in priority locations to largely benefit small mammals, reptiles and birds which are threatened by foxes and feral cats. In 2019–20 the department and its partners delivered over 550 000 hectares of pest predator control in priority locations, and this increase above the target was largely due to the additional treatment of pest predators undertaken in areas that were significantly affected by the bushfires of the last summer. Last summer's bushfires resulted in over 1.5 million hectares of habitat in Victoria being burned. It highlights the importance of focused efforts to protect Victoria's biodiversity.

During 2020 the Victorian government committed an initial \$22.5 million to support biodiversity bushfire response and recovery action, and then in this latest budget there has been a further \$29 million announced to continue that work. This program has thus far involved more than 25 delivery partners and resulted in 14 at-risk threatened species being extracted during the fires, being cared for and then being safely returned to their habitat once it was safe and that habitat had recovered. It has also delivered more than 300 000 hectares of pest herbivore control and 38 000 hectares of additional pest predator control, and we are working with the 10 traditional owners on initiatives to assess and heal country.

Important biodiversity and habitats also persist on private land, outside the state's parks and reserves system, and we are using conservation covenants to protect these important areas. Conservation covenants, as you might be aware, are voluntary on-title agreements allowing private landholders to conserve natural habitat. Trust for Nature has covenants in place with approximately 1400 landholders, totalling more than 70 000 hectares, and the trust also owns approximately 30 000 hectares. To complement these actions we have a significant contribution made by volunteers for the protection of biodiversity and management of threatening processes. We conducted a survey in 2019 which discovered that over 130 000 people undertook more than 1.5 million hours of environmental volunteer work, with a combined economic contribution of more than \$50 million. Victorians Volunteering for Nature was released in 2018, and it is an important part of being able to expand and achieve the goals and the targets for 2037.

Further actions that we have taken in recent years include a review of the native vegetation regulations and the establishment of new legislation relating to our marine and coastal areas through the *Marine and Coastal Act* of

2018. We have made recent amendments to the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act, and in line with those amendments we have also assessed the conservation status of 2000 Victorian species, that we have assessed using the IUCN—the International Union for Conservation of Nature—approved criteria. These draft conservation statements and assessments were recently released for public consultation. Following the consultation, the final list will be finalised and recommended for inclusion on the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act* threatened list.

Further to those actions that are already being undertaken around our regulatory and our legislative framework, in mid-2020 the government also announced a review to strengthen the Wildlife Act. The *Wildlife Act* was created in 1975, and it is now time to modernise it and make it contemporary to reflect best practice for the regulation and hence sustainable management and protection of wildlife. This will be, if you like, a logical final step in addition to the creation of Bio 2037, the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act* and the native veg clearing regs and that will complete the full biodiversity picture.

I mentioned climate change earlier, and we know that climate change is affecting all of our environments, and Victoria is not alone in this. The *Climate Change Act 2017* sets a target of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, and requires the establishment of five yearly interim greenhouse gas emission reduction targets to support the transition to net zero emissions. While emissions scenarios and climate models are a starting point, there are significant uncertainties surrounding the nature of the impacts that will result from projected climate changes, their timing and how human-enacted systems will respond. Action now is needed to avert harm in the future, but given the uncertainties, climate change planning and decision-making must prepare for the possibility of many future scenarios as well as respond to the unfolding process of change.

Victoria's climate change adaptation action plan for the natural environment systems is one of seven system-level adaptation action plans being developed during 2020 and 2021 under the act, and these system-level adaptation action plans will respond to priorities for adaptation and will be complemented by six regional climate change adaptation strategies that provide place-based stakeholder and community-led change and adaptation actions.

In addition, in the recent budget the Victorian government has just announced the largest clean energy investment and household energy efficiency package of more than \$1.6 billion, and that program, which will result in reduction of a significant amount of carbon emissions, will make a significant difference.

Finally, I just want to refer to traditional owners as the custodians of their lands, who have a right and a cultural duty to maintain and restore the health and wellbeing of country. Indeed, many traditional owner groups rate the health and wellbeing of their people with their country and see the two aspects as intertwined.

The Victorian government acknowledges Aboriginal self-determination as a human right and that it be enshrined, and is working towards committing our actions to equality, justice and strength. *Biodiversity 2037* recognises the fundamental connection between the rights and the wellbeing of traditional owners and Aboriginal Victorians and the health of the natural environment. We have a range of initiatives which have a particular focus on partnership around biodiversity with traditional owners and the obligations for country—joint planning, including through biodiversity response planning; working together to bring traditional knowledge into broader biodiversity planning and priority setting; and reading and healing country. In addition, joint management plans under the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act* share a vision for enhanced land management between traditional owners and the Victorian government and realise the shared aspiration and responsibility of traditional owners for a new approach to managing country. Joint management plans are in place between the state of Victoria and the Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation, the Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation and the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation.

In conclusion, Victoria has an effective legislative framework coupled with regulatory settings and standards that together provide a safety net for Victoria's biodiversity. To support this and to actively manage threats, DELWP uses the best available science to understand priority areas for action and to set targets. We collaborate with partners and stakeholders to deliver purposeful, cost-effective action to protect animals, plants and the ecosystems in which they live across public and private land, and we are planning for the impacts of climate change while acknowledging this will lead to significant changes for biodiversity in the future and transformational change will be required. Finally, traditional owners have a right to maintain and restore the

health and wellbeing of country. We are working in partnership with traditional owners to protect and enhance biodiversity. Thank you very much, Chair. That is the end of my opening remarks.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ms White. So with that we might go over to questions and I might turn to Mr Hayes first.

Mr HAYES: Thanks very much, Ms White. Very interesting. Thanks for your submission and for being here today. I wanted to ask a couple of questions mainly to do with development in the future, which is really DELWP's area. You talked about how you are looking at the damage done over 200 years of intensive settlement, and I am looking at the word 'intensively' there because I am sort of noting that that intensity has picked up over time. Probably back in the 1970s—and I was alive then; not many of you were—we used to drive around with 'Victoria—The Garden State' on our numberplates, and since the 1970s we have doubled our population and a lot of my supporters say it has become 'Victoria—The Concrete State'. Under the projections from DELWP we are going to double our population—the last doubling was over the last 50 years but we are going to double again over the next 30 years. In your future scenarios in the 20-year plan to reduce environmental damage are you taking into account—I know you are looking at climate change—that doubling to possibly eight or 10 million people living in Victoria?

Ms WHITE: Thank you for your question, and I might also refer to James Todd, the Executive Director of Biodiversity, to assist with the answer to this, Mr Hayes. I understand that with the doubling of our population, particularly in a short period of time, the consideration for the environment is going to be significant. I pointed out in the submission that the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act* amendment requires the consideration of biodiversity and the impacts on the environment for matters relating to development and the actions of government. In regard to particular urban development, the *Plan Melbourne* plan—not that that is administered by the area that I oversight in DELWP—makes a number of recommendations relating to the need to protect ecosystems and plants and animals, and a number of councils have undertaken a range of actions, including the development of urban forests. Probably a key part of the urban development is the Melbourne strategic assessment that was undertaken to support and enable the expansion of Melbourne, and I might ask James to speak more about that and how that incorporates key ecosystem and species considerations. Thanks, James.

Mr TODD: Thanks, Kylie. Thanks for the question, Mr Hayes. Before I touch on the Melbourne strategic assessment I might just go back to the basis of the original question. So Kylie touched on this in her statement, which was really around Victoria's native vegetation regulations. Right across Victoria there are regulations in place that ensure that permits or permitted clearing of native vegetation or indeed proposals to clear native vegetation are done in a way which avoids clearing in the first instance and minimises it where possible, and then there is the requirement to offset that clearing for any damage that has occurred. So that essentially delivers a no-net-loss objective from development, and urban development is an example of that. And then beyond that of course we need to be investing in *Biodiversity 2037*, and some of the investment that Kylie is talking about is about investing in improvements in the state of biodiversity.

The Melbourne strategic assessment is a commonwealth-approved program, so this is approved under the commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* and it deals with matters of national environmental significance in terms of species and vegetation communities. What it does is that it basically approves the urban development of Melbourne for the next 50-odd years, or up to 2050, 2060, and in return for that it establishes a series of offsets that need to be put in place to ensure that that urban development does not negatively impact on biodiversity over that time. So it has the dual benefit of providing reduced cost to the development industry, and certainty, but also ensures that those biodiversity impacts are dealt with right up front rather than incrementally through development over time. So it is much more cost-effective but also will lead to better outcomes, ultimately.

And one of the major commitments out of that Melbourne strategic assessment is the establishment of a 15 000-hectare western grassland reserve to the west of Melbourne, to the west of Werribee, and that area was identified and is being established on the basis that it represents the largest contiguous area of native grassland on the volcanic plains in Victoria. More broadly native grasslands are down to less than 2 per cent of their original extent prior to European colonisation, and at one stage in southern Victoria they extended right from Melbourne pretty much to the South Australian border. This area to the west of Melbourne, which is designated as the western grassland reserve, is in fact the largest and most contiguous area of native grassland left in the state.

Mr HAYES: Could I just do a follow-up on that and say thanks, Mr Todd. I have got great interest in the western grassland, so that is good to hear, but there is a lot of work that needs to be done on that and keeping it weed free. But my question more goes to the Melbourne strategic assessment and *Plan Melbourne*. If biodiversity is going to be such an important factor in the future, will that be written into the provisions in the planning scheme—directed through *Plan Melbourne* into the planning scheme—to make those sorts of things matters that should be considered rather than just increasing numbers and density in the city?

Ms WHITE: Mr Hayes, I might answer that question. The *Planning and Environment Act*, which is a key tool for planning decisions, does include matters concerning the environment and biodiversity.

Mr HAYES: Hardly ever raised in VCAT, though, Ms White.

Ms WHITE: But I could only point to that as being the key tool and the key legislation that is available for considering planning decisions, particularly those that are considered to have a significant impact.

Mr HAYES: Thank you.

The CHAIR: And thank you, Ms White. Okay, Dr Ratnam.

Dr RATNAM: Thank you, Chair. Thanks, Ms White and colleagues from the department and Parks as well, for being here. I really appreciate your work and attending the inquiry. I have got a few questions. I will see how many I get through and I am happy to come back so that everyone gets a go as well.

We can see that a lot of biodiversity projects are happening under the biodiversity strategy and other government programs, as some of you have referenced before, but it can often be unclear whether they are achieving the desired outcomes for threatened species. For example, the New South Wales Saving our Species program has a clear, transparent website which lists each listed threatened species, the threats facing them, the funding allocated to each project, how it is to be spent, which partners are part of the project and what the outcome was. Has the Victorian department considered a program like this for us?

Ms WHITE: Thank you, Dr Ratnam. I might ask James to speak about, if you like, how the governance and the framework for Bio 2037 are identified.

Mr TODD: Thanks, Kylie, and thanks, Dr Ratnam, for the question. So *Biodiversity 2037* sets out an approach which is really about maximising the overall outcomes for biodiversity in Victoria. What it has done is basically shift from what was previously a species-by-species approach to starting to look towards what actions can be implemented which deliver the greatest benefit to the most number of species. That is not to say that critically endangered species are being ignored; it is simply just saying that when we are making decisions about the natural environment and where to act in terms of managing threats we need to do that on the basis of those actions that are going to deliver the greatest number of benefits. So in terms of how that plays out, DELWP has an interactive website called NatureKit, where members of the community and management agencies and others can see the sort of information that goes into supporting those sorts of priorities for action across the landscape. So this is combining thousands of species in terms of their distribution, threats that are operating on them and the costs of management and using that to then help prioritise those actions. That is the sort of information and science and capability that DELWP used to respond to the bushfires most recently and to identify the highest priority actions that needed to be undertaken while the fires were still burning but also as part of the broader response and recovery plan that was [Zoom dropout]

The CHAIR: Looks like he is just frozen there for a second.

Mr TODD: Have I gone?

Ms WHITE: You are back.

Mr TODD: I am back. Sorry, hang on a minute [Zoom dropout] simply to say that the science we have got and the information that we have got and the approach that *Biodiversity 2037* sets out are exactly the framework and the capability that were applied to identify the priority actions that needed to be undertaken post the bushfires by way of the example.

Dr RATNAM: Can I ask a quick follow-up question, Sonja? Then I am happy to hand over. Thanks very much for that response. We have just started this inquiry. We have got a lot of context. We have had the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability here. We know the context of their 2018 state of the environment report. We are in a really dire situation in terms of species extinction, and we have got a very short window to turn this around. One of the worries I have is that we seem to have a lot of tools, legislation, plans, funding we can refer to, which are all great things we want to see more of, but the accountability and outcome side of this equation seems to really lacking, so hence the question about the New South Wales program, which seems like it has a built-in component of accountability which is actually saying what the outcome is. I think it is really important for every organisation that now is to be part of the rehabilitation effort in trying to turn this around. How do we encourage more accountability? That is why the question was: have you considered something like that which would actually help advance the accountability of all the departments and projects across government that are now tasked with this huge, very important task? So I guess I would like you to talk if you could about how we are going to measure this. How are we going to know that we are on the right track before it is too late?

Mr TODD: So there are a couple of elements to your follow-up question there. The first comment I would make is that outcomes for biodiversity by necessity can really only be measured over the long term. We are dealing with 200 years of habitat loss and degradation, so there are always going to be lag effects in terms of our actions. So the results of those actions will take time, and hence the *Biodiversity 2037* strategy is really setting 20 years as the target by which we are looking to stop the overall decline of biodiversity in Victoria, so that is the timescale we are operating on.

In terms of accountability, *Biodiversity 2037* and the associated monitoring and evaluation reporting framework set out the way in which those accountabilities are made known. So in terms of agencies and partners and the like the accountability is in the actions rather than the outcomes, because the outcomes are difficult to measure in the short term.

Kylie mentioned in her opening statement about the targets that are in the *Biodiversity 2037* strategy, and in the case of pest herbivore or pest predator control, it was 400 000 hectares per annum in priority areas of pest herbivore control. Now, those targets are set in the *Biodiversity 2037* strategy, and they are on the basis of the best available science and peer-reviewed science that we have, which helps determine where are the most cost-effective actions to undertake to deliver against those 20-year outcome targets in the *Biodiversity 2037* strategy, and we have a reporting framework that then says: how well are we progressing towards those output targets? So we have got targets around pest predator control. We have got targets around pest herbivore control, we have targets around weeds, we have targets around revegetation, we have targets around permanent protection on private land. So these are all output targets and action targets that are identified in the *Biodiversity 2037* strategy, and that is the way in which we then measure our accountability progress against those targets. At the same time, we continue to invest in monitoring of outcomes so that we are understanding those through time, and also obviously investing into things like science and research to understand the effectiveness of our actions and to help reduce some of the uncertainties around that so that we can continue to improve over time.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Todd. Mr Meddick.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Ms White, James, Mr Webb and Dr Norman. Look, I am just curious. In your submission you identify a number of areas where improvements could be made, one of which was the removal of legislative barriers to enable traditional owners to directly manage land. In light of your statements just before, James, I am a bit concerned and a bit confused. A number of traditional owner groups that I have spoken to—the Dja Dja Wurrung for instance, and many of the different language groups within the Eastern Maar, the Wadawurrung, and that is just to name a few; I have spoken to several—are quite annoyed by the fact of the use of 1080 poison and its continued use and the ignoring of the fact that they want traditional familial groups of dingoes returned to the land who manage so-called introduced pest species. That is also backed up by enormous amounts of evidence, as provided by such experts as Lyn Watson, Dr Mel Browning, Professor Euan Ritchie, Professor Ernest Healy, Dr Kylie Cairns, who have all supported trial programs, for instance, of bringing dingoes back into these areas, because they do manage introduced species, and yet we continue to put massive amounts of threatened species at risk from poisoning in these areas.

It is completely undeniable as you know that 1080 poison is completely indiscriminate. There is no such thing as a target species with it, and yet we ignore the wishes of traditional owners in trying to return this balance to

the ecosystem of having an apex predator in these areas. I know of programs that have been run in the past—I am not sure if they are still running now, but aerial drops of this poison into remote, inaccessible forest areas where there is absolutely no chance of anyone being able to go in and monitor the effectiveness of what that poison has done, which seems to me to be the ultimate in unaccountability.

How do you respond to that, and do you actually have any plans to respect the wishes of those traditional owners to stop the use of 1080 poison in the areas that they want you to stop it in as a start and to return the dingo populations to those areas to manage these introduced species? I can point to the fact that there has been DNA sampling of these animals in different areas with an over 90 per cent return of being pure dingo DNA, which puts kind of a lie to the fact that there are these—and I hate this expression of course—wild dogs, because it gives the public the impression of course that there are packs of German shepherds and dachshunds out there roaming the forests and farmland and ripping down animals and sheep at every available opportunity. How do you speak to that accountability, and will you respect the traditional owners' wishes to do these things?

Mr TODD: Thanks for the question, Mr Meddick. What I can start by saying is that we are working with traditional owners right across Victoria in terms of what often they describe as returning spirit to country. And that may be either reintroducing animals that have particular cultural significance to those groups. That may include dingoes, it might include quolls, it might include a range of other species.

So in answer to your question: yes, we are working with traditional owners in terms of that. We work with them to identify what their objectives are with respect to that, and obviously then we would need to work through arrangements as to how that might happen.

More broadly, 1080—the department uses 1080 to control pest animals. It is part of the tools that we need to apply, but of course we are very conscious of the off-target impacts. And we use it in a way to ensure that those off-target impacts are minimised in terms of things like burying baits and the like, and we are doing on-ground fox control in East Gippsland and the like. We are certainly conscious of that, aware of the off-target impacts, but there is also the issue of pest predators and how they might be controlled in an effective and efficient way and the impacts of those on native wildlife.

Mr MEDDICK: Thanks for that answer. And, Chair, I have just got one follow-up then, if that is okay. The APVMA sets down the terms of use of 1080 poison, and yet we continually see different groups—and it is even available to individual farmers by doing a 1-hour course. And yet this is a poison that is listed on the Australian government website as a chemical of terrorist concern. Would it be, in your opinion, then a rather ridiculous situation to have such a highly toxic chemical available with such limited training? And we often see and often hear reports of domestic dogs being killed as a result of inadvertent consumption of meat baits, for instance. And part of the APVMA's rules are that where baits are buried for fox control, for instance, they are marked out on a mud map plan by whoever is using it, and at the end of the baiting period, they must return and dig up and take out any unused baits.

Does the department have a plan to actually have officers in the field to ensure this happens, so as to minimise the effects on other native species that might consume these baits and be killed? But also to the fact that a lot of these baits are actually picked up by birds and carried into urban areas, and that is where we see a lot of the domestic animal poisoning occurring, are there any plans from the department to have an enforcement model to make sure this happens if you are going to continue to use this poison?

Ms WHITE: Mr Meddick, I might answer that. We use 1080 and any other chemicals according to the standards that we must meet to use that, and that includes the appropriate use of 1080 baits, the way in which they are buried and then the way in which they are monitored. We have within DELWP a team of people that are responsible for the program, oversight the program and then also monitor the take and any other matters relating to the program, as well as of course the dog control itself. We follow all of those standards that are required of us in the use of that chemical, so I just point to that we use, if you like, the most contemporary standards for the use of that chemical, and we follow that with our programs.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms White. Ms Bath.

Ms BATH: Thank you, panel, for being here. I will not thank you individually, because that would be my time up. I am interested to question you about our fires, and I know, Ms White, you mentioned the devastating fires right across certainly a large part of my electorate in Northern Victoria. Also we talk about climate change,

but fuel load is one thing that we have an ability to manage, and many in my patch would question how well that has been managed but also question that there have been fuel load maps that have been requested and not been presented. So I ask you: will DELWP be able to present those to the committee so that we can have a broad view as to the status of fuel loads in our forests? That is my first one.

Ms WHITE: Thank you, Ms Bath. That second part of your question, I am unaware of those requests. However, to the first part of the question I might ask Hamish Webb to speak. Thanks, Hamish.

Mr WEBB: Yes, thank you, Kylie, and thank you, Ms Bath, for the question. I guess there is a bit there in terms of how we manage fuel loads and manage bushfire risk across Victoria. In 2015 the government released Safer Together, which is its risk-based approach to managing bushfire risk across Victorian communities. Importantly it is about making sure we take the effective action in the most appropriate locations, and that means targeting activities to ensure that when we do have the opportunity for, say, planned burning we maximise the outcome for that. We recognise and we have obviously seen some difficult fire seasons last season and the one before that, but at times the ability to undertake broadscale planned burning will be challenged through certain years and based on seasonal conditions and rainfall and drought and bits and pieces. Unfortunately eastern Victoria last year was at the end of a sort of pretty significant three-year drought period, and we saw the tragic consequences of those conditions.

Importantly, in terms of how we are managing bushfire risk, it is about identifying a lot of different factors that contribute to bushfire risk. Fuel loads are only part of that. It is actually also the availability of those fuels, so when they are drier or their arrangement in terms of bark and other conditions that contribute to the nature of bushfire behaviour. So our approach is about making sure we are looking at all those factors and combining things like planned burning with more mechanical fuel treatment. We saw a 50 per cent increase in the amount of mechanical fuel treatment that we delivered in the last 12 months compared to previous years, and we will see continued investment in that to ensure we are able to maximise the opportunity to reduce bushfire risk where we can. We are also looking at how we continue to use what we would describe as landscape-scale fire, mosaic fire, which is putting fire back into the larger forested tracks to reduce the more flashy and flammable fuels you might see on, say, northern slopes and western slopes that really do create what we call the ramps and are the real engines to the large fires that we experienced last summer or on days where the conditions were deteriorating.

I think you also asked the question there and made a comment to the climate change piece. Importantly and I guess worryingly, and you saw this through the royal commission, there was some expert evidence provided to that that we are seeing a deterioration and further deterioration of bushfire conditions as we go forward. What that means is we are seeing drier, longer, more intense droughts and more frequent drought conditions. That sort of leads to the underlying dryness, the availability of different fuels. We are seeing more spike weather days, so be they heat waves, and then those change days, and unfortunately in Victoria we have seen the tragic consequences of those sorts of conditions. And we are also seeing more and additional lightning-generating storms, so you can start to see ignition rates of fires increasing through lightning, and—

Ms BATH: Mr Webb, thank you. In no way do I mean to diminish the importance of this, but I think it has been covered off in a little bit in time. My next question would go to the VAGO report that looked at that only 43 per cent of priority burns occurred last year and only 30 per cent in the normal ranked burns, which I think protects communities. Specifically the question I ask is in relation to 70 per cent residual risk targets; they have only been met when we have had these mega-fires in Victoria so far, so i.e. we reached that total or amount of 70 per cent residual risk because the large bushfire was included. Before I run out of time, Ms White, I guess I am asking that question before: could we see those fuel load maps for the committee? Thank you very much.

Mr WEBB: I am happy to talk to the VAGO. I think importantly one of the things, and VAGO just spoke to this, is that we are able to show the relative contribution of planned burning versus bushfire to the risk reduction over the last 10 years, which clearly shows since July 2009 that 66 per cent of bush reduction across Victoria is attributable to planned burning and 34 per cent is attributable to the bushfires, and that is despite bushfires burning, you know, over 1 million hectares more.

Now, importantly what we are talking about there in the 70 per cent is about risk to life and property. Obviously as we start to think about other values that are out there, talking about, say, ecosystems and values, the size and scale of those large bushfires are having a far more detrimental impact on environmental values than the

planned burn program. But what that does tell you is that the fuel management program is having a significant and overwhelming contribution to risk reduction.

And no doubt fires like last year's have a significant contribution as well in a year, in a particular year, but over the long term we can see the contribution of fuel management. And that is why a risk-based approach is really important, because when we get the opportunities, we maximise that risk reduction—it is not about just trying to treat large areas—and that will achieve the same outcome.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you, Ms Bath. I will come back around afterwards. I might just take the opportunity—and take the liberty as Chair—Mr Webb, to ask you a question, perhaps. Could you just outline for us what role Indigenous peoples have in managing fire landscape and what interaction your department is having with them in that regard?

Mr WEBB: Yes. Thank you, Chair. And I think it is very much an emerging and growing area—seeing a great emergence and growth in the relationship. So if we reflect on three or four years ago, there was only a handful of involvements in burns and cultural burns across Victoria. I think last year there were something like 10 to 20. In our current forward planning we have got over 100, so you can really see an exponential growth in that.

Importantly we are working in partnership, and we supported the development of the traditional owner-led cultural fire strategy, which was released in May last year, 2019, and that was sort of the first document of its kind from traditional owners' perspective. It was authored by traditional owners, and it sets really clear objectives and principles about how traditional owners want to reintroduce cultural fire back into Victoria. And importantly it gave a traditional owner voice, led by the traditional owners. So we are now working with the traditional owners about what that looks like from an implementation piece, because as you would be aware, each group wants to do things differently, which is exactly how we should be working with them.

So we are still partnering. As I said, the increase in the cultural burning program—we are seeing that at a tenfold increase. And we are also seeing other activities that the traditional owners are wanting to talk about—be that the use of cold watering practices for managing fuels, be that more involvement in the emergency response and recovery side of things—so we are working with each of the groups to develop long-term plans and resourcing plans about reintroducing TOs, traditional owner practices, cultural fire practices, into our bushfire management approach.

The CHAIR: Okay, thank you. Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. I have a number of points I wish to cover off on. To follow on from other members' points about accountability, I do not think you properly responded to Dr Ratnam's question as to why you cannot produce a website exactly as New South Wales does to be able to constantly inform us exactly what you are doing in certain aspects of your work. Waiting for 20 years, I am sorry, is just not acceptable. We will not be in the Parliament and some of us could be dead—and certainly who knows where the environment will be?

And if you want accountability, I can give you some anecdotal evidence following on from Mr Meddick's question about 1080, because we know that in Killarney you use 1080 to beat the foxes—which were not a problem until you started fencing off areas for plovers, when the foxes said, 'Well hello, here's dinner'. You tried to keep horses and dogs out, which actually were a very good natural environment where the plovers used to nest near their areas and it kept the foxes away. People, pets, dogs got infected by the 1080 bait, and actually birds got infected as well, so we can give you the anecdotal evidence of that outcome.

Also, I go to the anecdotal evidence about roadside vegetation. I do not know what you think of phalaris, but at the moment in my area, which did not have a fire last year, thankfully, it is about double the height in some areas of a fence. It certainly stifles our native vegetation, and it is a harbouring place for vermin as well. But, of course, it is a fire risk, and as we saw in the St Patrick's Day fires the vegetation in areas that are public spaces on roadsides was not properly maintained, and it still is not. In fact, it has got many times worse due to the lush seasons. We have not only got phalaris a mile high, we have got ferns and we have got blackberries on state roads—highway 1. The Princes Highway is one of the worst areas, right where the fires burned. You have done nothing about this or about forcing VicRoads to make sure these places are free of invasive species, which are not only bad for the environment, but they are certainly a fire hazard.

I am also wondering if you support the dumping of—

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mrs McArthur. Is there a question there, because we do have other members, so perhaps if you could just move to your question.

Mrs McARTHUR: Well, there are various questions in that. The final one is: do you support the PFAS-contaminated soil going into the Maddingley Brown Coal site at Bacchus Marsh, which really would, I would have thought, have quite a significant effect on the biodiversity system, because it flows into the Parwan Creek and then on into the Werribee River, let alone affecting the agricultural community, and the local people, whether they are traditional owners or not, around Bacchus Marsh are rightly concerned about this. Is that acceptable?

Ms WHITE: Thank you, Mrs McArthur. I am not sure whether there is much to add to your comments and observations about roadsides. I take your point. In regard to that last point, the EPA has approved the environment management plan for the Maddingley Brown Coal site to receive tunnel-boring machine spoil, noting the low levels of PFAS that are likely to occur, and I can only point to that as being an appropriate regulatory tool that is being used in this instance.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms White.

Mrs McARTHUR: What about the roadsides?

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, I will come back to you. I do need to move to Mr Grimley. Mr Grimley.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, panel, for your submissions today. My question is for Parks Victoria actually. Just making reference to the 2019–20 financial year, Parks Victoria successfully prosecuted 10 individuals for offences under the parks Act or regulations. It seems like a pretty low number to me. That could either be due to the public doing the right thing, which is a good thing, or it could be in relation to Parks Victoria not having enough or effective means of patrolling certain areas. I would just like your information here for the committee. In your view, are the HR resources sufficient in this area in enforcing regulations, and if so, or if not, are the financial commitments sufficient in maintaining effective patrols?

Dr NORMAN: I am happy to take that one directly. Thank you, Mr Grimley, and thank you, Chair. I would also like to pay my respects to the traditional owners right across ecosystems across Victoria. With all the challenges, restoring health of country together is really important to us and aligns with our ecosystem protection needs.

In relation to compliance, we are very active at the moment with the new Office of the Conservation Regulator, and we are building an expanded program and additional resources for compliance as a joint exercise. And we have received some funding for increased authorised officers in the recent budgets, but it is certainly an area that we recognise the increasing need in and increasing issues. Even under COVID we have had much higher dumping of asbestos and other forms of industrial waste across the landscape, lots of illegal firewood harvesting, lots of illegal activities, so it is a very strong focus. And our executive director of commercial, planning and economic recovery, Simon Talbot, he is in charge of a major review of compliance and our authorised officer teams, and to work with that Office of the Conservation Regulator on really ramping that up is very front of mind, and it is very actively being pursued at the moment.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thank you, Dr Norman. Just one more quick one, if I can, Chair. In your view, are the amounts that have been allocated to you funding-wise for this sufficient in addressing all of these needs that we have in the environment?

Dr NORMAN: A significant number of our existing staff, so a lot of our existing staff, are authorised officers, and they are very actively involved. I think the scale of the problem is enormous and will need a whole-of-government response and approach, but the problem of illegal behaviours on the Parks estate and on Crown lands in general are certainly expanding. So we can always use more resources in that space.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Okay, thank you. I will come back around now and go to Mr Hayes. Any further questions?

Mr HAYES: Thank you. Two things to consider, and whoever can answer best, please. One is: what is the department doing to aid in the connection of pockets of native bush, of making wildlife corridors and things like this? This seems to be quite an urgent matter if we are to preserve native species. They get isolated in pockets of bushland and cannot get to others when fire comes through or some other natural disaster or predator takes them out.

The other consideration is on a completely different level and is following up to what I was talking about before. Is there any plan to make the environment the prime consideration of planning documents such as *Plan Melbourne*, rather than this obsession with increasing density and population growth? Environment number one—that is what I think we should have.

Ms WHITE: I note that, and I just might ask James to deal with the first part of your question, Mr Hayes.

Mr TODD: Thanks, Kylie. Thanks, Mr Hayes. Obviously fragmentation of habitat is one of the issues that has led to the decline of biodiversity in Victoria. That is a legacy, again, of large-scale clearing that has happened in Victoria since colonisation, so restoration of existing habitat as well as reconnecting habitat are certainly actions that the department and partners invest in. Most recently under the state budget there was an allocation of \$92.3 million for restoring carbon through nature, and \$77 million of that will go towards essentially revegetation and restoration activities on public and private land, which will provide both carbon sequestration but also improve connectivity for habitat as well as opportunities for traditional owners to restore country and healthy country and also reap the economic benefits of future carbon markets.

Mr HAYES: Rivers are a great opportunity for that connection too. I will just throw that in.

Mr TODD: I can say that a priority of the *Victorian Waterway Management Strategy* is around restoration of riparian areas, because they are important corridors and often refugia for animals, particularly in times of drought and the like. So certainly there are priorities right through Victoria in terms of restoration of riparian areas.

Mr HAYES: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mr Hayes. Dr Ratnam.

Mr HAYES: Hang on. Sorry. I was still after the second part of my question to Ms White.

The CHAIR: I am just conscious of time and we have got to get through everyone, so if you can keep your question short. Just quickly, Mr Hayes. Then we will go to Dr Ratnam.

Mr HAYES: Sorry, I did ask about making the environment number one in planning in Victoria, the prime consideration, rather than population density.

Ms WHITE: Mr Hayes, can I be a little bit cheeky and say that I will take that as a statement.

Mr HAYES: There is no plan as far as you know, then, Ms White?

Ms WHITE: I am not a deputy secretary responsible for planning, so let me point this out, but *Plan Melbourne*, though, does include ways of being able to both environmentally and developmentally develop aspects of Melbourne and it does include the protection and maintenance of environmental values—in fact it does now have a clear emphasis on the need to be able to incorporate climate change—all of which are important for being able to maintain the environment as Melbourne grows. You would be aware too that *Plan Melbourne* has aspects to it that are around keeping environments livable, which involves including environmental values and trees and other, if you like, clean, green, open spaces that are involved. The Melbourne open space strategy, which is linked to *Plan Melbourne*, is a key component which is around expanding as well as connecting our open spaces, which are going to be even more important, and we have discovered with COVID just how important they can be, so that is a key component of *Plan Melbourne*.

Mr HAYES: Not very successful so far—you can take that as a comment.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thanks, Mr Hayes. Dr Ratnam.

Dr RATNAM: Thank you, Chair. I have got two questions on funding, so I will ask them quickly so that they can be answered together if that is okay. The first question is: the biodiversity strategy identifies a target for private land conservation of 200 000 hectares protected by 2037. How will this be achieved? What support will be given to Trust for Nature to achieve this in the most effective way possible? That is the first question. The second one is: the four-year funding for the 2017–18 funding of the biodiversity strategy runs out in June next year and there was no new funding in last week's state budget announced—what is the impact of this loss of funding on the department's biodiversity conservation work?

Ms WHITE: James, this might be one for you to start with.

Mr TODD: Thanks, Kylie. Thanks, Dr Ratnam. So, correct, the biodiversity strategy identifies a target of 200 000 hectares of permanently protected habitat on private land by 2037. The Trust for Nature is obviously a core agency in delivering against that target. Trust for Nature covenants are not the only mechanism by which that occurs. There are other on-title agreements administered through the *Conservation, Forests and Lands Act* by the department as well as Indigenous protected areas that fall under that overall banner. The trust is funded to deliver against a program of conservation covenants on private land, and obviously in terms of that target it is a significant step up from the level of covenanting that has occurred per annum over the last 20 to 30 years, so there is certainly a need to increase the rate of permanent protection, and the Trust for Nature is working on a number of strategies to address that and to help achieve that target. Was that for me too? Sorry.

Ms WHITE: Did you want to talk about Bio 2037 and the funding, James?

Mr TODD: Yes, sorry, the funding. So the commitment back in 2017 when the government released the strategy and also that \$86.3 million was that there was \$20 million ongoing, and Kylie mentioned that in her statement. So that money is available from 2021. Then obviously there have been more recent announcements made in terms of the state budget and some things like the Victorian deer control plan and, as I mentioned before, storing carbon for nature, those sorts of programs, as well as further funding that has been provided to Landcare and volunteers. There is a range of initiatives that equate to about \$200 million in the most recent state budget announcement that will all make a contribution to those targets and the on-ground actions and the priorities in the *Biodiversity 2037* plan.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Meddick.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Chair, and I am conscious of time as well. I will be very quick with this one. Just further to Mr Hayes's first question, I have had the opportunity to go out in my electorate, and there are several properties that Trust for Nature are in control of. Unfortunately some of them are even adjacent to and separated by major highways and other large arterial roads, which presents a bit of a problem for the passage of wildlife from one property to the next. In particular, we are talking about macropods, but there are other species as well in these areas, like echidnas and lots of other ground dwellers, for instance.

I have travelled extensively in Europe and the use of land bridges over there for the passage of wildlife is extensive in different countries such as the Netherlands and Germany and France. What is your view on those, and do you think there is a practical application for those to be used in conjunction with larger wildlife corridors on existing land itself? So farmland where they might need to be a transitional corridor of X metres wide for animals to have safe passage through, but in conjunction with these land bridges or other types of modes for animals to be able to pass safely across roads, because this also presents a problem for road safety for human beings. Animal strike can be deadly.

Mr TODD: Thanks for the question, Mr Meddick. I guess I would start by saying that depending on the species there are a number of barriers to movement. Not to be too glib about it, but for some species they might not be able to travel more than 10 metres between areas and for other species they can travel thousands of kilometres, so there is not a kind of a one-size-fits-all, and so for connectivity for animals you need to think of different scales.

In relation specifically to your question around roads and so forth, we have got some highlighted and high-profile examples of where that has happened in Victoria, particularly with respect to threatened species like the mountain pygmy possum, where we built the so-called 'love tunnel', which goes underneath one of the roads up at Hotham and then connected two populations that were otherwise disconnected. We also know that

VicRoads or Regional Roads Victoria have got a number of examples where they have built rope bridges across roads, like the Hume Freeway, to allow squirrel gliders and other things to cross.

So all I can say to your question really is that those things are always under consideration, but we need to make decisions in the context of cost-effectiveness and overall benefit to the species. So primarily our focus would be where there is an issue for threatened species, and that might be where you are needing to connect two populations that are otherwise going to be perhaps genetically disconnected, and that might lead to their further extinction risk. To the extent that some of those actions might benefit others, like kangaroos, I guess remains to be seen. But certainly it is in the mix of actions, and we need to then weigh up those actions in terms of their cost benefit against all the suite of other actions that are confronting us in terms of managing threats to biodiversity.

The CHAIR: Okay, thank you. Ms Bath.

Ms WHITE: I was just going to say Mark Norman might want to say something there. Sorry, Chair.

The CHAIR: Sorry.

Dr NORMAN: To follow on that question, Mr Meddick, it is certainly something we would look at even within the Parks estate, so even in the works improvements we are talking about at Twelve Apostles. While we have got temporary roads, we are aiming to build ways of swamp antechinus moving between populations across those roads. We are developing actual habitat cover, batons of timber that are put across those temporary tracks at night, giving cover from foxes and cats, and then they will come off during the day when the animals are not active. But as those tracks are formed there will be pathways underneath for those small mammals to maintain the continuity, it is front of mind to make sure we are not further fragmenting really endangered species, like that native mouse, the swamp antechinus. So it is front of mind.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you. That is good to hear. I would like to go down and have a look if you are happy to escort me down there. It is in my electorate so I would be happy to go and see it.

Dr NORMAN: If we get to that stage, absolutely.

Mr MEDDICK: Wonderful, thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Bath.

Ms BATH: Thanks, Chair. I have many questions, but I will limit it to two, and I will put the rest on notice and then we can come back. Many in the community are very interested and concerned about how national parks and our state reserves are managed as forests—so the biodiversity, monitoring and management of that. And we understand the productive forests have an auditing process of sustainable forest management standards and various others that sit under there. So my question is: would Parks Victoria and/or DELWP be prepared to endorse a recommendation that Parks Victoria and other DELWP reserves meet those same standards, so go in and have an audit management program similar to productive forests?

Ms WHITE: I might ask Dr Norman to talk about parks particularly and then we can round it off at the end more broadly around public lands. Mark?

Dr NORMAN: Thank you, Ms Bath. We have existing monitoring and evaluation programs going on across pests, weeds, threats, threatened species and issues around waterways. We have a range of monitoring and evaluation kinds of processes going on across many of our 3200 reserves. I would probably need to dive into the question further in terms of the forms of all that you are talking about on those forested estates—on those state forests. So I would probably hand back to Kylie or James to talk about the comparison between the two or your secondary question.

Ms WHITE: And part of that could be answered by Hamish. If you could talk about the kinds of audits and the scale of those audits, and then we might talk about the broader estate.

Mr WEBB: Yes, thank you. So I guess there are couple of different audits and monitoring programs that occur in terms of the broader forest management space. There are audits that are tied—and I think these are the ones you are referring to, Ms Bath—around the timber harvesting program and the code for timber harvesting.

There are independent audits that are run through the conservation regulator in terms of how timber operations are complying with various aspects of the code. Often they are around improvement audits in terms of track maintenance and construction, you know, and management of drainage et cetera within the coupes themselves or forestry operations.

From a broader forest management perspective, there are a number of activities we undertake. As a road manager, we have a compliance role and requirements that we need to do to meet our legislative requirements there. So there is an audit process that goes in terms of our roads, and inspections for bridges and drainage, as an example. And we have a similar program in our role as a fire manager, in terms of our planned burn program; any breaches or impacts from our planned burn program are audited by the inspector-general for emergency management.

That pool undertake an independent review of any planned burn, escape or breach, and that will be against the code for bushfire management on public land as well. So there are a number of sort of activity-based codes, audit programs, but there are also, as Mark was talking to, some condition and performance programs in place. We have got a number across the forest management program and the bushfire program, where we are monitoring quite a substantial monitoring network where we take a long term-assessment of flora and fauna values in terms of their condition, their presence or absence, to sort of track the condition of the forest through those programs as well.

Ms BATH: And how is that displayed? How does the public get to see that and how can this committee get a synopsis of that as a state of your nation in terms of how your report card is for DELWP, public forests and Parks Victoria, because I think community often, realistically, when they go for a walk and they look out and they see weed species or they see evidence of feral pests et cetera, go, 'Well what's going on here?'. So I guess I am saying to you: how can Parks and DELWP actually, you know, provide their report card and how transparent can that be for community?

Mr WEBB: Yes. It is an area that was picked up also by the inspector-general for emergency management and the Victorian Auditor-General as part of their recent reviews into the bushfire and the bushfire season. It is about how we provide the transparent information [Zoom dropout] and responses from the government in terms of making improvements to provide that sort of information that you are asking about.

At present there are sort of a couple of different forms that we use. There is the *State of the Forests*, which is more of a condition report, which is part of the state of the environment suite that the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability runs each five years. But there is also, from a fire perspective, the fuel management report, which is an annual report that sort of tracks the performance of the last 12 months in terms of fuel management.

But as I said, there are areas that both those independent reviews have said we can do better at in terms of how we communicate the range of information that we do have. So we will be looking to put improvements in place in the short-term, sort of looking towards June next year, as well as longer term communication and transparency. That goes, from a fire perspective, to the broader issue: 'How do we communicate bushfire risk and how do we help communities make decisions and understand community-led activities and state-led activities?'

The CHAIR: I just might interrupt at this juncture. Sorry, just before you go on, Ms Bath, I am conscious that Dr Norman from Parks Vic has not had an opportunity to give an opening statement. So I am in your hands as to whether you want to do that now or whether you want to come back at another point in time and do that, because I am sure other committee members would have some questions for you arising from your opening statement. Do you have a preference either way?

Dr NORMAN: We did contribute to the building of that whole-of-government response, so we were involved in the one that Ms White presented. That is representative across both our agencies.

The only thing that I would add as a point that clearly ecosystem decline is going on in front of our eyes—real-time, now—right across the state, and is the speed and the severity of climate change impacts are being felt everywhere. So there are huge challenges in this space, and we regularly hear of major transformations going on in our ecosystems like massive dieback of major tree species even outside the kind of catastrophic, fast-moving bushfire-type issues. We are in a changing climate, on a changing corner of a nation that is suffering

those issues, and it is very much front of mind to see how we can plan, respond and work to recover what we can but nurture nature in whatever form it is to the best of our ability by reducing other threats. I will probably leave it there.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. Now, again, I am conscious of time. It is 2 minutes to 1 o'clock, but I know there are two other members who have not had a second round of questions. So we will continue on until break time, but of course, committee members, you can submit questions on notice to our witnesses, or we can get people back. With that, I will move to Mr Grimley in the first instance. Do you have any other questions, Mr Grimley, before I go to Mrs McArthur finally?

Mr GRIMLEY: No. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Okay. Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Why are you scapegoating rock climbers in the Grampians? And why are you considering introducing dingoes into the Grampians, and what consultation have you had with neighbouring farmers? I guess that is a Parks Victoria question.

Dr NORMAN: The interest in considering what might be the roles of dingoes being brought back to a landscape was brought to the process in the Grampians by traditional owners wanting to have those discussions and do some investigations. It is the very early stages of a topic they would like discussed, so it is not something we are talking about rolling out next week. It is a topic for discussion under that process. As for rock climbing, I would just take that as a statement, because this is an inquiry into ecosystem decline. Maybe there is another forum for that discussion.

Mrs McARTHUR: Well, they use the Grampians, which you are in charge of, I should think, and they are being accused of damaging your ecosystem.

Dr NORMAN: There are concerns around impacts on tens of thousands of years worth of rock art that is in that system, and that is the core issue that is being discussed. But again, I think it is an issue that is a topic outside this inquiry.

Mrs McARTHUR: Well, are the public parks of Victoria places for the public, or should they be locked up?

Dr NORMAN: They are absolutely places for the public, and the critical point is that we connect people with nature and natural and cultural values in those places and ensure we protect them while maximising the experiences of the almost 100 million visitors we have a year across the parks estate. So there is absolutely no intent to lock up the national parks estate without the people with us, and without them engaging with nature and caring and getting active about protecting nature and ecosystems it is doomed to fail, any of our endeavours. So the public are absolutely welcome and critical players.

The CHAIR: Okay, well with that we are out of time, so I would just like to thank all of the witnesses for their contributions today.

Ms BATH: Chair, they did start a little bit late—or we did; it was not anyone else's fault—so I just figured that there might be just a couple more questions available.

The CHAIR: Well, we have had two rounds of questions already, so can I get an indication from committee members just by show of hand who has got additional questions? So there are two of you. So perhaps—and again, I am in the hands of the committee and of course whether the witnesses are also available—you want to proceed for a further 5 minutes, because I am conscious people also need to have a break and our witnesses may have other things to attend to.

Dr RATNAM: Or perhaps we can ask the witnesses to come back in a future hearing if that gives us a bit more space and time given it is quite substantive what both contribute.

The CHAIR: Yes, and as I said, you can put your questions on notice as well or we can ask our witnesses to come back at another time. So at the moment there are only two of you, though, who have indicated there are questions, so I am in the hands—

Mrs McARTHUR: Well, Chair, I think there could be a lot more questions, and it would be very good idea—

The CHAIR: Well, you can present them on notice.

Mrs McARTHUR: Well, it would be a very good idea to do what Dr Ratnam is suggesting.

The CHAIR: So can I just get an indication from the witnesses, then: do you have a further 5 minutes you could stay or do you have other things to attend to? Ms White?

Ms WHITE: Yes, I can continue for another 5 minutes.

The CHAIR: Okay, all right. So perhaps, Dr Ratnam, if you could be first cab off the rank, please.

Dr RATNAM: Sure, no problem. A couple of questions to Parks Victoria—thanks very much for presenting here—on matters of funding. I will ask them together so you can respond as you like, and sorry one is a bit long winded, a bit long. The first question is: how much of Parks Victoria's funding and staff time is dedicated to conservation works as opposed to visitor activities and infrastructure? That is the first question. The second question is: we know it is difficult as a government agency to talk about funding shortfalls, but let us presume based on what we know in the context—and we have heard about the declining state of biodiversity in Victoria—that you do not have enough money for core conservation and threatened species protection work. If you did have more money specifically for biodiversity work, where would you use it and what quantum do you think is needed to properly fund core conservation work that is needed right now?

Dr NORMAN: I will break that down. The first one, the conservation roles at Parks Victoria, we last financial year managed around \$20 million worth of directly externally funded conservation programs. A large proportion of our annual operating budget of \$160 million is for the staff and programs that are delivered as business as usual, as baseline programs, so there is a large proportion of that amount that goes into the daily processes needed, across around 3250 reserves across the state. So it is a significant component and a priority of our organisation. The connection to the visitor experience and infrastructure is integral to that conservation as well because it is about sustainable contact in positive, constructive ways that does not kill the golden goose of nature; it actually makes sure that people have that contact in the most positive way possible.

In terms of funding overall, we have had an increase in funding. It has been going up in the last couple of years and is anticipated to be higher again next year. There are major announcements which I think have huge significance, like the Prom Sanctuary announcement to put the predator-proof fence across Wilsons Promontory and, for 10 kilometres of fence, build 50 000 hectares of the biggest climate refuge in Australia in terms of a diversity of species and habitats in the cool waters of Bass Strait, so protected from climate change. It is absolutely a game changer, and it will be a model for other sanctuaries and other programs like that around the state.

We are not going in a going-backwards state in terms of support; we are actually going forward with both baseline and individual initiatives that have put us in a better place in recent years. But the scale of it is still absolutely huge, and I am really concerned that that can be understated in terms of how transformative things are. Our rainforests burned in the recent fires. They have always been too wet to burn. We are in new, uncharted waters.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Bath. Unless you have got a very, very quick question, perhaps they might have to put them on notice, because I am just conscious of time.

Ms BATH: Thank you very much. First of all, I am interested in how many DELWP scientists there are specifically in charge of mitigation of invasive species, so that might be something that you need to take on notice. The second relates to track closures in terms of: what is DELWP's policy on track closures? And I mean on state dirt roads and gravel roads. How is it formulated, and what data is it based on? How many seasonal tracks have been closed in the last five years, and how many tracks are permanently closed? Many of my constituents are concerned that they see that those fire-mitigating tracks that are able to give access to fire-mitigating vehicles et cetera are being closed. So I would like you to paint a picture for this committee an understanding around track openings and track closures and what they are based on. Thank you.

Ms WHITE: Just in the couple of minutes, we would need to be able to, if you like, reply outside of this meeting to those questions relating to tracks and roads, so we will take that on notice.

In regard to the scientists, I would need to also get the accurate numbers, but I can say that we have a number of scientists, both in Arthur Rylah Institute, and also we work closely with a number of universities and other institutes around the science and the research that underpins our predator control program, so I can provide that information.

The CHAIR: Great. Thanks very much for that, Ms White. All right. I would just like to thank all witnesses that appeared before the hearing today. As I said, if members have any other questions, they can put them on notice or ask witnesses to come back at another time. With that, all broadcast and Hansard equipment must now be turned off, and I thank witnesses for their attendance.

Witnesses withdrew.