

TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Auditor-General's Report No. 202: Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands (2016)

Melbourne—Monday, 2 December 2019

Members

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

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WITNESSES

Ms Helen Vaughan, Deputy Secretary, Water and Catchments,

Ms Karen Lau, Executive Director, Catchments, Waterways, Cities and Towns,

Ms Annie Volkering, Executive Director, Land Management Policy,

Dr Amber Clarke, Director, Waterways Programs, and

Dr Andrea White, Manager, Wetland Program, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning.

The CHAIR: We formally welcome you to the public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee's Inquiry into the Victorian Auditor-General's Report No. 202: Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands, tabled on 14 September 2016. If anyone has a mobile phone, I would also ask that they are now turned to silent. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege; therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. For any media present, we welcome media covering the hearing today but we remind you of the following guidelines: cameras must remain focused only on the person speaking; operators must not pan the public gallery, the Committee or witnesses; and filming and recording must cease immediately at the completion of the hearing. Broadcasting or recording of this hearing by anyone other than accredited media is not permitted. I advise that today's hearing is being broadcast on the Parliament's website, and rebroadcast of the hearing is only permitted in accordance with standing order 234 of the Legislative Assembly. I will invite you to make a 15-minute opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by questions. Thank you.

Ms VAUGHAN: Great. Well, thanks very much, Chair. My name is Helen Vaughan, Deputy Secretary Water and Catchments, for the department. I did want to pay my respects to the traditional owners of the land that we meet today. I do thank you for the opportunity to actually work through our implementation of the Auditor-General's recommendations to improve the way we have fulfilled our obligations for the Ramsar convention.

Visual presentation.

Ms VAUGHAN: At the time of the Auditor-General's report Victoria had 11 Ramsar sites. We now have 12. The Auditor-General's report provided useful direction to build on work already underway to strengthen Ramsar management in Victoria. It has been instrumental in reshaping the governance, accountability and reporting arrangements for these internationally significant wetlands.

Since the Auditor-General's report, we have established new statewide governance arrangements; formalised site coordinating committees and structures; developed and are implementing a monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement framework; and invested additional resources in Ramsar coordination, monitoring and management. Our new governance and reporting arrangements have already demonstrated their value with improvements in coordination across the agencies responsible for Ramsar management. A renewed focus on Ramsar management and monitoring will protect some of our most valuable wetlands and the species that they support.

On the panel with me today is Ms Karen Lau, Executive Director of Catchments, Waterways, Cities and Towns, responsible for leading environmental water policy in the department. We have Dr Amber Clarke, Director of the Waterway Programs and also chair of the Ramsar interagency governance group. We have Dr Andrea White as the Manager of the Wetlands Program, who has the expert knowledge of Ramsar management in Victoria. We also have Ms Annie Volkering as the Executive Director of the department's Land Management Policy. Now I will pass over to Amber to run through and provide any further detail in response to the recommendations.

Dr CLARKE: Thank you, Helen. The Victorian Government has implemented all three recommendations from the VAGO audit report, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands*. The key agencies that are responsible for Ramsar management in Victoria collectively developed an action plan in order to respond to those recommendations from the VAGO audit, so that was DELWP, Parks Victoria, CMAs and Melbourne Water. All of the management plan actions have been accepted as complete by DELWP's Risk and Audit Committee in mid-2018. On the right-hand side of the slide you can see a summary of some of the key actions we have undertaken in response to the audit, and these are more fully described in our written submission.

One of the key findings of the VAGO audit was that roles and responsibilities of the key agencies were not clearly defined and that this was leading to a lack of coordinated management, both at the state level and at the site level. VAGO recommended that improvements be made to Ramsar governance arrangements by clarifying roles, responsibilities and accountabilities of the different agencies. DELWP and its partner agencies have addressed this recommendation primarily through the establishment of an inter-agency governance group. This is now responsible for Ramsar management at the statewide level. The group meets twice a year, is chaired by myself and also has senior representatives from Parks Victoria, Melbourne Water and the catchment management authorities. Through this group the roles and responsibilities for each of the agencies were confirmed, and they are now being implemented. The table on the slide here gives just a high-level summary of those key roles and responsibilities. We now have in Victoria a clear statewide coordinator for Ramsar matters, Ramsar site coordinators for each of the 12 sites, Ramsar site managers, and we also have 12 coordinating committees, one for each of the Ramsar sites. The purpose of those groups is to implement both the Ramsar site management plan and the monitoring evaluation reporting and improvement plan at the site level.

Just to step you through a bit of an example of how some of the existing and new planning and governance components work, if we start at the top box, number 1, each of the Ramsar sites has a Ramsar site management plan. This is a quite high level strategic document. One of the new things that we have implemented, in box 2, is that every 12 months for each site an annual action plan is prepared. This looks across all of the funding sources available, all of the roles and responsibilities of the different agencies and puts together a more detailed action plan for the coming 12 months. There are two key elements to those plans. The left-hand side of the diagram—boxes 3, 4 and 5—is really about implementing managements activities. The agencies agree and implement the actions that are in that annual plan, and these address some of the threats to long-term ecological character. Over time, as these management actions are undertaken, it will reduce threats and lead to maintaining or improvement ecological character.

Then on the right-hand side of the diagram the other important function of these plans is to identify the priority monitoring that needs to be undertaken. This includes both monitoring for ecological character and also monitoring of management effectiveness. Then this information helps feed up into state reporting and national Ramsar reporting, which you can see in boxes 7 and 8, there on the slide.

I will now hand over to Karen, who will take us through a selection of the Ramsar sites and some of their key values, threats and management actions.

Ms LAU: I will take you first to the Glenelg Estuary and Discovery Bay in the state's south-west; this is Victoria's newest Ramsar site. Listed in 2018, the site supports a nationally listed coastal saltmarsh as well as fens, wet grasslands and temporary pools. It also supports threatened species such as the Australasian bittern, fairy tern, hooded plover, Yarra pygmy perch and growling grass frogs. A restoration project at Long Swamp is an example of the type of on-ground works that are protecting and improving the ecological character at this site. With the assistance of \$195 000 from the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, the Nature Glenelg Trust, in partnership with the Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owner Corporation, the Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority and Parks Victoria, have constructed a weir to permanently block an artificial outlet to the sea that was made when Long Swamp was historically drained. These works have enabled the inundation of approximately 70 hectares of wetland. The objective of this was really to increase the availability, diversity and connectivity of aquatic habitats throughout Long Swamp. The results have included improved wetland vegetation condition, movement of juvenile tupeong between the estuary and Long Swamp, increased habitat for the threatened ancient greenling and we have also had Australasian bitterns and ground parrots being observed at this site. This project received a Society for Ecological Restoration excellence award in 2018.

I will take the Committee north next. This is Gunbower forest, which is the second-largest river red gum forest in the Murray-Darling Basin. Delivery of environmental water holdings to Gunbower forest is one of the key management actions to support ecological outcomes at the site. After extensive investigations and a capital investment of more than \$16 million through the Living Murray program, they have enabled construction of a series of wetland regulators, the Hipwell channel and associated works. And so together, these works at Gunbower enable watering of almost 5000 hectares of the Ramsar site.

In 2018 we used this infrastructure to deliver 43 gigalitres of environmental water holdings to the forest, and around 44 per cent of this water was then returned to the river for re-use at further sites downstream of this one. The watering has supported the breeding of many birds. Our monitoring in 2018 found over 50 nests and approximately 150 juveniles present. Environmental flows to Gunbower Creek are also providing good condition for native fish and their recovery. Our monitoring is showing us that we have a stable Murray cod population in Gunbower Creek, and a range of sizes and ages tells us that this is a robust and healthy fish population.

Site managers have also been carrying out carp control at Gunbower forest to improve environmental conditions. Carp are an invasive, exotic species of fish that damage habitat for native fish, they muddy the water, they make it difficult for native aquatic vegetation to grow. In 2017, 1170 kilograms of carp were physically removed from Reedy Lagoon and Black Swamp and the wetlands were fully dried. The absence of carp meant that aquatic plants flourished when the wetlands were subsequently rewatered. The result is a dense coverage of aquatic plants, including river swamp wallaby grass, which is a nationally threatened species.

Investments in pest control and environmental water are complemented by a recent allocation of funding at nearby Koondrook to maintain connectivity for fish along Gunbower Creek into the forest and then through to the River Murray. The design phase of this project, supported by \$800 000 in funding allocated from environmental water trade revenue, is well advanced, and approximately \$4.5 million has been earmarked for construction.

I will take the Committee south. This is the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site, much loved by traditional owners, local communities, environmental groups, recreational fishers and those involved in Gippsland's visitor economy. The East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority will be able to provide information to this Committee at the hearings on Wednesday about the management of this site, including the State Government's \$12.5 million Gippsland Lakes investment over five years. The CMA will be able to outline a wide range of projects arising from this investment. I will just give you a taste of it, such as the beach sand renourishment project. This project takes dredge spoils from routine maintenance of the navigation channels within the lakes. The dredge spoil is then used to renourish beach-nesting bird habitats within the lakes complex. A range of resident and migratory shorebirds have been reported nesting at the renourished sites.

The East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority will also be able to provide the Committee with a detailed overview of some of the real challenges at the Gippsland Lakes. These lakes face a potential change in ecological character, with monitoring data showing increasing salinity levels at Lake Wellington. The increased salinity level is the result of sea level rise, reduced freshwater inflows and climate change. The department is supporting the catchment management authority to undertake further work to identify options to manage Lake Wellington in particular and its fringing wetlands, including looking at options for protecting additional freshwater habitat nearby that could support Ramsar values.

Looking back north again, this is the Barmah Forest in northern Victoria. It supports a fairly extensive range of native flora and fauna. It is an important site and drought refuge for waterbirds, frogs, native fish and turtles. Like Gunbower forest, key management actions for Barmah include environmental water management. We have had environmental water deliveries from August to November in 2018 that stimulated the growth of threatened plant species such as the winged peppergrass that have not been previously recorded in the forest for about 20 years. Other outcomes from environmental watering have included strong growth and flowering of moira grass; native fish breeding, including golden perch and silver perch; and some waterbird breeding where controlled flooding has occurred.

The pictures on the bottom of this slide show fencing work that has been undertaken at Barmah Forest. There was 15 hectares of vegetation fenced off at Little Rushy Swamp. The fencing has enabled the exclusion of

invasive species such as feral pigs and horses. The pictures show how native vegetation such as moira grass and river swamp wallaby grass has re-established with the help of spring environmental flows and pest exclusions. You can see very different results on each side of the fence there.

The last site that I will take the Committee to is the Hattah-Kulkyne Lakes. This is the largest series of floodplain lakes along the river Murray. The Hattah Lakes were flooded over two consecutive years using environmental water for the recovery of wetland vegetation, including some areas that have not previously been flooded since the 1990s. Thirty-one gigalitres of environmental water holdings were delivered in spring 2016, and a further 110 gigalitres were delivered in winter and spring the following year. The lakes then underwent a planned drying phase in 2018–19 to enable the germination of understory vegetation.

Since this event there has been a significant increase in the number of rare and threatened plants at the site. In 2018 our monitoring showed that the wetlands were found to provide feeding habitat for a range of waterbirds, including species considered threatened on the Victorian advisory list. Waterbird breeding has been observed for cormorants at Lake Cantala and Australian pelicans at Lake Hattah. These outcomes are only possible owing to a \$32 million capital investment in environmental works through the Living Murray program. Extensive investigations, construction of a permanent pump station, four regulators and three environmental levies now enable more than 6000 hectares to be watered, including the Ramsar-listed lakes.

Ms VAUGHAN: So, in closing, DELWP has implemented all recommendations from the VAGO report. The panel welcomes any questions that come from the Committee, and Dr Clarke will be well placed to help coordinate and respond to those questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much; I might kick off. As you just said, all of the recommendations have been implemented. They are obviously focused on governance, administrative and reporting mechanisms largely. You have spoken a little bit to this through your presentation, but I am just interested in how the new arrangements that you have put in place have influenced the on-the-ground works.

Dr CLARKE: Sure. So one of the examples that I mentioned before in the slide in particular is the new annual action planning process that we have put in place. Every 12 months the coordinating committee get together, which is one of the other new things we have put in place. They look at all of the available funding that is available over the coming 12 months and work out what are the priority actions that need to be addressed to address threats to ecological character, and then they assign responsibility to different agencies and work out how much funding can be allocated to those actions. Then there is a reporting process as well. That has meant that now there is a really clear plan at a high level of detail of what needs to be done each year to try and protect that ecological character. Some of the actions that are occurring on the ground include things like pest plant and animal control, which is a really big one; delivery of environmental water at quite a lot of the Ramsar sites; and also activities, things like fencing and replanting of native vegetation. So those actions on the ground are going to translate into reducing threats to ecological character.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you.

Mr RIORDAN: Just back to the action plans, do we figure out what money is available first, then create the action plans, or do we have the action plans out of priorities and then try and source the money? Which way?

Dr CLARKE: We first look at what is all the available funding across the different agencies in the coming 12 months and work through the priority actions available and that can be implemented. But what we also do is then prioritise further actions that need to be undertaken and then when funding becomes available—because sometimes new grants or new opportunities arise—the coordinating committee at the site will know straightaway this was the next most important activity that needed to be undertaken.

Mr RIORDAN: So there is a carryover of the action plans? If actions A and B are done but we do not get C done, it will automatically carry over or it is reviewed and then carried over?

Dr CLARKE: The plan would be reviewed, but that process I just described means that if the additional funding becomes available it is immediately clear what action next needs to be undertaken.

Mr RIORDAN: So the next question is on the action plans. One of the criticisms in the Auditor-General's report was that there was sort of lack of clarity of who is responsible. I guess going through the slides I still was not entirely clear. On catchment management for the—was it 12 Ramsar sites?

Dr CLARKE: Yes, 12 sites.

Mr RIORDAN: Are they all initially overseen by the local catchment authorities?

Dr CLARKE: So there is a Ramsar site coordinator for each of the sites. At 11 of the 12 sites a catchment management authority is the coordinator, but at one site Melbourne Water is. Then there are Ramsar site managers, so primarily that is Parks Victoria for 11 of the sites and Melbourne Water is the primary land manager at one of the sites.

Mr RIORDAN: As the Ramsar sites will usually be part of the larger catchment area of the catchment management authorities, their priorities and objectives, are they prioritised as the main priorities for developing the action plan or do they come up with one plan but then it goes to DELWP and then DELWP decide what the priorities are?

Dr CLARKE: The annual action plan for each Ramsar site specifically looks at the priority actions for within the Ramsar site. That comes from a program logic that we have now developed in each site, so that specifies at each site: these are the particular values and critical components, these are the threats at the site and then these are the management actions we need to undertake. So each one is very specific to the unique features of the site. But then, for example, in the broader catchment the local catchment management authority will have a healthy waterways strategy, and that contains actions to improve catchment and waterway health across the broader area, and those two things are very complementary. As was mentioned in the prior discussion, in some cases the waterways strategy and the Ramsar site plan are actually integrated documents.

Ms STITT: Can you give an example of that, where the waterways that flow into the Ramsar site have a coordinated plan from the department?

Dr CLARKE: Sure. So probably a good example is Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority. The Goulburn Broken CMA has a healthy waterways strategy. That is an eight-year plan that integrates management for all the rivers and wetlands in its entire catchment, including upstream areas. That might include things like managing erosion and sediment loads, and particularly nutrients travelling downstream to the sites. Then they would have a downstream site like the Barmah Forest, where they would have specific environmental watering actions for that site but there have been benefits from the work they have done upstream in the catchment.

Ms STITT: Great. Okay; thank you.

Mr HIBBINS: Obviously in the Auditor-General's report the data and the limitations of data was one of the systemic issues. I just really want to ask how that has been addressed. Are there still knowledge gaps? And I also want to understand about the public reporting of some of the ecological character of the sites.

Dr CLARKE: Sure. Perhaps I will start with the data question. We have been doing quite a lot of work to improve the data that we have available for our Ramsar sites. One of the things that was mentioned before, for example, was limits of acceptable change. So at the time of the audit we had that for five of our Ramsar sites, but we now have limits of acceptable change for all critical CPS at 10 of our 12 Ramsar sites. For the sites where we do not yet have those, it is largely because the science is still lacking somewhat or we are still trying to understand to a greater level inherent variability and those sorts of things. In terms of other data, we have certainly invested more in direct monitoring of ecological character than we have in the past, so that has created a new source of data as well to determine ecological character.

Your second question was about reporting of ecological—

Mr HIBBINS: Yes, in terms of all this data being made publicly available.

Dr CLARKE: Sure. There are a couple of ways that happens. In the Ramsar site plan for each site, that has information on ecological character and limits of acceptable change, and they are all available on websites. We also have the ecological character descriptions and some addenda for ones that have been updated recently. They are also available publicly, so people can go there and look in a bit more detail at CPS and limits of acceptable change. Also the Commonwealth Government has a national report it prepares for the convention of contracting parties, so we feed in information to that. I believe that is a public report as well.

Mr HIBBINS: And since the Auditor-General's report and since the improvements to data, has anything changed its cause for referral federally with regard to our Ramsar wetlands?

Dr CLARKE: In relation to potential change and ecological character, there are three sites in Victoria where we have information that indicates a potential change in ecological character. I can go through those if you would like.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes, that would be great.

Dr CLARKE: One of those is the Barmah Forest Ramsar site, and that is largely due to a decline in the extent of moira grass at the site. Things like grazing pressure have impacted moira grass, and also unseasonal operational water delivery and things like the drought and dry years as well. The Western District Lakes is another site with a potential change in ecological character. This is related to limits of acceptable change being exceeded for salinity and hydrology at two of the lakes, Corangamite and Murdeduke. This is potentially partly due to climate change. And the third site is the Gippsland Lakes, where we have seen the limits of acceptable change for salinity at Lake Wellington exceeded. That is largely due to two things: sea level rise and also a reduction in freshwater inflows.

Mr HIBBINS: Thanks. There is just one follow-up. In terms of my first question on gaps, are there existing knowledge gaps? Are there still things that need to be worked on now?

Dr CLARKE: Yes, and perhaps I will ask Andrea to give some technical information on that.

Mr HIBBINS: That would be great.

Dr WHITE: Sure. We have very much, since the audit, targeted those. They made a finding that there were limits of acceptable change that could not be evaluated against because we had insufficient data. We have targeted that with new funding. They now get funding specifically to monitor the ecological character of the site, and we have targeted those areas that have insufficient data.

Mr HIBBINS: Is that an increase to their recurrent funding, or is it specific grant funding?

Dr WHITE: That came through the budget process in May 2017, and we got \$2 million to fund our response to the VAGO audit. A large chunk of that was actually for monitoring, so that went to the CMAs to undertake ecological character monitoring and also management effectiveness monitoring.

Mr HIBBINS: Is it an issue if it is just through a budget process grant and the future monitoring then is dependent on a further grant?

Dr WHITE: I might pass this on to Karen to answer.

Ms LAU: I am happy to answer questions about funding for Ramsar site management. There are actually multiple program streams that cover this, so while there was specifically \$2 million for implementing the recommendations of the audit, I will give you a sense of what the bigger picture looks like. From the period of 2016 to 2020 there has been a \$5.235 million Victorian Government investment in Ramsar-specific funding, and that is really covering, like Andrea was saying, monitoring ecological character and management effectiveness, supporting coordination between the agencies and implementing site management plans.

The work in Ramsar though is not necessarily just specific to these kinds of grant fundings for coordination and monitoring type activity. There is also the broader investment in catchment and waterway health. As Dr Clarke was saying, investment upstream affects what happens downstream in our wetlands, so our catchment

management authorities have been drawing on the \$222 million four-year investment in catchment and waterway health. That combines again with funding from other sources such as the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth Government have two major program streams that assist Ramsar sites. The 2013 to 2018 program was the national Landcare partnership, and then it has been reconfigured for the period of 2018 to 2023 into a regional Landcare program. The first tranche of that was in the order of \$11 million of investment in Victorian Ramsar sites, and over the 2018 to 2023 period we are anticipating approximately \$10 million worth of Commonwealth investment in these sites. That is why the annual action plan arrangements that Dr Clarke set out for you are really important in looking at how, with multiple funding streams combined with the use of environmental water holdings, some of our most significant investment going into these sites combine on an annual basis to feed into delivery of Ramsar site plans, which operate on a sort of seven- to eight-year trajectory.

Ms RICHARDS: Segueing a bit from Sam's earlier parts of his questions, I am interested in finding out which Victorian Ramsar site perhaps faces the greatest threat and how we are responding to the threats to its ecological character.

Dr CLARKE: I can start on that one if you like. The Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site is one that we have mentioned already today, and certainly that is facing a threat to ecological character. In particular, that relates to levels of salinity in Lake Wellington which have exceeded the limits of acceptable change, so it is really due to two key factors: sea level rise and a reduction in freshwater inflows. We are very actively undertaking works with the local CMA and other partners to undertake investigations to see what options there might be to protect particularly the valuable fringing wetlands around Lake Wellington into the future. Also, as Karen mentioned in her presentation, there are other areas of wetland habitat we can protect that will allow further adaptation of the site.

Ms RICHARDS: Great; thank you.

Mr RIORDAN: Just following on with the action plan issue again, we asked the Auditor-General earlier about whether what we are actually doing with our Ramsar wetland is benchmarked against any international standards and whether if we fall short or exceed it is somehow benchmarked and acknowledged. So the work that everyone is doing in all the plans and the monitoring, is it being measured against world's best practice or what we should actually be achieving with our wetlands?

Dr CLARKE: I guess the part that I could speak to is Australia's obligations in terms of managing Ramsar wetlands. The key factor there that we need to address is either maintaining or improving the ecological character of the site. That is sort of the key yardstick, if you like, of whether or not the sites are being protected and whether or not your actions are working. For the vast majority of our sites, we are managing to maintain or improve that ecological character.

Mr RIORDAN: And is that judged by us or judged by someone independent?

Dr CLARKE: There is an independent process there. So basically, we undertake a range of monitoring at the sites; part of our obligation is to report to the Commonwealth Government with that information, and if we believe that there might have been a potential change in ecological character we need to let the Commonwealth Government know that. But then the Commonwealth has the more specific role—basically they assess the case for change, so this can require a lot of information from the relevant states and territories. It is actually the Commonwealth Government that would determine if there has or has not been a changed ecological character, so that is part of their role under the convention. It is then up to the Commonwealth Government if they then decide that they need to notify the international Ramsar secretariat.

Mr RIORDAN: You have highlighted in the presentation a few of the key sites and some of the key issues that you are dealing with ongoing. Has DELWP done an audit, if you like, of the 12 sites to say, 'If we were to have this site to the best that it can be, it's going to cost X amount of dollars in projects and programs'? It would not be a perfect figure, but have we got a ballpark figure that we can use over time to financially manage the management of Ramsar? Do we know what that figure is by site?

Dr CLARKE: It is difficult to break down, by site, a specific figure. As Karen mentioned, there is a whole range of different actions and fund sources—for example, things like environmental water delivery and the price of water varies from month to month and season to season—but what we do have is, I guess, a really clear process to determine what management actions are required for the site and then to allocate the funding that is available to deliver on those.

Mr RIORDAN: So there is not a dollar figure allocated to each wetland that is sort of the goal of where we are heading?

Ms LAU: That would be a very challenging proposition to craft the budgets on a per-wetland basis. If I take the example of the way in which we manage environmental water deliveries through the northern Victorian system, that might include deliveries from jointly managed environmental water across jurisdictions, through the Living Murray program, commonwealth environmental water holdings and Victorian environmental water holdings. The way in which they will flow is that they will be released from storage, they might flow through Barmah, then through Gunbower, along the River Murray, be pumped out to Hattah and some of it returns to the river and waters the Lower Lakes Ramsar site in South Australia. So the budget configuration is very difficult to attribute site by site, because investment is often targeted at multiple geographic areas, but to achieve benefit at the Ramsar site. I think what is important in terms of configuring budget allocation, while there is not a single figure, what we have had since the Auditor-General's audit is a new monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement program that gives us the signals of where we are seeing really positive outcomes in terms of vegetation, native flora and fauna et cetera, and it also gives us those sorts of signals at the sites that may be struggling a little more with ecological character. That helps us at DELWP as we allocate funding to catchment management authorities and for site coordinating committees to then prioritise funding in those particular areas. There is no single budget by—

Mr RIORDAN: So take for example the Western District Lakes area, where you will not have the complex water buying and trading arrangements but you will have clear costs around fencing, perhaps weed mitigation, dealing with farmers and a whole range of probably more quantifiable objectives. There is not somewhere that you can go and say, 'Well, to keep this Ramsar wetlands in the state that we want it to be in, this is the sort of ongoing budget'? Now, granted that those funds are not necessarily there, but in terms of both the community being aware and the catchment management as an organisation having that as their goal that that is what they need to aim for, and I guess I pose also that there are of course private sector opportunities, particularly in the Western District Lakes area with the burgeoning wind farm industry who are always looking to throw money at something, there is an opportunity for millions of dollars a year that could be going into very targeted wetland improvement issues if they were quantifiable and known and ready to go. So is that—

Dr CLARKE: I think even with other management activities—so, say for example, pest plant and animal control, even year to year that can vary a lot as well, because if it rains a lot a particular weed might grow more. Also as you implement more management activity for something like foxes, the population might go down and then next year you might not need to do as much. With things like fencing, I know, with a limited range of local contractors price can vary depending on how busy contractors are and things like that. I think probably the really important thing is that we have got a clear list of actions of what needs to be done. So if someone came to a site and asked, 'What needs to be done this year?' or 'What's the next most important thing to be funded?'—

Mr RIORDAN: You could do that.

Dr CLARKE: we could answer that straightaway. We could certainly give a range of information of costs for those activities. At the moment we are implementing the first year of that annual action planning process, and in September 2020 we will get the first round of reports into the state. From there on that will help us build up a really good picture of perhaps an average annual cost of managing a site over time. So that might be helpful in the future as well.

Mr RICHARDSON: I just want to take you to the new Ramsar site and the criteria that determine the Glenelg Estuary and Discovery Bay site and if there is a process for future sites to be considered as well.

Dr CLARKE: Sure. The Glenelg Estuary and Discovery Bay is obviously our newest Ramsar site, listed back in 2018, and one of the foundational things in terms of it being listed was really strong community

support. There was a very active local group that was a strong advocate for the values of the site. It has a whole range of outstanding natural features. So it meets five of the nine criteria for listing internationally recognised Ramsar wetlands. There are 95 different bird species there, 24 of which are international migratory waders that travel from the Northern Hemisphere down to Australia. It has a range of representative and important wetland types that are very important to preserve. It is also the longest estuary in Victoria, so over 70 kilometres long, and the estuary is a really important migration path, feeding ground and nursery for a significant number of native fish. Another interesting point about the site is that it has 1 per cent of the population of very important damselfly, which is a little type of insect, but very rare. So this site is very important in terms of protecting that damselfly.

Mr RICHARDSON: I have just got a follow-up, which segues into another area. The smallest Ramsar wetlands are down in the south-east, obviously, the Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands. There have been two environmental effects statements that have impacted on those wetlands. I am interested from the VAGO report on governance and arrangements and the reporting obligations in the next couple of decades at the Edithvale-Seaford Wetland site what learnings the department has taken from that assessment and then how it has interacted with two such significant EES processes as well going forward in terms of governance and management and protection.

Dr CLARKE: Sure. So for those sites, but also for other potential developments at Ramsar sites, Victoria's environmental effects statement process is a key way in which we assess any potential impacts from those types of developments. We also work really closely with the Commonwealth Government and their EPBC Act assessments. I might ask Andrea to comment a little bit more on the Edithvale-Seaford one.

Dr WHITE: Both of those proposed developments went through an EES process and were referred under the EPBC Act and were dealt with in that way. So we have a bilateral agreement with the Commonwealth. They accept that the process that we undertake for our environmental effects statements will be used for their assessment in working out whether something could have a significant impact on a Ramsar site. So we work closely with them.

For Edithvale-Seaford, that was found to be a controlled action by the Commonwealth, so they found that it could actually have an impact on the Ramsar site's ecological character. But it was okay to go ahead with certain conditions, and they are around monitoring groundwater levels. We are happy with that process, and we provided input and feedback during the EES process but then also in the monitoring approach that they had, making sure that the groundwater would be monitored so that we would detect very early if there were any issues that could affect the Ramsar site and that there would be things that we could put in place to remedy that.

Mr RICHARDSON: So the annual plans that the committees establish per Ramsar site, is that feeding in that information and data management and tracking annually as well?

Dr WHITE: Yes, that is right. Their business very much is looking after their site and understanding if there are any trends in the condition of the ecological character, and then feeding that up to us.

Mr RICHARDSON: Excellent.

Mr MAAS: I can see that you have implemented processes since the VAGO report was tabled. Have there been any internal reviews since those processes have been enacted?

Dr CLARKE: I guess the key one for us was that the department's Risk and Audit Committee verified all of the actions and assessed our evidence and determined that we had indeed met all of those actions.

Mr MAAS: Was that released publicly, or was that just internal?

Dr CLARKE: I believe that is an internal departmental document.

Ms VAUGHAN: I can add to that, through the Chair. The Risk and Audit Committee has an independent chair. It has some independent members. It is an internal departmental process. The work that is put into assessing whether the department has adequately met the recommendations is that there is a separate group within the department outside of the people implementing the recommendations who assess the evidence

against some criteria and then present that to the Risk and Audit Committee with the independent members, and then they make a decision as to whether that has been addressed.

Mr MAAS: Okay. Thanks for the clarification.

Mr HIBBINS: A number of submissions we have received have highlighted the feelings of inconsistency that we allow the shooting of ducks on our Ramsar-listed wetlands. How are we squaring off our obligations under the Ramsar convention with the provision of duck shooting on our Ramsar-listed wetlands?

Dr CLARKE: The Ramsar convention does not prohibit any legal use or activities. In Victoria duck management is regulated, and it is regulated in order to be conducted at sustainable levels. That includes at Ramsar sites. So the convention is primarily about wise use, and fundamentally that is about whether or not something is sustainable. The Game Management Authority oversee that for Victoria, and they have a range of things like season limits, bag limits and identification programs to try and ensure that management is sustainable.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for coming and giving your evidence today. We remind you that a Hansard transcript will be available to be verified shortly. We thank you for making the time to appear.

Witnesses withdrew.