

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Melbourne—Tuesday, 11 May 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 Maclean, Chief Executive Officer, Landcare Victoria.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria. 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 proceedings via the live broadcast as well.

So at this juncture I will take the opportunity to introduce committee members to you. My name is Sonja Terpstra, and I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee. Mr Clifford Hayes is the Deputy Chair. Joining us via Zoom today we have Ms Nina Taylor, Dr Matthew Bach and Mr Stuart Grimley, and then back in the room we have Mr Andy Meddick, Ms Melina Bath and Mrs Bev McArthur.

All evidence that is taken today 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, and 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.

So if I could just get you now, please, for the record, to state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Mr MACLEAN: My name is Andrew Maclean. I am the Chief Executive Officer of Landcare Victoria Incorporated.

The CHAIR: Great, thank you. With that, I now welcome you to make your opening comments, but if you could keep them to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes, that will allow us to ask you plenty of questions, because there are quite a few of us here. Also joining us now is Dr Samantha Ratnam via Zoom. Over to you.

Mr MACLEAN: Thank you very much. Thank you for the opportunity. My plan today is basically to speak to the submission that we lodged back in August. In that I took the liberty of making a few recommendations about the sorts of recommendations we would like to see you make, so I will just work my way through those. But I thought I should start with a bit about our organisation and a bit about me so you know who you are talking to.

So Landcare Victoria is the peak body, if you like, for the Victorian landcare sector. We have about 600 members. Our members are Landcare groups and networks, and they in turn have individual members which amount to—we maintain a database—at least 17 000 families and individuals, so we estimate that there is well into the 30 000s of people who are members of Landcare. On top of that we get people volunteering on sort of a one-off basis. So it is quite a substantial movement. Landcare originated more than 30 years ago. It was an initiative of the Victorian Farmers Federation in partnership with the Victorian government of the day and Joan Kirner, who I believe was the environment minister at the time and played a leading role in establishing Landcare. Victoria, we like to think, has led the way with landcare in Australia and indeed internationally now.

Our organisation provides a range of services to our members. Most prominently, I might say, is the mundane issue of ensuring that they have insurance. So we purchase insurance on their behalf, and their membership ensures that they are covered by the insurance policies we purchase. We also involve ourselves in advocacy—here is an example today—and advice about governance and planning and issues like that to help make the landcare sector strong. The Landcare Victoria board took a decision perhaps about this time last year, if not

earlier, to elevate our capabilities and our performance in support of members and stakeholders, and that led to the establishment of a CEO role—they did not previously have one—and I was appointed to that role in July last year. We have a busy agenda of growing Landcare Victoria and growing landcare in Victoria.

I will segue then to tell you just a little bit about me so you know the sort of person you are talking to. I joined Landcare Victoria back in July, and prior to that I had been the CEO of Southern Gulf NRM, which is one of the regional natural resource bodies in Queensland. It is broadly analogous to the Victorian catchment management authorities. Prior to that I was for several years executive director of the Wet Tropics Management Authority, based in Cairns, which is responsible for the wet tropics world heritage area in North Queensland, and prior to that I had worked for perhaps about 20 years in the Victorian environment department, mostly in public land management roles—forest management, initiatives like that—very highly integrated roles. So I tell you that as a bit of a bit of perspective for the sort of comments that I can make in terms of the evidence I put forward now.

So that is the organisation and that is me. So moving into what we are suggesting that the committee might like to think about landcare, a core point we make in our submission is that the problem of ecosystem decline very substantially is a consequence of agricultural development. There has been 150 to 200 years worth of agricultural development in Victoria. That agricultural development occurred in the context of the time, in the context of the values and knowledge that existed at the time, and led to the widespread loss of ecosystems and the widespread decline in those ecosystem values. You will have been hearing all about that in evidence elsewhere. Indeed in our submission we have not laboured the point about whether ecosystem decline is a problem or not. That seems to be the foundational point of this committee's hearings, so I am taking that as read. We make the point in our submission that the decline in ecosystems in Victorian private land can only be reversed with the voluntary cooperation of private land managers. For as long as we have freehold land title, people who own parcels of land and are responsible for the management of that land make decisions for better or worse about the condition of that land and the ecosystems on it. They are choices that they make in the context that often they are farm businesses, and it is important that we recognise that that context is an important driver in the decisions that they make.

I have told you a little bit about Landcare. I just want to make the point that whilst it was established 30 years ago and it was established in a particular context—in a particular political context, economic context and all of those other contexts—it has grown and developed over the years, and it has a capacity to continue to grow and develop. One of the points about our aspirations at Landcare Victoria is to support the voluntary landcare sector to adapt and to take opportunities that emerge from changes in policy and changes in the way investments go into ecosystem management. I had a friend who once characterised Landcare as just planting trees, and I was offended by that. It is much more than that. Landcare involves itself in quite a diverse range of activities in support of ecosystem values and ecosystem restoration. Just this morning I went and reminded myself of the sorts of examples that we have got, and we have got fox and rabbit control projects down at Venus Bay. Bass Coast Landcare Network is leading a climate change adaptation project. South Gippsland Landcare Network has a project addressing threatened invertebrates in the western Strzeleckis. Yarram Yarram Landcare Network are looking at coastal saltmarsh protection and wetlands revival. There is a large Project Platypus organisation up in north-west Victoria, in the headwaters of the Wimmera River, that takes a really big, landscape-scale view of that part of the world. There is perhaps a broadly similar concept, the Lungs of the Lake project, supporting ecosystem resilience in the catchments of the Gippsland Lakes. Landcare has really risen to the challenge of bushfire recovery. We have got projects in far east Gippsland restoring she-oaks as feed trees for the glossy black cockatoo, fox control in the King Parrot Creek in the Upper Goulburn and roadside management—that is a common theme in Landcare. The Goulburn Broken Landcare network is involved in monitoring the bush stone-curlew, which is an iconic species in that part of the world. So that is just a snapshot of the range of sorts of things that Landcare is involved in. Groups respond to their local and regional needs and develop projects in support of them.

The CHAIR: I will just let you know you have got 2 minutes.

Mr MACLEAN: Two minutes? Well, I will just very quickly say that two of the really big ways governments support Landcare are through the Landcare facilitator program—and I am pleased to see that that program is being rolled over again and there is a process of assessing applications as we speak—and the Victorian Landcare grants program, which is another really important way of supporting landcare, and that has just been opened for applications. We are pleased about that, but we make the point that those programs are oversubscribed. There is more demand for that funding than the government has been able to make available. And we think that a very important point we would make about the facilitator program is that we did an

economic analysis last year that showed that the return on investment into the facilitator program is a ratio of about seven to one. So every dollar that the government spends on the facilitator program returns about \$7 in public value. It is a very good program in that regard. I might stop there. Those are a couple of important ways the government can help.

The CHAIR: Great. Thanks so much for that contribution. Over to questions. Ms Bath, I might start with you.

Ms BATH: Thanks, Chair. Thank you very much, Mr Maclean, for being here. First of all, all the Landcare groups you mentioned are in my electorate of Eastern Victoria Region, in Gippsland, so you are spot on with the most amazing work that certainly people do across Victoria but also in those areas in Gippsland. I am interested in the facilitators—I have met some of them in my electorate—and the importance of them. In your submission—and now maybe it is slightly old, so you can update us—you talk about 68 facilitators and 10 coordinator positions. You speak about how there are 10 positions that depend on income budget initiatives presented by and considered by government, so I am assuming the remaining also are working at 19 hours per week. I would like you to unpack that. The pretext of my question is Landcare is vital for supporting enhancement of ecosystems et cetera, but it is volunteer based, and so these coordinators are pivotal to support those volunteers in their programs. Are there vulnerabilities, and would you drill down? What additional comments would you like to make to the committee for government ears to listen to?

Mr MACLEAN: My understanding of the situation with coordinator funding is that the bulk of the funding—I think it might be 58 out of those 68 positions; I am regularly corrected by my colleagues in the department, but it is in that vicinity—is funded through recurrent funding in the DELWP budget. The additional 10 positions rely on a successful outcome in budget submissions. So we await, of course, the state budget before the final decision can be made about the number of facilitators that can be supported. The maximum grant is in the vicinity of about \$54 000, I think, and the department requires that facilitators work a minimum of 19 hours a week. So the Landcare committees that take these positions on board have to create a budget that looks at what facilitators should be paid, what their overheads costs are and all those other factors in running the business around the facilitator, and that determines how many hours they work. So mostly they will work the 19 hours. If they work more than 19 hours, it is usually because they are prepared to accept a lower rate of pay. That is what is going on there.

Ms BATH: So why are they so important? And give me an example of some of their roles and functions for supporting programs and volunteers.

Mr MACLEAN: Landcare is a voluntary movement. You have made that point, and it is very important that we recognise and respect that. The principal way people volunteer is they volunteer their time, so they go to the tree-planting days and those sorts of activities. The committees volunteer time in organising, strategising and planning their activities. I also like to make the point that ultimately the landholders volunteer their land to make it available for these ecosystem restoration projects. Now, whilst there is quite a level of enthusiastic volunteering around those themes, the hard work of organising the planting day, all that sort of stuff, that really is where the facilitators come in. So they spend their days busily applying for grants—that is a big part of their role—and basically organising the volunteers, seeing that people turn up to implement the project. So they provide really important support to the committees in advice and guidance, and then they become the arms and legs of the committees and make things happen. So they really are important. I really admire them, because they are not on fantastic rates of pay.

Ms BATH: It is a labour of love as well as small remuneration.

Mr MACLEAN: It is. They are very passionate. And the best of them are highly connected and know their communities really well. Indeed I can recall one—I will not name names—when there was a bushfire disaster and Agriculture Victoria wanted to reach out to landholders, they needed that Landcare facilitator, who knew people—he had the contacts—and who made things happen as a consequence. So that is, I think, a measure of their value.

Ms BATH: Thank you. Chair, I have got more about grants, but it may come up with others, so I will respect the time.

The CHAIR: Sure. And because there are quite a lot of us here, we might provide questions on notice if we run out of time for all of us to ask questions.

Mr MACLEAN: Happy to.

The CHAIR: I might throw to Mr Grimley next.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thank you, Chair. And thanks for your submission today and all your work that you do with Landcare; it is tremendous. I have just got a query in relation to the projects that Landcare groups identify and get underway. Are there any criteria behind which projects are chosen in that regard?

Mr MACLEAN: I think the best answer I could offer there is that Landcare is a grassroots organisation, and the voluntary committees set priorities to address issues that are of concern to them and their communities. I think that is a really important and powerful starting point. If they wish to obtain resources from funding bodies, well, there needs to be an overlap between their aspirations and the aspirations of that funding body. So that is the art, and that is where I think the facilitators are very good at demonstrating that what they wish to do is of value to funding bodies. In the end a lot of what happens tends to be guided by the criteria of the grant programs that the groups can get access to, so, if you like, they are the criteria.

Mr GRIMLEY: Yes. Wonderful. Thank you, Chair. I will defer to my colleagues.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Meddick.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Mr Maclean. I will ask three questions up-front, so feel free to answer any of them on notice that you might choose. They are very simple ones, I believe. The facilitators that you are talking about—they are not a line item in the budget each year, they are something that you have to make as a request to government in each budget cycle. That is, as I understand, what you were saying there.

Mr MACLEAN: Yes.

Mr MEDDICK: So their positions are determined by whether you actually receive funding or not to a certain degree.

Mr MACLEAN: That might be one to take on notice. My defence is I am new around here.

Mr MEDDICK: Sure.

Mr MACLEAN: I have not been through a whole budget cycle. I am not sure whether the department has made a submission for one year's worth of funding or for four years to align with its base funding, but the program needs to be renewed about every four years.

Mr MEDDICK: Yes. And I am just curious to explore the relationship between what you speak about in your submission, regulation for private landowners, and encouragement, because it seems like there are fairly strong regulations on biosecurity, for instance, and different measures that they should be undertaking under the regulations. But, as you state, you are saying that they are only weakly enforced. So it seems to be almost like there is a carrot-and-stick approach here but the stick is quite small. In your words, it is only weakly enforced—in your submission—so I am wondering if this is a problem. Should government be funding more officers to make sure they are enforced but also making sure that these landowners are more than aware of all of the grant systems that are available to them to be able to carry out what they need to carry out?

Mr MACLEAN: Well, I think you mentioned carrots and sticks. Finding the right balance of carrots and sticks is the important thing here. I do not know that I want to come along and say that we would wish to see stronger enforcement of our biosecurity regulations, for example, generally speaking. I think generally the enduring outcomes you will get in relation to biosecurity are when people themselves are convinced and are motivated themselves to manage the landscape in a way that addresses those biosecurity risks. There will be some people on the margins that behave in ways that create risks to their neighbours and who will not cooperate, will not collaborate, on things like blackberries and furze and all those widespread weeds, and I think that is where some enforcement activity is appropriate. But I generally think that even for that to be effective you need to be able to say, 'Look, there are grant programs available to you to support your work. If you don't take them up, then the enforcement stick needs to be brought out'. That would be my general view, and I think that would reflect the views of Landcare communities generally. They do not want to see these things being heavily policed, but they do need to know that, in the end, recalcitrant people will be helped to make good decisions through compliance activities.

Mr MEDDICK: Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: I might ask a question at this point if I can. Now, you mentioned that Landcare does so much more than just planting trees and that there are lots of different activities. But I am wondering specifically in regard to tree planting or restoration of landscapes where you get that cooperation from life private landholders or whatever: how does Landcare incorporate traditional owner practices? For example, how do you make sure you are planting the right trees in the right landscape, and are you interacting with traditional owners in that regard? And if you are not able to answer that, perhaps you can provide an answer on notice if you need to.

Mr MACLEAN: Look, my up-front appraisal is that I think everyone in the landcare sector knows that there is more work to be done in partnership with traditional owners. That is understood, and that is an issue everywhere. I cannot quote you examples at the moment, but I am sure some groups are doing better than others. I know that in the department of environment one of the facilitators is a statewide Aboriginal Landcare facilitator, and he works with communities to get them involved.

Another point I would make, though, is that when we work with traditional owners we need to engage with them on their terms. We need to respond to what their aspirations for the landscape are. It is not about saying, 'Come along and join us in what we want to do'. We need to be going the other way around. So, yes, there is more work to be done there. It can be time consuming, it can be expensive and it can be challenging sometimes in sort of marrying the different world views.

The question of species choice—I think most land carers would say, 'Well, the best choices of species are the local indigenous species'. All over Victoria there are little guides, often produced by Landcare communities, to say, 'Well, what sort of vegetation originally grew in this landscape? What were the shrubs? What were the trees? Let's go to those species as our first choice for revegetation'.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Great. Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you for your presentation and all the great work that your organisation is doing. I was just interested, because I was reflecting on the various levers that encourage, for instance, private landowners—and I do not want to say that in a way that sounds arrogant, us telling other people how they should manage land—but just thinking more collectively about how we improve the future. Do you think that actually consumers are now starting to drive—well, not just now; for some time—really important levers in terms of the quality of the product, the locality of the product, making sure it does not have sprays, making sure the soil is well looked after? Do you think that is driving change as well?

Mr MACLEAN: This is a big question that goes a bit beyond Landcare, but my personal view here is yes. I think that there has been a big shift in the last 30 years away from government-led, regulatory government-funded projects to ones where consumers exercise choice through their purchasing power. Who does not buy dolphin-friendly tuna? Who does not buy Forest Stewardship Council-accredited timber? There are all sorts of examples where the markets are making demands of primary producers, and primary producers have the opportunity to respond or not. I think it is a really encouraging development. But it is very challenging for individual primary producers to, I guess, come to grips with those changes. That is one of the things, I humbly suggest, that perhaps Landcare Victoria could assist with through developing partnerships with industry and other stakeholders. I think you are onto something there; it is increasingly a driver. Organic farming is another big one.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Ratnam.

Dr RATNAM: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Mr Maclean, for your evidence this morning. I have got a couple of questions I am happy for you to take on notice if we do not have time to answer them substantially today. You mentioned, both in your submission and today, that the grants are oversubscribed. I want to ask: what kinds of projects are not being able to be funded because there is not enough funding, and how much more funding would be required to fund those really positive projects? So the first one is about funding and what we could see if it was funded properly. The second question I have is around stewardship. So while you have mentioned a couple of programs, I was wondering if we could hear your thoughts on: would there be a place for a more intense stewardship program or an actual stewardship type of program—for example, like in the US, where farmers have a diversified income stream, where they combine both agriculture and conservation so it is actually part of their income stream to conserve environment on private land. I just wanted to hear your thoughts on a stewardship-type program as well.

Mr MACLEAN: So I have two questions there: one about stewardship and one about the extent to which the funding may fall short of what is needed and what is not being funded.

Dr RATNAM: That is right. Thank you.

Mr MACLEAN: I will go to the first question first. I think my best answer there is I do not really know. I think if we doubled the size of the Victorian Landcare program, it would still be easily taken up, and the last projects would still be valuable projects. So the sorts of projects that are not happening will be the sorts of things that Landcare groups aspire to do. It will be the tree planting on water frontages, it will be the weed control works on bushland, it will be the erosion control works and also works that go to knowledge and skills development—all that sort of stuff that Landcare does. They are the sorts of projects that will go in. Eventually the money runs out, and there will be some people that are disappointed as a consequence.

Landcare has proved to be, I guess, very versatile and adept. The Victorian Landcare program is not the only sort of funding, and certainly several groups have had some substantial success in securing funding out of the commonwealth government—for example, the Smart Farming Partnerships project is a good example of that, where groups have done well. But that Landcare program is a good one, because it is very much focused on that sort of community-scale volunteering activity that is at the heart of Landcare. So we value that program.

The second question was to do with stewardship payments. Yes, that is another interesting development that has emerged over the last 10 to 20 years perhaps—perhaps more like 10. I was really pleased to have the opportunity to discuss the Victorian government's new BushBank program—I believe that is what it is called—which is heading down that way, which is recognising that land managers who manage their land in a way that sustains ecosystem values is creating public value, and it is appropriate that the public recognise that through some form of payment. Now, you could say that the markets will recognise that, but that link is not very strong, I think. If you are actively managing your farm—mostly—to sustain the population of a particular threatened species or a threatened ecosystem, then if as a community we value that, I think it is appropriate that we recognise that through some sort of payment. I also value the idea because some of the sort of payment arrangements—I am thinking here of carbon—require people to address this issue of additionality: 'You need to do more'. That is good, but it does not really recognise the people that have done a lot already—that are already sustaining a landscape. They have got a great balance between agriculture and environmental values, and they are satisfied with that balance—and we should all be satisfied with that balance. They are not about to do any more, but they cannot get any sort of financial reward for what they are doing.

Dr RATNAM: Thank you.

Mr MACLEAN: Does that answer your questions? Okay.

The CHAIR: Great. Mr Hayes.

Mr HAYES: Thanks, Chair. Thanks very much, Andrew, and thanks for all the work that Landcare does. It is very important. I was some 25 years ago involved in Landcare as a volunteer planting trees and, yes, it was just fantastic.

Mr MACLEAN: That is great.

Mr HAYES: The whole-farm planning, the whole-catchment planning that went into the work was extremely valuable, and that whole area has changed a lot as a result. But I just want to ask about expanding the role of Landcare because I see this as probably the best way of restoring ecosystems on private land that we have talked about so far. And I am sort of surprised that there is only one—in your submission—Aboriginal Landcare facilitator out of 68. I would love to see more Indigenous knowledge come into the program. But how could the number of facilitators be expanded? Could you see them as permanent paid positions or does it need to keep the same structure as you have got at the moment but just get the funding on the ground to vastly expand the program so that more repair work can be done?

Mr MACLEAN: In terms of the total number of facilitators, I do not know that we are all that far off the right number. I think it would be good if they worked more hours. I think that is probably a more significant limitation in that it limits I guess the sort of people that can apply for those jobs. It limits it to people who only work half time. Sometimes they will make it up to a full-time role, multiply it with project funding from other sources, but that is a limitation. Now, there might be people out there that will cut my throat for saying that, but I think another 10 or 20 would be great but it is not like we need to double the number.

I think the really important and powerful concept of the Landcare facilitators though is that they unequivocally work for their community. They are funded by the government, the grant is made to the Landcare network—usually it is a network rather than individual groups—and a facilitator is recruited and is accountable to that network committee. I reckon that is a really powerful distinction from other models, which would be that the government sends a facilitator into the community. There is always a question about, ‘Who does that facilitator work for? Who do we trust? Are they working for us or are they working for the government?’. So that is—

Mr HAYES: Okay. But say if the funding was expanded, how would that funding be best spent?

Mr MACLEAN: On facilitators, I think—

Mr HAYES: Say if you doubled the budget?

Mr MACLEAN: It would be making at least more of them closer to full-time positions. That is important. We need to support the facilitators. There is a need to invest in that, and I am talking to DELWP—is it okay if I say DELWP? Do you know what I mean?

Mr HAYES: Yes.

Mr MACLEAN: I am talking to DELWP about how we can partner better with DELWP in supporting the committees and the facilitators. One of our strategic plan goals, which we completed actually since this submission went in—I should have brought a copy along—is to support the professional development of facilitators. Whilst that accountability to their local committee is a strength, it can also be a weakness because they can become a bit isolated—you know, what are the big policy issues that are emerging? So we would like to have a role there to sort of support them in that sense. We would like to support the committees in terms of their planning and group management skills and governance skills. They are important ways to invest money, and there is really no money in any significant way to allow for that at the moment. We aspire to that.

Ms BATH: Chair, sorry. Could we have a copy of that?

Mr MACLEAN: Yes. I do apologise. I should have brought it.

Ms BATH: No, thank you.

Mr MELHEM: Thank you, Mr Maclean, for the work you do. The Victorian Farmers Federation have submitted that Landcare Victoria has basically moved away from being a partnership with farmers and is now more focused on riparian revegetation. Would you like to comment on that? It is sort of quite a serious—

Mr MACLEAN: They have not shared that with me, and I am very disappointed that they say it.

Mr MELHEM: That is why I am asking the question.

Mr MACLEAN: A really strong message, ever since I have started, has been to say that Landcare has to be relevant to farmers. It is farmers that manage the bulk in terms of the number of hectares that are at issue here. Most of that is agricultural land. Now, there is mining, there is urban development and all the rest, but agriculture is the dominant land use. And I know, and I think all of our members know, that Landcare has to work in the context of commercial agricultural operations. What more can I say?

If there is an issue relevant to that question that is a concern to me, it is that landcare in a policy sense tends to sit inside of DELWP and I would like to hear a bit more from AgVic about landcare. I would like to have a stronger relationship with AgVic in having them recognise those market forces that are driving stronger, more sustainable land management practices and the role of Landcare in supporting landholders to achieve that. But I have no doubt that Landcare has to be relevant to farming, and I dispute the proposition that we are moving away from the active involvement of farmers.

Mr MELHEM: Well, could it be something that is localised? I mean, local committees and local farmers not sort of talking to each other more? I mean, I do see for example where Landcare is sort of looking at various roads and vegetation and stuff the question could be some sort of breakdown at the local level.

Mr MACLEAN: Well, it is a grassroots movement. I have an apocryphal Landcare group I use. I call it the Bushy Creek Landcare group and I do not know if one really exists. But if the Bushy Creek Landcare group exists—

Mr MELHEM: They are a good group.

Mr MACLEAN: They are a great group. They will set their own priorities, and the priorities they set will probably reflect the values and choices of their management committee. Now, if farmers are not active on that committee, well, they will tend not to pursue agricultural objectives. And Landcare is a very diverse organisation. Urban Landcare, for example, tends to focus much more on sort of bushland reserves and little creek frontages in urban areas, but the conventional, common garden Landcare is an agricultural activity. It is out there working with farmers to support them to adopt more sustainable land practices. It is collaboration in regard to pest and weed management. It is collaboration in regard to soil erosion and things like that up in the Mallee. So I am going to go back and I am going to read that VFF submission. Thank you for drawing it to my attention.

Mr MELHEM: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Dr Bach.

Dr BACH: I am going to pass, Chair. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Okay. Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Mr Maclean, and as the only farmer on this panel—

Mr MACLEAN: Good.

Mrs McARTHUR: I feel I better actually put the perspective of the farming community.

Mr MELHEM: Excuse me. There are two of us. You are not the only farmer.

Mrs McARTHUR: How many thousands of acres have you got, Mr Melhem? Anyway, you mentioned the fact that we have got to police farmers perhaps—or you say not so vigilantly—in relation to noxious weeds. Now, I want to put the proposition to you that the greatest abusers of noxious weeds permeating our ecosystems and our environment are actually the governments themselves. So on roadsides in my electorate of Western Victoria, especially where there has been fires, there is a jungle that has emanated of blackberries, ferns, blackwood seedlings and the dead trees that never got removed that were burnt. It is a bushfire waiting to happen. But apart from that, it is an absolute jungle of noxious weeds. Now, farmers will get fined by the local municipality if they allow noxious weeds to permeate their properties, but there is no policing of the government or their agencies or local governments who are not up to the job of getting rid of the noxious weeds, and that is for roadsides.

The CHAIR: Is there a question there, Mrs McArthur?

Mrs McARTHUR: Yes. And then we move into state parks and forests, which are now out of control with noxious weeds and vermin wrecking our environment. So do we need a policeman for the government, not so much the farmers?

Mr MACLEAN: I briefly outlined my CV at the start of my presentation, and I should in the sake of transparency point out that I spent about 20 years as a manager responsible for state forests and other conservation—

Mrs McARTHUR: Well, it was good under you, we think, but it has gone backwards since.

Mr MACLEAN: Thank you. My response to that would be that a regulatory solution for public land managers is probably not going to be any more effective than a regulatory solution for private land managers. What is lacking for Parks Victoria and for DELWP in its management of state forests and for the other public land managers is sufficient money. So if the Parliament were to vote a decent budget to those agencies, they would definitely give attention to those issues. Every one of my colleagues in public land management was as concerned as you are about weed infestations, and all of them wish to be good neighbours, but none of them have anything like the resources that they need to tackle that extensive margin or boundary of public land.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. So when the Moyne shire, for example, wanted to have grazing on their roadsides to help reduce this rapid growth in weeds but also phalaris, for example, they were actively opposed by DELWP and certainly VicRoads. So the local government municipalities were trying to do the right thing,

and actually there were several of them that wanted to encourage grazing on roadsides, and even local farmers wanted to do it. The hoops you need to step over to do this are immense. So I do not accept that these government agencies actually really want to do anything about particularly roadside vegetation. Maybe you can comment on that.

Another area I think of interest perhaps to you is the Myrning Biolink, which thousands of volunteers participated in to connect the Lerderderg State Park with the Werribee Gorge State Park. I think 40-odd landowners basically handed over their land. Volunteers, including school groups, planted probably millions of trees. That is completely under threat by the western Victoria transmission line being put right through it. As we know, the metreage of foliage has to be 3 metres. So if you can have volunteers do a whole lot of work in ecosystem restoration but then the government comes in and completely wrecks it all, what do you say to that? How do we approach more volunteers to do more work?

Mr MACLEAN: Look, I am not familiar with all the issues around the Myrning situation, but of course the general proposition is that it is very disappointing to see the work of volunteers overturned by big developments like that. I do not really have a general response to how that can be handled. On the question of roadsides—again, I am not familiar with the details of the Moyne shire—I would make the point that roadsides are often valuable remnants of native vegetation that have otherwise been substantially cleared, so DELWP is likely to be motivated by a desire to protect those from the pressures created by grazing. I imagine VicRoads is worried about road safety issues on roadside grazing. So again, as a general proposition I think we do need to manage our roadsides well, and a lot of Landcare groups are actively involved in managing roadsides well.

The CHAIR: And with that, we are out of time.

Mr MACLEAN: Okay.

The CHAIR: If any other members have any other questions on notice, they will get them to you through the secretariat. So, Mr Maclean, thank you very much for your evidence today. It is much appreciated.

Witness withdrew.