

TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

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

Sale—Wednesday, 4 December 2019

Members

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Ingrid Stitt

Ms Bridget Vallence

WITNESSES

Mr John Hirt, President, Sale branch,

Mr Peter Warner, Conservation Officer, Sale branch, Field & Game Australia; and

Mr Gary Howard, Project Manager, Heart Morass rehabilitation project, Wetlands Environmental Taskforce.

The CHAIR: We might open this meeting of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. Thank you to our guests from Field & Game for their attendance here today. We have a formal spiel that we are required to go through, so as I said, we welcome you to the hearing, which is on the Inquiry into Auditor-General's Report No. 202: Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands, a report tabled on 14 September 2016. I ask that any mobile phones be 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, and verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. If there are any media present, we welcome any media covering the hearing today. 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 the accredited media is not permitted. Thank you for coming today, and I invite you to make a presentation of up to 15 minutes.

Mr HIRT: Thank you, Madam Chair. May I remain seated? Are you happy with that?

The CHAIR: Absolutely.

Mr HIRT: First of all, my name is John Hirt, and I am the President of the Sale Field & Game association. I thank you and the Committee for extending us this opportunity to make a brief presentation. It is a verbal presentation. We have made a written submission to the Inquiry, and we thank you for the opportunity also to do that. Also appearing with me today are Peter Warner, our Sale branch Field & Game Conservation Officer; and Gary Howard, who is the Project Manager of the Heart Morass restoration project of the Wetlands Environmental Taskforce. Between us three members appearing here today, we can conservatively say that we have accumulated over 150 years experience involving wetlands and wetlands conservation and activity.

Just a bit of brief history about Field & Game to try and establish some context around what we are and what we do: what is now known as Field & Game Australia, the organisation, was established at a meeting here in Sale in 1958. Field & Game Australia now comprises 63 branches spread throughout Australia, with approximately 17 800 members, of which about 82 per cent are resident here—the vast amount of branches are in Victoria, where the association began. Sale branch was formed in the same year, 1958, just a few months after the formation of the association. The driver for the formation of the association was pioneered by a group of people, many of whom were duck hunters, who had become increasingly concerned at the degradation or loss of wetland and the habitat values that that provided for waterfowl and waterbird habitat. It is true to say that wetlands have been absolutely at the heart of the Field & Game association since its inception to this very day.

Examples of the association's philosophy, commitment and endeavour in pursuit of wetland conservation for the greater than 60 years that we have been going include, but are not limited to, the association being instrumental in the formation of state game reserves—a number of which are located in Gippsland, and some of which are Ramsar listed—which include Dowd Morass, which is highly valuable, and the Heart Morass state game reserve, which is somewhat less valuable but still valuable. Another major thing in more recent times was the establishment of the Wetlands Environmental Taskforce, known as WET, the jewel in the crown of which is the purchase, rehabilitation and management of the Heart Morass, which abuts the Heart Morass state game reserve—and you will have an opportunity later in the day to get a little bit of an insight into that via the bus tour.

The association has been involved in a whole bunch of works over all this time, including tree planting; construction and maintenance of water control structures; defining and improving access to and within state

game reserves; track maintenance and improvement; advocacy and liaison with successive State Government agencies, especially in relation to water regimes and management issues around state game reserves. The association has undertaken an extensive artificial waterfowl nesting program, providing nesting habitat for a variety of waterbirds. The other thing that takes up a good deal of our time is control of vermin. So that is a little context around where we come from. We have been involved for a long time, and it is true to say that we are pretty passionate about our wetlands.

We note the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site includes wetlands that are critical to the health of the Gippsland Lakes system more broadly and to the flora and fauna which inhabit these environments. Deterioration of the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site has long been a major concern of Sale Field & Game members. We note that primary causes of deterioration are associated with increasing salinity within the system and reduced inflows, the two combining to create a change of environment, and a consequence of that is a change in environmental characteristics of the site.

In relation to salinity, Sale Field & Game acknowledges the complexity of the problem. We know it is not an easy one. And in relation to reduced inflow, we also acknowledge that there are a lot of potentially competing demands on a very precious resource—water. The inflows into the lake system, particularly the western end of the lake system, the primary catchment of which is the Latrobe River system, provides water for a whole range of things, including irrigation, water for urban areas and, importantly, water for the power generation and other major industrial activities that occur in the Latrobe Valley area.

Since 1982, which was when the Ramsar agreement got a tick, little in practical terms has been undertaken by management agencies to preserve the ecological character of the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site, in our opinion. In particular no measures have been implemented to mitigate increasing salinity, despite all the evidence of its negative impact on the system. Furthermore, proper or comprehensive exploration of possible mitigation measures and options has not really been undertaken. In this regard Sale Field & Game made a submission to the Victorian Auditor-General's Office report in 2016 and escorted VAGO officers on an inspection of Lake Wellington to demonstrate the deterioration of the lake and adjacent wetlands. In our opinion the deterioration of the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site is attributable to human interference. It is our further opinion that the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site well and truly meets the criteria whereby formal notification of change of ecological character is required. We do note and support the recommendation contained in the Victorian Auditor-General's Office report, recommendation 2 at dot point 2, which recommends that funding be provided, specifically focused on looking after better management of Ramsar sites. The Sale Field & Game association supports this and have said that much in our written submission.

It is our contention, Madam Chair, that continued failure to properly explore and implement physical measures to mitigate the deterioration of the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site, in particular to deal with the increasing impacts of salinity, which as we noted, has got a couple of drivers, will inevitably result in making any possibility of trying to maintain that the Ramsar site's ecological character and values extremely difficult, much less any restoration of those values—it would appear to make that completely impossible.

It would seem to us, then, that the only remaining option would be for Government to fall back on the provisions within the Ramsar agreement that enables consideration to be made of levels of acceptable change—in other words to say, 'Well, it's all too hard. Change is happening. There's nothing we can do about it, so therefore we will continue to do nothing'. The Sale Field & Game association do not believe this is consistent with the spirit of the Ramsar agreement or Australia's commitment to it, and we do not believe it is consistent with good and responsible government.

Madam Chair and Committee, that concludes our presentation. I again thank you again for the opportunity to put our perspective before the Committee.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I appreciate it. I just wonder if you can talk a little bit about what your perspective is on the implementation of the Auditor-General's recommendations more broadly and the extent to which you think they have been effectively implemented.

Mr HIRT: In practical terms, Madam Chair, the Sale Field & Game association have for a long time advocated physical measures to limit the ingress of saline water, which basically comes from Lakes Entrance,

enters the lake system and gradually migrates west. We have advocated for some physical barrier to be explored—options for that to be explored. We think that one of the places that that could be constructed is at McLennan Strait, which separates Lake Wellington from Lake Victoria. We also advocate for the construction of a levee bank system that would limit the introduction of water from Lake Wellington into the adjacent wetland areas, and in particular Dowd Morass, which lies on the south side of the lower Latrobe River and the Heart Morass state game reserve and the adjacent WET property, which lies on the northern side.

The advantage of a bolder initiative to mitigate saline water intrusion into Lake Wellington by construction of some kind of control structure, would be that other wetland areas would derive benefit. Clydebank Morass state game reserve and Lake Coleman state game reserve being two which about Lake Wellington, slightly further to the east.

We are not scientists, and we are not necessarily sophisticated engineers, but we think as some kind of practical thing to do, it would be a step in the right direction. There have been some—I would describe them as fairly cursory—studies or looks at these kinds of options, and invariably they have resulted in what I would characterise as highly overengineered solutions, with absolutely staggering and exorbitant price tags that would scare anyone, especially government, completely off.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I might continue on that, if I can. Can I also welcome everyone to Sale, my hometown, and thank the Committee for coming here. I also declare an interest—I am a member of Sale Field & Game as well. But John, just continuing on that line of questioning, when you said 'overengineered' and 'exorbitant' options, was that looking at a sort of bund in McLennan Strait? Is that the thing you were talking about?

Mr HIRT: Mr O'Brien, yes, that was one of the options that came to light in a couple of the studies we have used, which instanced a possible engineering option at McLennan Strait. It was an extremely bold engineering solution—I would describe it as—and it had an attendant estimated cost of something in the order of \$200 million, which I think probably would have scared anybody off.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes. In terms of the management of the wetlands, what is your experience working with the managers—Parks Victoria, CMA and DELWP in particular—of Heart, Dowd, Clydebank, Lake Coleman and others around the area? I am happy for anyone to take that.

Mr HIRT: I will respond, if I may, in the first instance. I think we could characterise the experience as mixed. West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority physically and legally—I will use that term—manage the Heart wet property under a joint management arrangement, and our relationship with them in that regard has been excellent.

I think, in terms of characterising our experience with the various agencies, I believe frustration would be an adequate and appropriate characterisation of that experience. It appears to us that part of the problem in addressing and sorting these really complex and difficult issues is that the responsibility is fragmented. We have a mix of agencies: two catchment management authorities; the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning; and Parks Victoria, which is the action, or doing, arm of DELWP. Between those various agencies I think a number of things slip through the cracks, and whilst we do enjoy liaising with them all, it is at times extremely frustrating in those dealings. I defer to Gary and Peter to add to that if they so choose.

Mr HOWARD: Thank you, John. I have had 50 years of dealing with various government departments and I have seen many name changes, but the biggest issue that I see with the Ramsar sites and the Gippsland Lakes is a lack of action. I go to that many meetings and I get involved in that many focus groups with catchment management and various other departments, and it seems to be all about reports and consultants and nothing ever happens on the ground.

In the most recent one—and Peter can probably add to this—the Sale branch wrote to the then Minister for Water relevant to a very severe salt ingress to Dowd Morass. To that end we ended up with another lot of consultants working through catchment management, and I think the end of the report was, 'Let's do nothing and sit back and watch and see what happens'. It is beyond that now. Dowd Morass in its earlier state had a fantastic rookery system in the tea-tree areas. These were vibrant rookeries with probably three or four species of birds breeding there every year. Those rookeries have diminished now to where there is one very small

element left. Dowd Morass is in its death throes. For these consultants to sit back and say, 'Let's do nothing and monitor the situation', it is beyond monitoring. We need action. There is nothing happening that I see, and I work very closely with catchment management, particularly with the Heart and other issues, but there is nothing happening on the ground. It is killing the system. Peter, you might like to add to this.

Mr WARNER: With the Dowd issue, catchment management undertook a study as a result of our letter to the Minister. Basically when we get a high tide down the lakes there is an intrusion of salt water from Lake Wellington. Lake Wellington's salinity does fluctuate, but for a lot of the time now it was very high. When we get a high tide and maybe some high river levels, it will backfill into Dowd Morass. There was about 20 000 EC—saltwater is about 50 EC—intrusion in May 2016. As a result of that, we wrote to the Minister and the study was eventually undertaken. The report was just released in July this year. As Gary said, the report basically said, 'Do nothing'. It was a very extensive study. They gathered a lot of good data. I am not trying to knock the quality of the report, but at the end of the day, as Gary said, the recommendation was, 'Let's monitor the system'. Well, we have been monitoring the system for about 30 years now and all we have seen is deterioration. There seems to be a lack of will from the government authorities to actually take some action.

In 2010 there was a study done on a submerged barrier on McLennan Strait to reduce the salt wedge. The salt comes under the freshwater that flows over the top and that salt wedge quite often migrates as far as here, and we are a long way from Lakes Entrance. Particularly in low river flows but regularly now, the salt wedge is up as far as the swing bridge, which you will go to this afternoon. A low-level submersible barrier in a study done by SKM on behalf of the catchment management authorities in 2010 recommended that one of the probably most viable low-cost options was to build a submerged barrier on McLennan Strait. They estimated roughly about \$4 million, which in the scheme of things is not a lot of money. That is probably a low number. There are other options besides—and this was just putting rock fill in the strait to actually inhibit the salt migrating up. It would not stop the salt coming up, but it was a start to try and reduce the salt intrusion into Wellington.

The Ramsar management plan review was conducted, I think, in about 2014. We made a submission to that plan, again pushing for a submerged barrier at the strait. Resulting from that and our submission, the East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority undertook another study on a barrier across the strait. This is when they came up with the \$200 million option, which was not along the lines of what was intended in the SKM report. Their only other option is for a balloon-filled submersible barrier, not using rock. There are other options out there and they have a lot less money involved than \$200 million. So we continually get frustrated that studies are done and we get thrown engineering solutions that appear to be over the top in terms of cost and complexity. It is not a major problem. There are places all over the world that have salinity barriers, but we continually see that we get thrown up these options and they are dismissed. I do not even know whether they go to government, whether they are proposed to government to spend that amount of money. But it continues to frustrate us that nothing seems to happen, and cost is one of the things that is always thrown in front of us as to why you cannot do anything.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you very much for taking the time to provide your insights and obviously the strength of your evidence as well. I am interested in whether there have been any activities you have been able to undertake to restore or conserve the Heart Morass yourselves, as people who are on the ground and very active, obviously, and with so many years of expertise and experience.

Mr HOWARD: Yes. I suppose you have really got to see the morass and see the few pictures that are there of what it was like when we first took over. It has been an ongoing project, and literally myself and other volunteers are there weekly. We work jointly with catchment management; we have an MOU with catchment management. They jointly wrote the management plan for the property, which we adhere to and which we follow, but all the work that is undertaken is done by volunteers. What we have achieved with water management is manipulation of the potential salt ingress at the eastern end of the morass, actually in the Parks Victoria area. We have done some work there that has prevented the salinity coming back up through our property. Then there has just been the ongoing rehab work with revegetation.

Water management: we have a water—it is not a definitive allocation of water. Because we are at the bottom end of the system we do not have a volumetric allocation. So every year we jointly, with Parks Victoria, because the Sale Common is next door to us and there are houses across the river, sit down with catchment management, and we put a water management plan to the environmental water holder. That is ticked off, and

then at the instruction of catchment management I open or close the gates that allow water into our property. Then we have an ongoing Waterwatch program, where every month a group of us monitor nine sites on the property to see what is happening with the salinity pH; pH is probably one of the biggest tellers, because the property suffers from acid sulphate soils. Dissolved oxygen turbidity is monitored monthly and forwarded off to catchment management, and that guides us on what we are attempting to do. The other issue that we attempt to do is bring freshwater into the top end of the morass. When the morass is at a reasonably full level, we have got a system of floodgates at the bottom that we can open up, and then once the river drops it will pull water off and then reduce the salinity. So we have this artificial flow at certain times of the year.

Just to add one thing that probably highlights what happens with government departments—and I am not kicking anybody—a number of years ago I was involved in the Lake Coleman rehabilitation project. There was a panel appointed by government. It had numerous bureaucrats from all the government departments—Peter Cullen, a member of the Wentworth Group—and they used to fly from Canberra for these meetings to advise us on what we were going to do to rehabilitate Lake Coleman. Out of that, after 12 months, we came up with a management plan for Lake Coleman and how we were going to turn this back into a vibrant wetland. Prior to this, the predecessor of Gippsland Water, the Latrobe Valley Water and Sewerage Board, used to discharge effluent into Lake Coleman; they had a licence to do it. We fought and got that licence revoked. Eventually it was revoked, so we needed to do something with this wetland. We went through all the process. There are two interconnections between Lake Coleman and Lake Wellington. We devised a plan, which involved the RAAF, because part of it was RAAF land. To that end, the structures were put into the two control areas. We physically manhandled boulders this size into place—our members—to assist in the project. That project, after a number of years, was to control the freshwater into this.

I spoke to Parks Victoria, which was the controlling body. I said, ‘Look it’s time you did something to change the water regime, as per the plan, into Lake Coleman’. My first answer from Parks Victoria was, ‘We haven’t got a boat to get there’. I said, ‘Fine. I’ll give you my boat’. ‘No, we can’t do that because we haven’t got a coxswains ticket’. I said, ‘Look, excuse my French, I will run you down there in the bloody boat’. ‘No, you can’t do it because you haven’t got a coxswain ticket’. So all that money was spent and all these were people involved, and now the whole thing has fallen into disrepair. The whole thing is rusted away, fallen apart, and it was an absolute waste of money. Now, this is a Ramsar-listed wetland. Last time salinity levels were taken in Lake Coleman they were actually at sea level levels—50 000 EC units. There were local eel fishermen that fished in there. They caught prawns, flounder, flathead, bream and mullet, which you would normally expect to find there, but there were fish that would normally be around the Lakes Entrance end in Lake Coleman.

So this is what we have been dealing with and this is where our dissatisfaction, I suppose, with the whole system comes from—to spend all that time and all that money. And I do not know how much it was to fly Peter Cullen down on his charter flight from Canberra to Latrobe Valley for all these meetings—wasted.

Mr HIBBINS: You have indicated that reduced inflows have impacted the lakes. That is from the feeder streams. Is that the case? Yes. Do you have a view on the impact of the dredging of the entrance, which is currently permitted to be dredged at about 5 and 5.5 metres?

Mr WARNER: Yes, we do. The entrance was deepened by approximately 2 metres compared to what it was previously. We have got a couple of concerns with that. One, it was done without an environment effects statement, and there was no measurement of the hydrology and the effect that it would have on the inflows into the lake system. But common sense tells you if you have got a bigger channel or a deeper channel, there is going to be more water coming in. We have physically seen that. You can see it on the graphs on the salinity in Lake Wellington. It is on a steady climb, and since the deepening of the entrance the salinity has been going up. It fluctuates obviously depending on what river flows there are.

But, yes, we do not agree with the deepening. Our members have had discussions with the ports authorities, and they are genuinely trying to manage it to the depth that is required for the fishing fleets et cetera to use that deepening entrance. But it is certainly, in recent times, very disappointing that that was done without an environment effects statement. I am not saying it would not have happened, but at least there would have been some understanding of what the impact would have been on the deepening of the entrance. We believe it had a significant adverse effect on the salinity in the lakes, particularly Lake Wellington. The eastern end of the lakes are saline now. It is probably beyond redemption, but there is a chance with the western end. We have seen you

might get a flush down the rivers, and with the deepening of the entrance water flows in and out. It quickly acts like a pump. There is fresher water going out and the tide saltwater coming in, and it is just slowly over time building up the salinity. The entrance itself was the prime cause of the salinity in the lakes obviously, but the deepening of it has exacerbated the problem. That is only very recent. It is very disappointing that that occurred without understanding the impacts and what mitigating steps could be taken if that was required. Obviously the ports would have done that because they needed the increased steps, and they had a new dredger to do it. But what was the impact on the rest of the lake system, and what could be done to mitigate that impact?

Mr HIBBINS: One of the issues that was raised in the Auditor-General's report and has been raised by some submitters is just the lack of data and the lack of monitoring—the lack of understanding—of what is actually happening in the ecological function of the lakes. Is that something of concern to you, and have you seen any change in that since the Auditor-General's report?

Mr WARNER: It is only two years since the report. The system does fluctuate significantly, and we are in a drought. There are less flows down the Latrobe River particularly. Nothing has come down the Avon in the last couple of years. But we have certainly noticed increases, as Gary said, in Lake Coleman in marine species. At the mouth of the Latrobe River a friend of ours was getting some shrimp out of his shrimp trap and he found a seahorse in his shrimp trap. We have never heard of that before.

Mr HIBBINS: So it is anecdotal evidence.

Mr WARNER: Anecdotal. But there has been no study done. The CSIRO previously did an audit, and we believe it is critical that the CSIRO do another audit of the lakes just to demonstrate the change in character of the Ramsar site, because there are a lot of marine species that we have had reports are in the lakes now that have never been seen before.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes. Okay, thanks.

The CHAIR: Unfortunately our time allocation has expired. Were there any burning final questions, or we can continue these conversations this afternoon. No? Thank you very much. We appreciate you making the time to provide us with such important evidence this morning. You will be provided, as I indicated earlier, with a proof of the transcript for you to verify, and then that will be made available on our website as well. So thank you for your time. We appreciate it.

Witnesses withdrew.