

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria**

Melbourne—Wednesday, 24 February 2021

#### **MEMBERS**

Ms Sonja Terpstra—Chair

Mr Clifford Hayes—Deputy Chair

Dr Matthew Bach

Ms Melina Bath

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Stuart Grimley

Mr Andy Meddick

Mr Cesar Melhem

Dr Samantha Ratnam

Ms Nina Taylor

#### **PARTICIPATING MEMBERS**

Ms Georgie Crozier

Mr David Davis

Dr Tien Kieu

Mrs Beverley McArthur

Mr Tim Quilty

**WITNESS**

Mr Andrew Cox, Chief Executive Officer, Invasive Species Council (*via videoconference*).

**The CHAIR:** I declare the Environment and Planning Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria open. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the traditional custodians of the various lands which each of us are gathered on today and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings. I would also like to welcome any members of the public who may be watching the live broadcast today.

At this juncture, I would like to acknowledge my colleagues who are participating today and to thank those who have provided apologies. I will just introduce the committee members for you as well. I am Sonja Terpstra. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee. To my left here I have Clifford Hayes, who is the Deputy Chair; Dr Samantha Ratnam; Mrs Bev McArthur; and, at the other end of the table, Mr Andy Meddick, Matthew Bach and Melina Bath. There is no Stuart at the moment. No? Okay, fantastic. I did not want to leave him out again—I just wanted to make sure of that.

All evidence taken 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 you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

Could you please state your name and organisation, one at a time, for Hansard so that we can verify your identity on screen. That would be great if you could do that for us now.

**Mr COX:** My name is Andrew Cox, the CEO of the Invasive Species Council.

**The CHAIR:** Great. Thanks very much for that. Thanks for joining us, Mr Cox. At this juncture I would invite you to make your opening comments but ask that you keep your comments to a maximum of 10 minutes, so that will allow plenty of time for discussion and for questions. If you have any technical difficulties at any stage, please disconnect and dial back in via the teleconference, but everything seems to be working well so far. With that, over to you, Mr Cox. Thank you.

**Mr COX:** Thanks for the opportunity, and I think this is a very, very important inquiry for Victoria's natural environment. I will just take you through some of the key points in our submission. I presume you all have it at hand. Just by background, our organisation is interested in the environmental impacts of invasive species across Australia. We are a charitable organisation funded almost exclusively by donations, and we are incorporated in Victoria. We are in our 19th year this year and have been tracking progress on invasive species in Victoria since our establishment.

To help you understand the scale of the threat from invasive species, one major study two years ago concluded nationally that of all the traditional threatened species in Australia, 82 per cent of those species are threatened by invasive species. So they have a very broad ranging threat to our existing threatened species. It is worth remembering that most extinctions in Australia of our mammals and frogs and birds have been caused by invasive species. Of the roughly 30 mammal extinctions in Australia, about three-quarters of those were caused by invasive species. Mostly cats and foxes, but there are other causes as well—black rats.

So it is a big threat, and it is a big threat for Victoria as well. If you look at our weeds, in Victoria 25 per cent of the plants naturalised in Victoria are exotic. And while we might have a bad record, that rate continues to decline, or the rate of exotic plants establishing continues to increase. Every year another 10 new plant species are established in Victoria. So while we have learned a lot of lessons around how we have either accidentally or deliberately introduced species into Victoria, those trends are still continuing; we do not seem to have learned the lessons of the impacts of invasive species and why it is important to address this problem.

I think Victoria has a lot of data at hand about the problem. It is not a complete picture, but of all the states in Australia I think we have probably one of the best pictures of the state of biodiversity and some of the impacts. I will just highlight three major studies that I think help us understand the threat of invasive species. DELWP, two years ago, prepared an advisory list of environmental weeds, and that really gives a good overview of the scale of the environmental weeds in Victoria—over 1000. There was a parliamentary inquiry into invasive animals on public land in 2017 that highlighted the serious threat from pest animals, particularly things like feral deer, cats and foxes. The 2018 state of the environment report also looked closely at invasive species, and that report does highlight objectively the problems. And on invasive species, from multiple fronts, the trend is one of decline. For freshwater species we do not really know, because the data is so poor. The way we know is that the condition is declining, and that is of serious concern.

It is worth thinking about the links between climate change and invasive species, because I realise that climate change is one of the terms of reference, and there is a strong relationship between how climate change, as it occurs, favours invasive species. A good example is the mountain pygmy possum. As the snow melts earlier, there is less protection from predators like foxes, so it succumbs. Weeds are more favourable and spread more easily in warmer climates. So the two major threats are intertwined, and the impacts of climate change in many cases, or a large number of cases, will be manifest through invasive species causing declines of the native species when they are under climate change stress.

Some emerging pest animals worth putting on your radar: feral deer are spreading throughout Victoria, and they still have not reached their full range, so that is an example of a species that the impacts are going to grow. Feral horses are in small populations, and they will grow unless they are addressed properly. There is a concept called the 'invasion curve': over time a species arrives in an area; it starts from a small place but it rapidly expands, ultimately in some cases to cover the whole state. Once they are widespread and covering a large area it is very difficult to reverse that process and to eradicate the species from the state. So in those cases, like the feral cat, the feral fox, really the response needs to be a management response of trying to minimise the damage where it occurs. It is unrealistic to expect to remove it. But for those species that are in the early stages of invasion, you can make a difference. If they are in a small area, you can eradicate them if you are doing surveillance, you catch it early enough and you apply your resources quickly, and that is the biosecurity way of thinking. Even better, you should keep the species from ever arriving in the first place. For example, we should stop selling weedy plants in plant nurseries, because escapees from people's gardens are the biggest threats, because of the growth rate of weedy plants. Preventing them ever being in the gardens to escape is one of the best things, the cheapest things and the most feasible things you can do to stop the problem ever occurring. So investment in prevention and early action will yield benefit-cost ratios of 100 to 1, 1000 to 1 or even greater. One-off costs for eradication will solve a management cost in perpetuity.

I have just a couple more points. The legislative framework in Victoria could be improved a lot. We used feral deer as a case study of how the historical treatment of feral deer as a resource for hunters has meant deer are protected under the *Wildlife Act* even though sambar deer are listed as a potentially threatening species. They are causing grief to farmers and to the environment, and we are not addressing the threat in the early stages of invasion. So the legislation is just backwards and not seriously addressing the threat we have from this major pest.

More broadly, in Victoria there was proposed invasive species legislation to replace the CALP Act. It was part of a national program rolled out by every state and the federal government to create modern biosecurity legislation, coming out from the 2008 Beale inquiry after the equine influenza outbreak. Victoria is still without this modern biosecurity legislation, and as a result it is not properly risk based. We still have some of these perverse things like protecting deer, and the range of tools available to the agencies for a response are not as powerful as they could be, as in other states like New South Wales, Tasmania, Western Australia. I think almost every state has undergone its reform process except for Victoria, so it is certainly lagging in that respect.

We believe it is not just the legislation that is important to improve—about the way we manage invasive species; it is also, I guess, who is in charge and the culture that pervades the department that manages invasive species. Now, in Victoria the agriculture department takes the lead on invasive species, because invasive species impact both agriculture and environment. Because agriculture takes the lead, the lens of the problem is often looked through from the agricultural point of view, and the environmental point of view is often overlooked. Now, obviously the department is trying to do both, but that culture of the organisation means resources are often not available for environmental threats. It means the priorities of the environment are often subsumed by agriculture priorities. It creates problems when there are conflicts of interest. A good example in Victoria is tall wheat grass, which was promoted as a pastoral grass but it creates major threats to wetland areas

and it now is a major weed in Victoria even though the Victorian government is still promoting it for agricultural use in saline soils. So we believe the environmental agency needs to take the lead on invasive species rather than agriculture. It does not mean you downplay the agricultural impact. It means you need to give a greater priority to the environmental needs and the environmental threat that invasive species cause.

Finally, I just want to maybe highlight, because we are a national organisation, how we see Victoria managing invasive species compared to other states. I noted that the reform of the Victorian legislation is still to come, and that could be a big opportunity. There is a lot to learn from how the other states have implemented that and how they have mobilised community action and support for everyone to share responsibility on the invasive species challenge. It is not just a government challenge; it is everybody's challenge, and the legislation could help with that. But also I think one thing we have learned where biosecurity and invasive species has been successfully managed in other states is it is where it is done in a collaborative way. I have been involved in the development of the *Queensland Biosecurity Strategy* and the implementation of its legislation, and it is done in a way which brings the industry and the community to the table and where you jointly develop proposals and priorities.

I find in Victoria it certainly feels more like a command-and-control type system, and often attempts to try to engage with the government to be consulted with feel patronising. It often feels like our views are ignored and it feels like government is thinking it knows best and, 'You can have your say but we're not going to listen very seriously to your concerns'. Certainly there was an example of that when they were looking at the introduced birds and how they were managing that. The consultation effectively dealt yielded almost no change to the policy.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, Mr Cox, can I just ask you a question: when you say 'they', which government department are you referring to—or government? Could you just clarify that?

**Mr COX:** This was a few years ago. This was the department of—well, the primary industries agency. I cannot remember what the acronym was back then, but about four or five years ago. I can get you details about that if you like.

Finally, because I think I have spoken over time, I think removing barriers to pest and weed control around the use of chemicals is a really important thing. Certainly the state agency is quite averse to using chemicals—for example, our attempts to try to get improved cat control measures using traps. There were some changes in that, but still there are a lot of barriers to using tools to help control invasive species. A lot of the focus tends to be on public land, and on private land in Victoria it seems to be the government has less willingness to intervene on addressing invasive species threats on private land and supporting landowners. They are my opening comments, and I am happy to take some questions.

**The CHAIR:** Great. Thank you very much for those opening comments, Mr Cox. Ms Bath, shall we go to you?

**Ms BATH:** Sure. Thank you. Thanks, Mr Cox, very interesting. I note that you referred to a document that I referred to yesterday. I think it is the CSIRO conservation biology journal about threats to Australian imperilled species, and it was really interesting to note that for 82 per cent of all of the landscape's threatened species the threat is invasive species, and then we have fires as well—or major interruptions which denote there are fires.

I would just like to ask a question. You can say it is a leading question, but I would like your opinion. In terms of fire regimes across Australia, and we will go to across Victoria, once upon a time there were little and often mosaic fires that Indigenous people burnt. There is some fairly substantial evidence around that. Now we are seeing far less fires in the landscape and then mega-fires. I am interested to understand your perspective on how that has changed probably particularly plant species but other species in general.

**Mr COX:** Yes. I mean, I will comment specifically about invasive species but more generally as well, because we have been looking at this at a national level, because you might be aware that the federal environmental legislation, the EPBC Act, is being reviewed, and fire is presently not listed—or changed fire regimes—as a threatening process nationally. And that is a major problem. Yes, it is one of those top-order threats—along with invasive species, climate change and habitat modification—to biodiversity. So changing those frequencies from what has traditionally occurred prior to European settlement is having big impacts. I guess there are a few things we can do about that. Obviously we need to be prioritising loss of life and property, but within that you can still also minimise the damage to the environment. I am sure others in this inquiry will

be talking in detail about that, but in terms of invasive species I think what fires do is usually favour invasive species. They remove habitat which would otherwise protect native species from predation by foxes and cats, and then they also remove food sources. When you have got herbivores like deer and goats in the landscape, they can move very quickly and they are large, and they move through the landscape so it actually helps them spread, but also they are the ones who get the food first. Then there are native animals which are starving and are the ones that are left that are trying to repopulate the area. So from multiple fronts the native animals are at a disadvantage after a fire. Then the weeds also then get a big boost because of the fertile soils after the fires.

So I think the responses after the recent fires a year ago, where there was a lot of investment in pest animal control and some weed control, was really important. But the weed control needs to be targeted to particularly those new-arriving weed species, not just any old weed, because we know that for people, for example, dealing with blackberry—you cannot eradicate them. You have got to focus on the priority areas.

**Ms BATH:** Can I just have a quick one?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Ms BATH:** Thank you. Mr Cox, as a follow-up: I guess we have to be nimble; when I say ‘we’—a response from DELWP and agencies has to be nimble about, once the fires come through, as we have seen, actually targeting those invasive species before they flourish and bloom again. So what would be some of your advice to us when making a report on those sorts of things—being proactive once it has been through actions?

**Mr COX:** Yes. I mean, thinking in advance before the fires about where your important assets are is important, as is making sure, I guess, your response capacity exists, again, before the fires are there, so you can mobilise it quickly. I think we were surprised by the scale of the fires, and really we had to invent new responses to the recovery efforts, whether it is, I guess, injured animals but, more importantly, those animals that are left in the wild—their predation and competition from herbivores. We just released a paper a couple of weeks ago, provided to the federal government, about, I guess, how the federal government could assist the states in better biodiversity management following fires, and that is not just for invasive species. I will pass the link to that document on to the secretariat, because I think it might identify some gaps where the Victorian government could better prepare for and respond to bushfire emergencies.

**Ms BATH:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Hayes.

**Mr HAYES:** Thank you. Thanks very much, Mr Cox, for your presentation. I just wanted to ask you a couple of questions, first of all about educating the public—or, first of all, you could start by educating me—as to the dangers. You talk about feral deer and feral horses being up the top of the list of invasive species. I do not think many people, including myself, understand the nature of the threat from those animals, because whenever people talk about culling feral horses, I get floods of emails about protecting the horses, and deer are seen as being rather cute animals wandering around in the bush. I think people have to understand it better, and I need to understand exactly how they are major threats.

**Mr COX:** Yes. I mean, the thing about most invasive species that come to Australia is Australian species have adapted and evolved over a long period of time—they had their own predators, they had their own diseases—whereas these introduced animals usually do not. Deer does not have a natural predator—we do not have a sabre-toothed tiger anymore in Australia. It can breed at high rates and pretty much occupy all of the suitable habitat with very little threat. The same goes with horses, really. Humans are the only threat to it, so we have these exponential breeding rates. For horses that is between 10 and 20 per cent, sometimes even more in really good seasons, and the population with it has continued to expand into its favourable habitat. It does not matter whether it is in a national park or private land or a state forest. And people are deliberately introducing horses into new areas—in the alpine area they have been there for a long time as escaped domestic stock. They are hard-hoofed. A horse is a 400-kilogram beast which on four effectively stilettos cuts into the landscape, and in the alpine and subalpine areas the vegetation just cannot handle that erosion. And they are out-competing the native animals.

Because there is a reluctance for governments across the board to use lethal control and because trapping is ineffective on the whole except for small populations, the populations just keep growing. In Victoria it is hard to put a handle on exactly how many there are. The parliamentary inquiry into pest animals on public lands estimated, or at least some evidence there suggested, there was a million or more deer in Victoria, and I am sure

there are a lot more. They are still listed as a 'potentially threatening process' under the Victorian legislation, as I mentioned. The impacts are huge. Their grazing has affected the browse line—how high a deer can reach. Up to 2 metres the vegetation is just stripped. Ferny gullies are no longer ferny because they get grazed out. The habitat is lost. The vegetation is lost. They often ringbark trees. They are ecosystem transformers, feral deer. Feral horses are not as generalist feeders, but they are very large herbivores and they cause big impacts. I think those animals need to be addressed. They are a major environmental impact.

**Mr HAYES:** Yes. We seriously need some education on that one. That is very interesting. Thanks for that. Could I just ask another question?

**The CHAIR:** Very quickly.

**Mr HAYES:** You talk a lot about the conflict over appropriate management of invasive species. I was going to ask you about the conflict, but I think you have described it very well. But I am just wondering: what can we do about that? You were talking about prioritising biodiversity and environmental health over agricultural considerations in your submission. Would it help to have that written into high-level legislation—the overriding legislation, like the *Planning and Environment Act* or something like that that would give guidance to all decision-makers about future planning? How would you see it best prioritised?

**Mr COX:** In the planning system I think it is good to have invasive species management plans so that, for instance, when you build new roads and developments you are thinking about stopping spreading weeds. But most of it is around land management and I think making sure there are responsibilities for landowners to manage weeds and pests on people's lands, and that goes with the public land managers.

In terms of the conflicts, I think it is important. I guess we are not asking for necessarily a hierarchy—we believe agriculture is prioritised; we would like to see it equalised—but if there is conflict between competing priorities, like this need to develop a pastoral plant versus the environmental consequences, there should be a risk assessment done and the conflict should be resolved independently, not by the agriculture department, who have a vested interest. The other vested interest that often is a conflict is where hunting often dominates or has been dominating deer management. Hunting in almost all cases is not an effective pest management tool, yet until a recent change in deer policy late last year it has been the government's response to a problem. It was an ineffective response. Those conflicts have created the problem, and it has made the solution a lot harder. If we solved this problem 20 years ago and prioritised the environment, we would not be in such a pickle with feral deer.

**Mr HAYES:** I think often the environment is not prioritised, and that is the problem. The decision-making bodies, especially in the EES—

**The CHAIR:** We are going to have to move along. We are going to run short of time if we keep talking. Now, I know Mr Grimley has joined us online, so, Mr Grimley, I might see if you have got a question.

**Mr GRIMLEY:** Yes. Good morning. Thank you, Chair. Apologies for my tardiness. I could blame the laptop, but I will blame user error, unfortunately. Thanks for your presentation, Mr Cox. I have a question in relation to data. Apologies if you have spoken to this prior to me joining the meeting. The submission notes the lack of comprehensive data, which makes it difficult to understand the extent of the threat. Are you able to elaborate on this, please, and also what do you consider to be the most effective ways that we can gather and collect data in this space?

**Mr COX:** Yes. I mean, I think you are right: we need more data. In New South Wales, for example, to help us with how the biosecurity system is run and invasive species are dealt with they prepared a state of biosecurity report. That was released in 2017, and it is done every four years. It gave a good overview of the system and also how they are performing against benchmarks, so I think setting some benchmarks—I mean, Victoria does have a relatively good invasive species policy, but we do not really know how it is being implemented. I think that data will help that, something like a stated biosecurity report. We need transparency and the government needs to be honest about how it is going, and I guess the state of the environment report is definitely a good overview, but we need to drill down into a bit more detail, and I think making that data available to the public is really important.

**Mr GRIMLEY:** Thanks, Mr Cox. I have no more questions. Thanks, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** I might at this juncture just ask a question. Mr Cox, are you aware of the Victorian government *Biodiversity 2037* plan that has been released, and do you think that plan addresses some of the things you are talking about? So that is the first part, but also in terms of biosecurity, how do you see the role between the federal government and state governments being resolved? Because primarily, as I understand it, biosecurity is a federal government responsibility, so how could that relationship be improved here?

**Mr COX:** The biodiversity strategy is a good high-level strategy; it is the implementation that is falling down. I think that is a really important question for the government. It needs to implement it, and it needs to do it collaboratively. I would suggest that one key way of implementing that is through new biosecurity legislation. I mean, you need resources on the ground. I mentioned the invasion curve around the process of the species arriving and spreading. Investing in all stages of that, not just the widespread pests but those emerging, and putting in place good policies to stop the new species ever being allowed—for example, stopping selling weedy plants.

In terms of the relationship with the federal government and state government, biosecurity is not just a federal responsibility. It is right at the national border, but once a species has arrived or a good has arrived, it becomes effectively a shared responsibility between the federal government of the state government. The federal government has some powers but it is mostly a state responsibility, and that is operated through quite a complex national biosecurity system, which the Victorian government is part of. What we have found is the Victorian government's priority in the biosecurity system and its contribution is all around market access for agricultural commodities, because clean, green produce can get to China and other countries, but it is not necessarily about protecting—I guess, local industries—the natural environment. You know, Victoria could do a better job by being more proactive through that national forum in advancing environmental interests. Victoria could be a leader in fixing the system, involving more of the partnership approach but also prioritising the environment. The federal government has provided some leadership by creating a chief environmental biosecurity officer, who does look at the environmental impacts, and Victoria could do the same in its biosecurity system and have someone responsible for the biosecurity side of things.

Biosecurity is the full spectrum. I will just give you one example where Victoria's biosecurity response failed. There was a new—we mention this in our submission—vertebrate pest called the smooth newt. It established in the south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne near the Mornington Peninsula. It was an escaped illegal pet. It would normally trigger a national response, nationally funded, which Victoria would have contributed to, but it did not because of various thresholds. Victoria could have eradicated that species on its own, but it did not want to commit its new incursions budget to that one species. It was not prioritised because again it was run out of the industry side of government, and now the species still sits in a suburb in a small area of about 5 or so square kilometres, but it could threaten all of the streams and wetlands of Victoria. So for me that is a sign of a failure of Victoria's biosecurity system, because it is not prioritising the environment and it is not thinking about prevention and early action.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Thank you. Mrs McArthur.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair. Just to clarify something: you said you were almost exclusively funded by donations. Can you just fill us in on how you are totally funded? And secondly, one of the major problems we have got in rural Victoria is roadside vegetation, and the expansion of phalaris on roadsides is certainly not only an inhibiting factor for native flora but it is a fire hazard. Now, grazing those areas is hugely successful, but councils are continually restricted to do that and reduce that fire risk but also to improve the capacity of native flora to expand, because after all, if you burn and graze native flora, as the Indigenous population did for centuries—and will demonstrate if you want to go to Budj Bim at any time—that is a way of actually enhancing the population of the native flora. So what do you think government should do if you want to get rid of the introduced species in that area to ensure that people can graze and burn roadsides so we reduce the fire impact and we enhance the opportunity of native flora?

**Mr COX:** Good questions. In terms of our funding, last financial year I think our turnover was a bit over \$600 000, and the federal government funding we received—we got a little bit of JobKeeper. But there is a \$10 000 grant from the Queensland government to do some control of yellow crazy ants in Townsville, but otherwise trusts and foundations and individual donors are our funding sources. We do not receive any money from the Victorian government except \$10 000 from Melbourne Water over the last three years to help with the smooth newt delimitation project. So we are doing the government's work around this smooth newt that I mentioned with a tiny amount of money, but the rest is funded by philanthropy for that work.

On the roadsides, I think, yes, roads are very important vectors for weeds, and weed control is critical. I point you to a really good Victorian government program called the Weeds at the Early Stages of Invasion. It is called WESI for short, and it is a framework about thinking about when a weed arrives in a landscape, about how to prioritise it and what you should do about it so you are not wasting money.

In terms of grazing and fire for weed control, we talked about fire being a potentially threatening process if you do it too frequently. So I think if you are talking about benefiting the native species, you have got to think about the frequency, because if you burn it too often, it just becomes a grassland, which is more flammable. If you are grazing, it could introduce more weeds, depending on what you are grazing it with. You could do some crash grazing with goats, for example, but you do not want the goats to get out—you do not want to create a new problem. So I guess you have got to look at all the tools that you have got available and what is the one that is going to be most effective and probably the most cost effective as well.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Thank you. I am just noting we are running short of time, and there are a few more questions that we have. Dr Ratnam.

**Dr RATNAM:** Thank you, Mr Cox, for your submission and the really important work that you do. Just picking up on Mr Hayes's previous line of questioning, you have obviously raised your concern that deer are a significant and growing threat in Victoria and also that the management through recreational hunting is ineffective. Can you talk to us about how you think deer need to be managed in Victoria?

**Mr COX:** Yes, well, we have to accept that deer are here to stay, but there are places, small isolated areas, which deer could be eradicated from. I think there is a program underway to look at Wilsons Promontory to put a barrier island across the east mouth and then try to eradicate the two species of deer now—the sambar only arrived very recently. So that is an opportunity. I think in Victoria there was a new deer strategy adopted late last year which identified a shift and acknowledged for the first time really that deer should be managed to reduce their impact rather than to provide a sustainable resource for hunters. So that is a really big shift, and some I think \$18 million or so was allocated over four years to develop and implement three regional plans. We are concerned that those plans are going to take a long time to roll out, meanwhile the deer threat is growing.

It would be great to have some areas that currently are free of deer to stay free of deer. That requires on-ground effort for deer at low densities, which only professional shooters, whether it is from the ground or the air, can do. There seems to be an aversion to using aerial shooting, but it is a cost-effective method. And while there is recreational hunting, it is not targeted, so I am concerned that Parks Victoria, for example, has been using recreational hunting as its response—supervised recreational hunting—when actually you are going to get far better value from professional hunters. There have been some trials done comparing recreational hunting and professional hunting, and the indicative results show that it is by far more effective, the professional hunting. We want these regional deer plans rolled out.

It should be ideally integrated with other pest control, and there needs to be resources on the ground. We also want to create a pest status for deer, because at the moment the game status, the protected status—in people's minds, they think it is a protected species. Well, it is a protected species, but they think it is something of value. And pest animal control only works when all your landowners around you are operating in tandem. If one landowner wants to protect the deer and the rest do not and they want to control them, they just breed up on that area and then jump over the fences—you need very high fences to keep deer out—and you effectively undermine everyone else's efforts. So a pest species declaration for feral deer would also help send the right message that deer are causing impact and not a benefit. And that will not impact on hunters. There are going to be plenty of deer for hunters, so I cannot see why hunters would not support such an idea.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks. Mr Meddick.

**Mr MEDDICK:** Thank you, Chair, and I am conscious of the time. Thank you, Mr Cox. Look, I am going to ask you a number of questions, and I am happy for you to answer them on notice, the ones that you do not get to. The first one is focused on deer and horses, if I may. Definitely, are you supportive of the existence of deer outside of the agricultural setting or not? Apart from that then, you would be aware that there are groups of shooters—and I think you have already said—who do want them to exist for recreational purposes. What would you answer to them about that particular stance? And secondly, you talked about the absence of a predator for deer in that setting. Would you be supportive of the reintroduction of the dingo, as Australia's apex land predator, to help control in those situations?

Secondly then I will move on to horses, if I may. You talk about removal in your submission, removal of horses from these situations. Now, when you talk about removal, do you mean killing of horses or do you mean management in situ or do you mean removal of them to other areas such as farm settings? And if you do mean that, how do you propose that that is gone about, and should there be support for that? And again, that comes down to the Bogong population in particular that you mention of 100 horses. And again, you talk about removing 400 horses per day in the eastern alps. Do you mean rehome, or do you mean kill?

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Look, we are running short of time, so as Mr Meddick said, we might get you to answer those questions on notice.

**Dr RATNAM:** Can we also send questions on notice?

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Dr Ratnam is indicating that she might have some more questions, so if any other committee members have any further question—

**Mr COX:** Happy to receive those, yes.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Okay. Great. Thank you. Thank you, Mr Cox, for your presentation, and we appreciate your contribution this morning. Thank you for your attendance.

**Mr COX:** Thank you very much.

**Witness withdrew.**