

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

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WITNESS

Mr Peter Reefman, President, East Gippsland Landcare Network, Landcare Victoria.

The CHAIR: We have our representative from Landcare Victoria, Peter Reefman. Thank you for joining us today. We have a formal spiel, if you like, that we are required to read before each witness, which is to advise that this is 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. 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. 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, 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. I invite you to make a short presentation to the Committee.

Mr REEFMAN: Honourable members, thank you for the opportunity to speak to this Inquiry. Landcare has partnered with a number of other bodies in the area to effect improvements, either directly or indirectly, to the Ramsar wetlands. This has provided significant benefits to these areas. However, as I will say later on, there are a number of concerns that include resourcing, knowledge of the changes that have been happening, continuity of plans and prioritisation of works to address any of the changes and issues that are known.

I am actively involved with the East Gippsland Landcare Network, and that is my most immediate area of knowledge and insight—but I have spoken with people from the South Gippsland and West Gippsland catchment management areas. It is all on the eastern side of Melbourne—that is what I will be presenting on—but I understand that from the activities that are happening throughout Victoria that Landcare is involved in, because that is the focus of what I will be presenting, a lot of similar things are happening.

It involves hundreds, thousands of volunteers. Landcare is a grassroots volunteer organisation, and they work in a number of different locations, some of which are explicitly linked to the Ramsar-listed wetlands. They participate in a range of activities. Particularly in those areas that are more directly involved they do a lot of weed control, weed removal, tree planting and other trees and shrubs and ground-cover things. They participate also in—which is particularly relevant for the wetland areas because we are looking to do things like protecting shorebirds—doing some fox control programs, cat control programs. One of the more recent things that we are doing as the East Gippsland Landcare Network is we are also looking at the predator impact, and we are doing a little novel thing where we are doing scat analysis to see what are the actual prey items that the predators are impacting on, to see how much that is actually affecting shorebirds.

Many of the Landcare groups obtain funding and support from various and sundry organisations, including the State Government as well as the Federal Government. A lot of this is coordinated through a committee called the Gippsland Lakes Coordinating Committee. We find that the projects that are approved through this are aligned with the guidelines, the parameters that are set in place to provide effective management of the Gippsland Lakes areas, and that is a good thing. That provides some assurance that the activities that the Landcare groups are doing are going to be of value.

There are other projects that are also undertaken by Landcare, and this is particularly in an area that I am a little more familiar with, having become a farmer of late. There is a lot of work on regenerative agriculture, where we look at trying to build a more resilient and continuous ground cover. By having more continuous ground cover we end up having more resilient ground not only with grass growth but less exposed earth, which means that you get less siltation and dust blown around, which are all things that would have a downstream benefit because we are putting less of that, fewer nutrients as well, into the watercourses and therefore that would be a reduced impact—negative impact—on the wetlands areas because we are making an improvement in water that is leaving the farmlands.

One of the areas beyond my immediate knowledge and explicit involvement is in the South Gippsland area. Corner Inlet is one of the specific areas where a lot of work—well, I will come back first. There are a number of specific areas where the East Gippsland Landcare Network has been operating, and we have done a fair bit of work that has involved weed control, revegetation of riparian areas. As I mentioned before, we have done some fox control. That will do.

More to the west of the state, around Corner Inlet, which is one of the key Ramsar-listed wetlands, and the nearby Nooramunga Marine and Coastal Park, the Yarram Yarram and South Gippsland Landcare groups have done a major amount of work in and around that area, where they have done a lot of willow removal. They have done this in conjunction with the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority and Parks Victoria. They have done a lot of erosion control, willow tree removal, weed removal and control, and a massive amount of streamside and riparian revegetation works. One of the key things that they have also done is in the area of an invasive grass called spartina, which had been covering a lot of the mudflat areas and was making it very difficult for the wading birds to feed. They have done an amazing job of massive clearing of this. While it is not completely eradicated, it is effectively controlled and those areas are now available again for the wading birds to feed. Because it is not completely removed, it obviously needs some ongoing maintenance, which means an ongoing commitment to supporting that work.

Another area that they have done a lot of work in is since around about 2005 they have, in conjunction with Deakin University, been monitoring the broad-leaf seagrass beds in and around Corner Inlet. As a result of that ongoing monitoring, and in collaboration with the local fisheries, they noticed an area was being denuded of these broad-leaf seagrasses. An unusual collaboration has seen fishing industry working together with scientists and Landcare people and Parks Victoria to actually remove some 58 000 sea urchins that were eating and denuding the broad-leaf seagrass. The Landcare groups collaborated again, supplying fishing boats, to then go and replant a lot of these once the sea urchins were removed. At this stage we are not aware of why the sea urchins left their normal environment in a rocky area to come and graze on these, but it has been seen somewhere in about four or five or six different places around Australia where this has happened.

The Victorian Wader Study Group, while not explicitly a Landcare group, has done some extraordinary work in terms of actual study of the birds themselves, particularly the wading birds but also some terns. They have provided some extraordinary insight and knowledge into what is actually happening. This is been happening over a large number of years. From what I understand, the work that they have done is now seen as a benchmark that is being used internationally and in other Australian Ramsar-listed wetland areas. Anywhere that is not doing it, I would recommend to people—inasmuch as you people will have some influence in making recommendations—that leveraging off the work that these guys have done and extending it would be an awesome thing.

In terms of concerns, there are a number. The excellent work that we are doing as Landcare groups and similar organisations is offset against a number of issues and concerns. One of the areas is in terms of funding. Funding is a fairly variable thing. I understand that funding for natural resource management projects has been reduced over a period of time, tightening up a lot of things. A lot of Landcare work is done as volunteers, but a lot of the work also needs to have some engagement of contractors to do works that the volunteers are not easily able to do. The challenge in any time where there is a reduction of resources, particularly from support staff who are assisting the on-ground volunteer work—any reduction in funding there has then a natural flow-on that will reduce the amount of work that would be done by volunteers.

Another aspect in terms of the continuity of planning. This was something from a marine park ranger who had been operating in and around the Corner Inlet area. He was saying that it was rather frustrating that we have plans and then there is maybe a small hiatus and then another plan is created and then later on another plan is created and there is no continuity of the plans. An example he gave was that some fox control had been happening. They found that the routine baiting that was being done to control foxes was not particularly effective. The next time a plan was created they again started with the same basis of the presumption that they would start with baiting the foxes, which the previous experience had shown was not effective. So there is some frustration that there seems to be an ability to undertake some planning and do some studies and then when it comes to actually doing the execution of those plans there does not seem to be as ready funding available and

they do not seem to be learning from the on-ground experiences. So rather than refining a plan and continuing to execute, it is go back and, 'Let's do another study'.

I come from a project management background. Some time ago I wrote an article called 'Top-down versus bottom-up program management', and I saw the tension between when you have a strategic plan at the top and you inflict that on the grassroots troops versus the grassroots troops having some ideas as to what they want to do. It is always good to respond to those grassroots issues and initiatives as long as they do align with the key strategic drivers. Trying to find a happy medium where you can accommodate both is very important. One of the issues, though, is if you only respond to the grassroots issues—and this is particularly again looking at the Landcare space because we are fundamentally volunteers—and if there are issues that need to be addressed at a strategic level that do not entice the volunteers to come and participate, then you create a gap in terms of your management of, in this case, the Ramsar-listed wetlands.

Bushfires is a controversial area. It is not necessarily something that would ordinarily be associated with the management of wetlands but there are a number of issues and there are a lot of different stakeholders around who have very strong opinions. One of the frustrations that I personally feel in this is that we have got people coming with very fixed views on what needs to be done and there is no clear common or consensus view on what needs to be done. But the impact is that if we have large areas being burnt in less controlled ways and we get large areas of bare ground, we get more erosion and poor water quality coming from these areas. So anything that can be done to support a collaborative and scientifically based approach to fire management that gets everybody on board, that would be a good fringe area.

Salinity is an extra issue, and I put my hand up here to say that I am a very unknowledgeable person in the salinity space. I know that in many parts of Australia we have ground salinity issues. Many farmers are dealing with salt coming up from underground. But in the Gippsland Lakes there is a significant amount of salinity that has been rising over the last several years, from what I can gather. I know that, for example, the Murray-Darling Basin has some intransigent issues and that we have a number of stakeholders that are in the Gippsland Lakes space that also have some competing and conflicting interests. But somewhere, if we are dealing with the needs of maintaining our wetlands which need to have at least a less saline environment than what we have in the open ocean, then we would need to look at doing something there.

An example that highlights some aspect of the salinity is the recent fish kill that happened not far from here in one of the entrances to Lake Wellington when there was a significant carp kill. Carp are fairly resilient to salt, and this was in an area that is an entry into Lake Wellington. According to the ECD documents, it describes Lake Wellington as rarely if ever stratified. It is fairly mixed. While it is predominantly fresh, it undergoes episodic saline intrusion. That has affected the aquatic vegetation and fringing wetland communities. The suggestion is that it is not necessarily particularly saline, but if one of the entry points into the lakes has fish being killed due to the salinity levels, then that suggests to me that there will be something significant to do in terms of doing some in-depth on-ground analysis or on-water analysis.

Another concern that a number of nearby residents are expressing is there is a proposed open-cut mineral sand mine in the vicinity of Glenaladale just between the Mitchell and the Perry rivers, both of which feed into the Gippsland Lakes. The intriguing thing is that the proponent, Kalbar, has somehow managed to mitigate down to low a huge number of risks. I have been a career project manager and dealt with risk management extensively. I am, let us say, bemused at the way that they comfortably have managed to mitigate these risks down so nicely to a residual level of low. The mine operation would need large amounts of water to operate, which would be drawn from either the Mitchell River or some significant aquifers. The open-cut process would cut through a number of the smaller, higher up aquifers that a lot of the farmers would rely on but also that would feed into the Mitchell River or the Perry, so that would have a significant impact in terms of downstream water flows. That would, again, have an increased impact on salinity levels and water quality. The Stockman and Round Oak copper mine is also slated for a reopening. The current tailings dam is already known to be leaching significant heavy metals into the Tambo River, and any further increase in height of that would increase the pressure and increase the amount of tailings contaminants that would be coming down the Tambo River and into Lake King, one of the lakes in the system.

Some time ago the CSIRO—in 1998 and a supplementary one in 2001—did an audit of the water quality and the systems in the Gippsland Lakes. That was some 20 years ago, and one of the challenges if you are trying to

manage something is if you have limited information, so I would recommend that a 20-year period of time is an appropriate time frame in which to go and do another in-depth study. I would recommend that we get CSIRO or a similar organisation to embark on a study so that we know where we were 20 years ago, where we are now so that we have a clear understanding of the issues so that we can then formulate plans to effectively manage the situation we have here. Any other Ramsar sites that are lacking either a baseline or a follow-up, I would recommend that that be done for those sites as well.

I know the brief said to not include climate change, but climate change on our current trajectory is seeing somewhere between probably half a metre ocean level rise through to several metres. One of the things is if we have an ocean level rise of that magnitude, then all of the coastal-linked wetland areas would be facing an existential risk. They will just disappear, and the amount of time involved, if we are talking 100 years or so, that we might see this level of ocean level rise, all of these wetland areas will be completely inundated and we will possibly be close to sea level over here. The wetlands would need to then be migrated. Whether or not there are suitable areas—100 years is a very short space of time in which to create new environments. The existential threat to the wetlands and the inhabitants of those wetlands, the shorebirds, the migratory shorebirds, would be crucial. Thank you for your time.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that very comprehensive presentation. Can I open it up to questions?

Mr HIBBINS: You have indicated that Landcare, you are part of the Gippsland Lakes Coordinating Committee—

Mr REEFMAN: No, no—one of our members is on the Gippsland Lakes Coordinating Committee but I am just aware of it. I am just a member of the East Gippsland Landcare Network committee.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay, yes. And that has been put in place since the Auditor-General's report?

Mr REEFMAN: No, the Gippsland Lakes committee has been in place for some years. I am not entirely sure—

Mr D O'BRIEN: 2010?

Mr HIBBINS: Yes, okay.

Mr REEFMAN: One of the subsequent witnesses will have a lot more information on this because it actively involves the East Gippsland and West Gippsland catchment management authorities, and Sean, I believe, will be talking to you about that. I am sure he knows a lot more.

Mr HIBBINS: And you have indicated there is an issue with resourcing or funding coming out from actions flowing on or recommended from that coordinating committee within the plans themselves.

Mr REEFMAN: I am just aware that the amount of funding available for natural resource management projects has been reduced over time. It is something of the order of half of what it was several years ago. I am not entirely sure of the numbers, but it is of that magnitude.

Mr HIBBINS: Thanks. I just want to go specifically to invasive species—and the management of foxes, you indicated. Is the lack of funding directly impacting your ability to manage invasive species?

Mr REEFMAN: I would need to do some analysis to say where the reduction is—

Mr HIBBINS: Yes.

Mr REEFMAN: Again, while I am the President of the East Gippsland Landcare Network, I have an overview or an oversight of the various projects we undertake, but that is not an analysis that I have done to see where the types of projects we have done have been impacted.

Mr HIBBINS: Sure. All good.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Peter, from a Landcare perspective, in respect to Ramsar-listed wetlands, do you think we pay enough attention to what is going on upstream rather than looking at the wetlands as an isolated pocket? We know, particularly in the case of the Gippsland Lakes, what happens up at Mount Baw Baw is as relevant to the wetlands as elsewhere.

Mr REEFMAN: I would say that that would depend on who you are talking to and where you are looking. Certainly, like when I said we are doing regenerative agriculture, which is highly removed from the immediate wetland areas, it is always an interesting challenge when you are dealing with complex systems and the notion of integrating these various areas. This is where I would venture to say that that high-level strategic view would need to be something that is given a significant focus, and that may mean that resourcing and funding are allocated at that sort of a level so that the whole system can be addressed. And again, because I am dealing with the Landcare side and the grassroots level, I do not have a lot of oversight or insight into what is happening at that strategic level.

Mr D O'BRIEN: But from that grassroots level we heard from our previous witnesses that they were frustrated that there were a lot of chiefs, basically, and not much work going on on the ground, so there were a lot of meetings, a lot of discussion, but not actual physical work, which is what Landcare is best at. Would you concur with that from your experience, or would you have a different view?

Mr REEFMAN: It does sync in with what I was saying, that there seems to be a lot of willingness to undertake reports and studies on things like this that do not necessarily get involved at a grassroots or at an on-ground level.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Literally at a grassroots level.

Mr REEFMAN: Yes.

Ms STITT: From the perspective of grassroots organisations, do you think there is a good understanding of the management responsibilities for the wetlands, for the Ramsar sites?

Mr REEFMAN: Again that would vary. You probably have varying levels of insights on various issues. I know of some people who are extraordinarily knowledgeable and who cover a broad understanding of the whole system, but there would be probably 5 per cent of the Landcare people who would have a broad knowledge. Most of them are looking at their little spot—sort of, 'I'm working over here and I'm busy making sure that my area here looks pretty good'. So the knowledge would be diverse and the in-depth knowledge would be variable.

Ms STITT: And given that one of the VAGO recommendations was about clearer lines of responsibility and management of the wetlands, what in your view do you think could be improved?

Mr REEFMAN: I would say the observation of Winston Churchill: 'If you want to defeat your enemy, organise them into a committee'. Having a single point of responsibility for that holistic approach and giving them power, authority and funding to actually take full responsibility and implement those things—that would probably be significantly beneficial. But the responsibility for that single entity—they would still need to have a very solid engagement with the various stakeholders. So you do not just plonk somebody in in isolation and say, 'You are the maestro supremo of all things to do with the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar responsibilities', because there are so many people involved.

The CHAIR: Any final questions?

Mr D O'BRIEN: Only a comment, but I thought you were going to go with Churchill's other saying about democracy—that it is the worst form of government, but it is better than any other form that has ever been tried. Perhaps that applied to the management of Ramsar wetlands as well.

Mr REEFMAN: It is an intransigent problem. The notion of the bushfires that I mentioned before—you have got lots of stakeholders who have very strong ideas. It is getting them all to come together and collaborate and agree—like, develop a consensus. You have got ports, who have particular focus on what they want out of fishing and boating management. You have got people who want to do recreational fishing. You have got

people who want to go kayaking et cetera. You have got people who want to draw water from it for various and sundry purposes—taking water for making milk or growing cattle. I am trying to grow cattle as well, but I just rely on the water that falls on my ground. But, yes, you have got a lot of competing and conflicting interests that to get a consensus on how we need to do things is a devilishly difficult thing.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your time. We appreciate you coming to give that important evidence to us today. A version of the transcript will be provided to you for you to verify, and then it will be made available on our website. So thank you for your time.

Mr REEFMAN: Pleasure. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.