

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into 2020–21 Financial and Performance Outcomes

Melbourne—Friday, 12 November 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Danny O’Brien—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mrs Beverley McArthur

Mr James Newbury

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

WITNESSES

Mr John Bradley, Secretary,

Ms Karen Lau, Deputy Secretary, Environment and Climate Change,

Ms Anthea Harris, Deputy Secretary, Energy,

Ms Christine Ferguson, Deputy Secretary, Forest, Fire and Regions,

Mr Julian Lyngcoln, Deputy Secretary, Planning,

Ms Helen Vaughan, Deputy Secretary, Water and Catchments,

Mr Terry Garwood, Deputy Secretary, Land Services and First Peoples Group,

Mr Graeme Emonson, Deputy Secretary, Corporate Services,

Mr Xavier Hinckson, Chief Financial Officer,

Mr Chris Hardman, Executive Director, Forest and Fire Operations, and Chief Fire Officer, Forest Fire Management Victoria,

Ms Kate Gavens, Chief Conservation Regulator, and

Mr Stan Krpan, Chief Executive Officer, Solar Victoria, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning;

Ms Sue Eddy, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Building Authority;

Mr Lee Miezis, Chief Executive Officer, Environment Protection Authority Victoria;

Mr Matthew Jackson, Chief Executive Officer, Parks Victoria;

Mr Stuart Moseley, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Planning Authority; and

Mr Dan O'Brien, Chief Executive Officer, Cladding Safety Victoria.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting. We pay our respects to them, their culture, their elders past, present and future and elders from other communities who may be here today.

On behalf of the Parliament the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2020–21 Financial and Performance Outcomes. Its aim is to gauge what the government achieved in 2020–21 compared to what the government planned to achieve.

Please note that witnesses and members may remove their masks when speaking to the committee but must replace them afterwards.

All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

We welcome the Secretary of the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning and associated officers. We invite you to make a 10-minute statement, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you.

Visual presentation.

Mr BRADLEY: Thanks very much, Chair, and I really appreciate the opportunity to be with you today. Can I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we gather and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge that all the work we will discuss today has occurred on the country of First Nations people.

Maybe if I begin by setting some context for the work of the department over the course of the 2020–21 year. In terms of the challenges we faced during 2020–21, there were three key areas that will be well known to the committee: firstly, continuing our vital work with partner agencies to help the state recover from the devastating 2019–20 bushfires, including returning all threatened species salvaged from the fire-affected areas back to their habitats, overseeing the bushfire biodiversity response and recovery program and repairing and replacing essential water infrastructure. There was significant work during that period, including assisting with grants of \$5 million paid to impacted landowners to repair or replace over 900 kilometres of boundary fencing adjoining public land, and DELWP reopened during the year more than 8920 kilometres of fire-impacted roads and reinstated 10 major bridges.

Clearly the pandemic was very challenging to the delivery responsibilities of the department during the year, and our staff worked hard to deliver against the corporate plan, but on top of this assist the state response to COVID-19 by delivering vital services to support the Victorian community. During the year in question we supported 5000 vulnerable households through the utility hardship support package; we accelerated planning approvals for \$14.8 billion worth of major development projects; and our FFMVic crew, Forest Fire Management Victoria, supported Victoria Police in operations like the implementation of the New South Wales-Victoria border closure operations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, the significant June 2021 storms saw across the state thousands of homes and businesses impacted by power outages, falling trees and flood damage, with over 250 dwellings damaged or destroyed and almost 2 million hectares of public land affected, with 12 540 kilometres of public roads and a variety of crossings and bridges impacted. The department's activity in response to the storms was significant in response to supporting homes without power. There were 235 000 homes without power at the peak, which was up to that point our worst outage event in Victorian history through a storm like this, until we received the storms recently in October. The department oversaw the delivery of new programs, such as the prolonged power outage payment for those customers with long tail pathways to restoration and the delivery of small-scale generators to assist.

If I then turn to the delivery against the outcomes, the department found that those challenges did mean that in some cases our delivery was impacted by COVID, but overall there were also areas of significant progress and outperformance against our BP3 measures and a reprioritisation of efforts in response to bushfire recovery.

If I focus on net zero emissions, during the year we released *Victoria's Climate Change Strategy*, including those five-year pledges outlining actions to cut emissions across the seven sectors in the strategy. We developed the adaptation action plans for seven statewide systems that are either vulnerable to the impacts of climate change or essential to prepare for future climate change, and we released Victoria's future climate tool to provide access to the most recent climate model simulations of Victoria's climate.

In relation to our biodiversity delivery during the year, we modernised and strengthened the framework for biodiversity protections through the commencement of the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Amendment Act*.

Moving to *Recycling Victoria*, the government's flagship circular economy strategy, we released the draft statewide kerbside transition plan in June, announced a ban on single-use plastics in February of 2021 and launched the Circular Economy Business Innovation Centre in November of 2020.

I mentioned the reprioritisation of our biodiversity actions in response to bushfire, and that focus on management of pest animals resulted in a cumulative total of 470 000 hectares of herbivore control and 130 000 hectares of predator control under that response.

Turning to our efforts to ensure reliable, sustainable and affordable energy services, clearly the COVID-19 impacts were significant for energy consumers, retailers and essential energy services. In our Solar Homes program we did see impacts in terms of our ability to deliver to households, but still 61 473 solar PV rebate applications were approved and we reached the 150 000th home system installed in June 2021.

The Victorian energy upgrades program continued to deliver, with upgrades to 284 000 households and 15 000 businesses. We commenced work on the establishment of six renewable energy zones, released the Victorian government's *Zero Emissions Vehicle Roadmap* and supported 71 new projects in the New Energy Jobs Fund.

If we come to productive and effective land management, the COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on visitation across the public land estate during the year through park closures, physical distancing restrictions and restrictions on the movement of Victorians, but this did result in more visits to parks in metropolitan Melbourne and fewer visits to piers and jetties. We saw significant flooding events in the latter parts of the year. We were delivering across the course of the year significant outcomes through the Victoria's Great Outdoors program, with over 13 campgrounds, five walking tracks and 130 kilometres of upgraded four-wheel driving tourist routes, which support regional visitor based economies. We also delivered against the building works program, with installation of new PV solar systems across the Grampians region, 17 dog parks and a range of upgrades for tracks and facilities in various campgrounds.

Turning to our safe, sustainable water resources, the year was significant for the completion of the Goulburn-Murray Water Connections Project, the nation's largest irrigation infrastructure renewal project, in October, which is a project which is saving 429 gigalitres. We also saw significant progress with our partner agencies to deliver environmental objectives at 87 river reaches and 84 wetlands, including watering of high-priority wetlands in the Hattah Lakes system.

In terms of a safe and quality built environment, our focus during the year was on enabling economic recovery by fast-tracking major project approvals. We partnered with local councils to build capacity in the planning system, and we developed a user-friendly digital planning system. There was also significant progress in the implementation of the Victorian Cladding Taskforce. I might recognise that we facilitated approvals of major projects with a development value of \$2.8 billion through 23 projects. We completed cladding rectification works on 40 privately owned buildings, with 227 now subject to funding agreements and 155 buildings in some form of construction.

One of the things that was surprising during the year was that it defied expectations in terms of the slowdown impacts around the level of building approvals and property activity in Victoria. Victoria is currently leading Australia in residential building approvals in the year to August, with almost 70 000 residential building approvals in Victoria compared to New South Wales at 62 000 and Queensland at 44 000. We saw residential lots sold during the financial year, of 8400, more than double the 3600 sold in the prior year, and we saw 891 000 property registrations by our registry services, the second highest on record Victoria.

If I come then lastly to the focus of the department on reducing the impact of major bushfires and other emergencies, it was a year of good conditions for some of our planned burning activities, with 470 planned burns undertaken and 15 cultural burns by traditional owners on their country, strengthening the partnerships between property holders and land and fire agencies. We also saw our crews dedicated to non-fire emergencies, with more than 30 non-fire emergency events, including search and rescue, wildlife, blue-green algae and various other responses.

Our achievements in first attack through the Forest Fire Management Victoria team were really outstanding in this year, with 97 per cent of fires on public land contained at less than 5 hectares, which compares to that 80 per cent target. We have also delivered significant progress in the government's commitment to establishing strategic fuel breaks, which are important for being able to sectorise the landscape and manage fire more strategically in terms of bushfire risk to communities, delivering 544 kilometres of strategic fuel breaks, exceeding the target of 484 kilometres. We recognise that all of our work in bushfire management involves community engagement, and so it was excellent to see 2000 community-based emergency management engagement activities during the financial year. Chair, I will leave it there, but I appreciate the opportunity to discuss any of those comments or to take questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Secretary. Deputy Chair.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Secretary and team. My first question will probably go to Ms Vaughan, Deputy Secretary for water. Can I ask: the desalinated water order advice provided by Melbourne Water in March of this year—so in the period—indicated it was likely the government would make water orders of 125 gegalitres again next year and the year after. Is that still the plan?

Ms VAUGHAN: Thank you for your question, Mr O'Brien. The forward estimates are non-binding. At the moment the current order is being delivered of 125 gegalitres, as you say. The process that Melbourne Water goes through in order to conduct its modelling is to take into consideration five principles, and I will run through those.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry, can I just get to the nub of the point? Is it still the plan, as per the advice provided in March, to order another 125 gegalitres this year?

Ms VAUGHAN: The forward estimates are non-binding. They are still in the forward estimates papers, and the process that is gone through is to run through the modelling, look at the various principles that need to be applied and then to make a recommendation to the minister for what that next order would be. So it may be less, it may be more or it may be 125.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Righto. What is the timing on it? We have got a current order of 125. Is that calendar year or financial year?

Ms VAUGHAN: That is financial year.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So the current financial year that we are in right now is 125 gigs.

Ms VAUGHAN: Yes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: What is the cut-off point for when we need to make a decision on the order for the next financial year?

Ms VAUGHAN: Usually decisions are made early in the calendar year, so we are talking March or April, Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Righto. So no decision has been made on the next order as yet?

Ms VAUGHAN: No.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. I know the government is keen to ensure that the desal helps provide us a buffer. At the moment we have got Tarago, Yan Yean, Maroondah and O'Shannassy all at 100 per cent. We have even got Thomson Dam, our biggest, at 87.8 per cent and storages overall at 88 per cent as of today. What level does the government consider is an acceptable buffer to have before it does not order any more desal water?

Ms VAUGHAN: The order has been placed, so we are in the process of delivering on that 125 gegalitres. Each year is taken in isolation of each other. Our strategy, as you rightly point out, is to build storages. Whilst we have for the Melbourne storages around about 88 per cent across the board at the moment there is still 22 per cent there in capacity for storage.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Twelve.

Ms VAUGHAN: Sorry. My mathematics is not so good first thing in the morning. We have also got the demand deficit that Melbourne has every year, where we are 70 gegalitres short of our natural supply into the system, so the desalination order actually helps cover off that gap between supply and demand.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Has any advice been prepared at the moment for an order for next year?

Ms VAUGHAN: Melbourne Water goes through that modelling process every year, Mr O'Brien. They would be doing it at the moment. I do not have line of sight of that. That is a very separate process that they run, and so my expectation is that they would be doing that at the moment in order to be ready for next year.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Have you forecast a spill on the Yarra system this year?

Ms VAUGHAN: Well, the principles that are applied is to avoid spill.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry, say that again.

Ms VAUGHAN: The principles that are applied is to avoid the risk of a forgone harvest or spill.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I am just wanting to know whether there is a risk of a spill this spring in particular, with those storages, as I said, already pretty high.

Ms VAUGHAN: One of the benefits we have in Victoria is the water grid, where we are able to actually move water around between the different storages to ensure that we are managing the system, if you like, so that we are able to avoid those—I will call them operational spills.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I understand all that. I know in my own area Southern Rural Water manages most of the storages. They forecast risks, and they look at, you know, 'Is the Macalister or is the Thomson likely to spill this year?'. I am just wanting to know whether there is a forecast risk of spill in the Yarra system at all.

Ms VAUGHAN: Not to my knowledge, at the moment, Mr O'Brien. I can get back to you on that, if you like.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes.

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mr O'Brien, and also I suspect the witnesses have come to answer questions in relation to the outcomes, not estimates. So if we could keep questions to outcomes, that might be useful.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, this is literally the desalinated water order advice provided to the department, to the government, in March this year. So this is literally the outcomes of that advice that I am following up.

The CHAIR: That is fine, if we keep our questions to the relevant financial year.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Ms Vaughan, storages are now at the highest level they have been since 1996, but the desal plant is still running flat chat, 450 million litres a day being flowed into Cardinia for each of the past 30 days because the government made another water order of 125, as we said. What is the additional cost of that on Melbourne Water customers, and why are we continuing that with storages at 88 per cent?

Ms VAUGHAN: Household bills for the 2020–21 year had already been incorporated into bills from the previous year. So there was no change, as you know, because the order remained the same. So if the full cost was passed on to customers, it would equate to an average cost per residential customer of around about \$31 per annum.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry, how much—31?

Ms VAUGHAN: Per annum.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I just did not catch the number—31?

Ms VAUGHAN: \$31 per annum, yes, on a typical bill of around about 150 kilolitres. But through the regulatory adjustment process from the water retailers and the use of our banked renewable energy certificates that we have spoken about before, the average annual household bills in Melbourne for 2020–21 were expected to fall by \$6. However, there is another qualifier on that. The Essential Service Commission will confirm the actual 2020–21 average bills for Melbourne when it publishes its annual report on the performance of water corporations, and that happens towards the end of 2020–21—so usually the first week of December.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So you have used the renewable energy certificates function to drive prices down, but presumably prices would be down even further if you did not have the \$31 additional cost of the desal water?

Ms VAUGHAN: Well, Victoria and Melbourne actually have some of the cheapest water in the country.

Mr D O'BRIEN: That was not the question, Ms Vaughan. It was that there is still a \$31 additional cost on Melbourne Water bills because of the use of the desal this year, when we have got 88 per cent storage capacity at the moment.

Ms VAUGHAN: Well, what we are expecting is a fall of \$6 across the board for the average bills because of the way the pricing structure is managed in order to reduce the impact on customers, because again, one of the principles that is worked through as we develop up the water order is to minimise customer bills.

Mr D O'BRIEN: The 125 gig order that was made during the relevant period for these hearings is currently going into Cardinia. Are you able to tell me how much of that has been delivered so far? Like, do you get daily updates as to where it is at?

Ms VAUGHAN: I would have that information here, if you give me 2 seconds. Otherwise I can—

Mr BRADLEY: I think in terms of outcomes from the year in question, we can certainly give you the results for the outcomes for the 2020–21 year. AquaSure commenced delivery of the 2020–21 water order in July 2020 and completed delivery of the full 125 gigalitres in May of 2021.

Mr D O'BRIEN: But there is water currently going into Cardinia now from the desal plant?

Ms VAUGHAN: Correct.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Cardinia is currently at 82.5 per cent full. What happens if it fills and we have still got more water to come on the desal order?

Mr BRADLEY: So, Mr O'Brien, recognising the focus of the hearings on the outcomes, what we can say, as the Deputy Secretary said, is that Melbourne Water administers a process, as it did in the 2020–21 year, focused around the principles of avoiding forgone harvest and avoiding spill. That will certainly be taken into account this year as it was in the 2020–21 year.

Mr D O'BRIEN: But the question still stands, Secretary: if it spills, can you put the water elsewhere so you can keep topping it up with desal water?

Mr BRADLEY: As the Deputy Secretary said, there is an ability through the use of the water grid to conjunctively manage storages to some extent to maximise the yield from the storages across the system and avoid the potential, where possible, for forgone harvest. But those are things that are operationally managed during the course of the year and then taken into account, with the probabilistic assessment that Melbourne Water does as part of that advice on the water order, and that is what informed the water order for the 2020–21 year that is the focus for today, and that result was delivered in May of 2021.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Can I ask—presumably for information on notice for this, Ms Vaughan: can you provide the breakdown of the source of water supplied to each of South East Water; City West Water, or Greater Western Water as it is now known; and Yarra Valley Water—that is, was it from Cardinia or from the Yarra system or from elsewhere? Are you able to provide that information on notice?

Ms VAUGHAN: I would have to take that on notice, Mr O'Brien, yes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Of course. If it is possible, to provide it for the last five or 10 years as well if it is available.

Ms VAUGHAN: Five or 10?

Mr D O'BRIEN: Ten. Thank you. Continuing just on desal, page 83 of Melbourne Water's annual report shows that operating expenses for the salination plant increased by \$17.5 million last year. Why is that?

Ms VAUGHAN: Again, I would have to take that one on notice, Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: It is a significant increase. Surely there would be some reporting back from AquaSure or Melbourne Water to the department as to why it has been so significant.

Ms VAUGHAN: That reporting would happen, Mr O'Brien. I do not have that in my notes with me right now.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Well, if you are taking it on notice, if you could also provide what the impact of that increase would be on water bills and what the total cost of the 125 giganalitres ordered this year will be as well.

Ms VAUGHAN: Sorry, can you just repeat that last one?

Mr D O'BRIEN: What the total cost of the 125 gig order this year is.

The CHAIR: Sorry, do you mean in reference to the last financial year in question?

Mr D O'BRIEN: The order placed at the start of this year.

The CHAIR: So this calendar year?

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes. Thank you. Just quickly, a couple of questions again, sorry, Ms Vaughan, on catchment management. The Victorian Catchment Management Council, I know, has been abolished. But they were due to produce their five-yearly catchment conditions and management report for government next year, 2022. Obviously that will not be released now because they have been abolished, but they usually produced a draft conditions report for the government. Did the department receive any preliminary work from the council on that catchment conditions and management report?

Ms VAUGHAN: As you rightfully say, Mr O'Brien, the Victorian Catchment Management Council was abolished following the passing of the Water and Catchment Legislation Amendment Bill. It is being replaced with a time-bound advisory committee that is able to come in and advise on a specific area of interest for integrated catchment management. So, for example, that could be where there has been a bushfire come through over quite a significant area, and having local place-based people that can advise on biodiversity, water issues and planning issues really comes together in that holistic way.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I appreciate that. Will they produce a catchment conditions report?

Ms VAUGHAN: So with the catchment and conditions report there are two pieces of work that happen on a regular basis. One is the catchment management authorities produce a condition report, and that is included in their annual reports every year—that is tabled in Parliament. The Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability is taking over some of the reporting as well, through the state of the environment report, and her next report is due in 2023.

Where I was going to go to, Mr O'Brien, is that the Victorian Catchment Management Council completed three pieces of work that looked at legacy, community engagement and future focus. So the reporting aspect of the integrated catchment management will come through annually and also every five years.

Mr D O'BRIEN: But what would have been due next year, the catchment conditions and management report, will not be produced.

Ms VAUGHAN: That report will not be produced. There will be one in 2023—and know that the annual reports come through every year as well.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Thank you.

Mr BRADLEY: Sorry, just to be really explicit about it, the CMA annual reports will produce condition reports that would have been duplicated.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry, Secretary, can you take—

Mr BRADLEY: I am sorry, Mr O'Brien. The CMA annual reports will produce condition reports. That would include the constituent part for that CMA that would otherwise have been rolled up into the VCMC report. So that will come out annually as well as the five-yearly report from the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Thank you. I have a question for you now, Secretary. Page 314 of the department's annual report indicates that the number of field staff employed by the department was reduced from 718 down to 585 full-time equivalent in the last year. What frontline roles are no longer being performed as a result of that 133 FTE reduction?

Mr BRADLEY: Thanks, Mr O'Brien. I might ask the Deputy Secretary for Forest, Fire and Regions to comment, but certainly over the course of the financial year—and it might be that is an indication that this is not fully reflective of the staff that were involved—if anything we extended our project firefighters and increased our resourcing over the course of 2020–21 to deliver some of those really important works and respond to the COVID disruption that I was referring to earlier. So the Deputy Secretary might be able to—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Secretary, that is not what the annual report says.

Mr BRADLEY: It might be—

Mr D O'BRIEN: A reduction of 133 FTE in field staff—page 314.

Ms FERGUSON: Mr O'Brien, I will happily look into that, but it might be a timing issue, because we did not reduce the number of field staff over that period. I suspect it could be a point-in-time accounting issue in terms of when our project firefighters, which are seasonal staff contracted for a part of the year, depending on when that counting was done—it might reflect a variation in terms of the numbers of people on board at that particular time.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, it is as at June 2021, comparing the previous June, 2020. So it is apples and apples in terms of timing.

Ms FERGUSON: I will happily look at that, but we have not reduced. As the Secretary indicated, we extended a number of our project firefighters to support preparedness based on the COVID-safe working requirements and continue to support recovery.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, I am happy to take that on notice, but that is what the annual report says: a reduction of 133 field staff. Secretary, the same table on that page shows full-time executives increased by 20 and 444 new full-time-equivalent VPS staff. How is it that your annual report shows that you have reduced field staff but increased desk jobs, essentially, by 444.

Mr BRADLEY: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. Just bear with me one moment. So firstly, I guess, in relation to the overall issue of executive staffing expansion, the staff of the agency did increase substantially over that period as the budget of the department was increased by the government to invest in some of those priority initiatives in relation to economic recovery—the significant investment of a record budget—\$1.6 billion in renewable energy and a significant investment in the *Recycling Victoria* program. In 2020–21 the total number of SES staff did increase from 132 to 152, but during that period the number of executive staff increased in line with the total percentage increase in the budget of the department, so both of them increased by about 14 or 15 per cent.

Mr D O'BRIEN: And the VPS as well?

Mr BRADLEY: I am sorry?

Mr D O'BRIEN: And the VPS was the same?

Mr BRADLEY: The VPS staff over the period increased, and I am looking for the precise figure, Mr O'Brien—

Mr D O'BRIEN: I can tell you: 444.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I am sorry to interrupt the discourse, but the member's time has expired. Perhaps the answer can be provided on notice if it is available.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I will come back to it.

The CHAIR: You will come back to it. Thanks, Deputy Chair. Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: Thanks, Chair. And thank you, Secretary and your team, for your appearance today. I would like to move to accessible housing and to the National Construction Code if I might. I will take you to the questionnaire, page 2. There was some \$16.5 million that was allocated to speed up local government planning decisions to help accelerate the supply of new housing in Victoria. I understand that the department has also undertaken a fair bit of work to lift the quality of new housing products through the building system as well. I was hoping that you could explain to the committee the benefits of introducing those minimum accessible standards into the National Construction Code.

Mr BRADLEY: I might ask the Deputy Secretary, Planning, to answer that question.

Mr MAAS: Thank you.

Mr LYNGCOLN: Thank you for the question. As you pointed out, as well as looking at increasing the supply of housing in the state, it is important that we do this in a way where that supply is of a high quality, particularly where we are looking to increase supply. In established parts of Melbourne where the community can have concerns about increased density obviously that improvement in quality becomes really important. So there are two major things that have been done in that space which I can talk to. One is accessible housing standards at a national level and there is also the better apartments work that we have been doing as a department as well.

In terms of accessible housing, obviously we are trying to cater with our housing for a diversity of people in the community. Over 1.1 million Victorians identify as having some form of disability, and that includes 360 000 who identify as having profound or severe mobility limitation. It is currently estimated that the cost across Australia of inaccessible housing is \$4.1 billion annually, so it is a really significant issue for that part of the population. Victorians have indicated a strong preference to transition through life stages in their own homes, so as people age a lot of people have a preference to stay in the family home, but obviously that is only possible if the houses that have been built cater for that. So the Victorian government has been leading the way in implementing accessible standards in public and social housing, and the \$5.3 billion Big Housing Build will be a significant investment in social housing and will incorporate key elements of the *Livable Housing Australia Guidelines* into the standards for the building of that housing stock in addition to following the better apartments design guidelines that were developed by the department as well.

In addition to that action at a state level, Victoria has been a strong advocate nationally for a consistent national approach on accessibility standards to have those standards applied to all new residential dwellings through the National Construction Code. In April 2021 state and territory building ministers agreed to include a new minimum standard for accessibility in the NCC on 1 September this year, and that reform is expected to increase the number of homes with accessible features to approximately 50 per cent by 2040. That standard is aligned with the livable housing design guidelines and will ensure basic features are included in new homes and apartments, enabling Australians, for example, to have step-free entry into the home as well as accessible toilets on the ground floor. The government will continue to work closely with stakeholders in industry to advance those new standards, which will come into effect, to ensure they effectively support and overcome the barriers for people to have accessible housing stock.

In addition to that national work, as I mentioned, there has been further work on better apartments, so previously there was a project on better apartments that looked very much at the internal amenity of apartments. But the latest work that we have been doing on apartments really goes more to that external amenity, so again the quality for surrounding residents and the like. So there has been a project there to look at how apartment buildings can provide green open space for residents and contribute to neighbourhood amenity, better respond to families that choose to live in apartments and make sure that that is a family-friendly environment, that high-quality materials are used on facades, that the buildings will have attractive and engaging street frontages and that tall buildings will be designed so that they do not cause excessive wind.

So there was consultation on those standards in August of 2019. Those are being finalised, and there is now a sort of preview of those standards up on the web, which are expected to be finalised into those schemes by the end of this year. There has also been a Future Homes project, which has really been a competition, working with architects, bringing forward standard designs for apartments. So there was a competition that has been

held. The Minister for Planning announced the winners of that. We are now piloting those project designs from the winning architects with councils and looking at streamlined planning processes for that, which is underway now, and we expect implementation of that project to kick off in the final quarter of this year.

Mr MAAS: Excellent. Thank you very much. You have spoken to the minimum standards as well as when they will be implemented. I was hoping you would be able to inform the committee what minimum standards are now required.

Mr LYNGCOLN: Yes. In terms of the standards, as I said, the previous Better Apartments work focused on internal amenity. So the types of standards that would be looked at in there go to things like room size, both to ensure an adequate size of room but also to look at issues of light getting to different parts of the apartment. It looked at issues like ventilation, so a lot of those sorts of internal amenities. The latest updates though to the guidelines go to the issue of green space for residents, so where apartments are designed ensuring that there is adequate space within the footprint of the building to provide some green space and trees—also, as I mentioned, to look at the use of building materials. So what we have seen sometimes in the past is that the facades of buildings might have quite cheap material that degrades pretty quickly over time, and it becomes quite unattractive for surrounding residents. So the standards do go to the issue of what materials should be used in facades.

Also, looking at street frontages, previously there has been no standard around things like where a lot of utilities and bins and those sorts of things go, so you can end up with the frontages of apartment blocks that just look like a utility area. So there are standards in place around those street frontages and the placement of those things, ensuring there are safe and usable areas for pedestrians and cyclists, storage of bikes and the like, encouraging active transport, and then also looking at the design of buildings and having standards to ensure they do not create excessive wind for pedestrians and nearby public spaces.

Also there was some concern from the industry around cost impacts of some of that, and so we did look at some other standards that could offset some of that. So, for example, we looked at the issue of balconies, where often in very tall apartments you would have balconies provided at very tall heights that were not really usable—very windy in those locations. So we changed the standards to allow the balcony to essentially be brought inside and have more of a sunroom-type approach. It still provides a good amenity for the resident, and it has helped the industry deal with some of the other cost impacts of the standards that I just talked to.

Mr MAAS: Great, thank you. In terms of the implementation part of that piece, can you talk to actually how those standards will be implemented?

Mr LYNGCOLN: Yes, so similar to the original Better Apartments project, where there were essentially apartment guidelines produced, they are outcomes-based guidelines. So in some cases they might be prescriptive with numbers that people need to comply with, but they do go to objectives and allow designers of buildings to find innovative ways to meet the outcomes of the guidelines. As I mentioned, the latest set of those changes, which go to external amenity, have been produced in a document. They are up on the department's website at the moment as a preview, and then we expect to incorporate those requirements that are indicated there into the planning scheme probably by the end of the year.

Mr MAAS: Thanks, Deputy Secretary. I might move to economic recovery and infrastructure support, but focusing on the Big Housing Build. So on page 27 of the questionnaire there is mention of providing support through planning for the economic and community recovery from COVID. A key part of this economic support has been ensuring there is a strong pipeline of timely work to support the construction sector. Are you able to explain the role planning has taken to assist government in the Big Housing Build and Big Build projects?

Mr LYNGCOLN: Yes. Thank you for the question. Obviously the construction sector is a significant part of the Victorian economy, and there was a fair bit of concern as the COVID pandemic took hold that there would be impact on that sector, which would have an impact on the economy. It was identified that planning has a significant role to play therefore in facilitating activity in the construction sector. As the Secretary outlined in his opening address, to our surprise a little bit, the building sector has held up quite well, and the Secretary spoke to the statistics there around building approvals actually being better than Sydney and Queensland. So that has been encouraging. But having said that, it was identified there is a need to have a strong pipeline of

projects coming out of COVID as construction activity fires up, so there is both a short- and a long-term approach that is being taken to that.

In the short term there was what was called the development facilitation program established. Initially that came out of some advice from the Building Victoria's Recovery Taskforce. That was launched in October of 2020 to continue to support the construction industry and to revitalise the economy after the pandemic, or as we come out of the pandemic, and really that was about streamlining planning approvals. There were some eligibility criteria, largely around economic contribution that a project might make, whether it was shovel ready—obviously we want to be giving approvals to projects that are ready to go into construction and create economic activity and jobs and projects that would align with other government policy objectives—and an invitation for proponents for those projects to bring them forward, rather than those projects going through council permit processes. Some of these projects were already in those processes and stuck somewhere in the system, either waiting for a decision or in some cases they may have been taken to VCAT and had significant time ahead of them before they would get a decision. There was an ability with those projects for the Minister for Planning to intervene and call them in and make a decision. So there were nine projects in the area in question, with a total investment value of over \$300 million, creating 818 jobs, that the minister approved, creating 155 new dwellings and nearly 200 000 square metres of commercial floor space in the Victorian economy.

As well as that the department worked on some streamlined planning provisions to help facilitate the Big Housing Build. Obviously the \$5.3 billion investment in social and affordable housing is very ambitious in scale, and we identified the need to have very efficient planning processes to deliver on that program. So some provisions were put in place that again have some ministerial decision-making but still allow for consultation with councils as part of that to make sure that there is the local and community input into those projects but to facilitate their delivery in an efficient way.

Mr MAAS: Thank you. You have already spoken to what is known as the development facilitation program, and I note that there have been some \$8.6 million investment towards that—and great to hear about the purpose of that program to support the construction sector. You have also made reference to some of the projects. I was just hoping that you would be able to give us a bit more detail around the types of applications that were received in that program.

Mr LYNGCOLN: Yes, certainly. We did see applications coming in from right across the state, so both in regional Victoria and in Melbourne, and quite a diversity of types of projects. They might include things like major sport and recreation facilities, community care accommodation, technology and industrial parks—so commercial space in those sorts of areas—also mixed-use buildings, education centres, accommodation and education and training facilities. So there is quite a diversity of both residential and commercial but also other sorts of community facility type projects that have been coming through that process as well as the normal planning processes that we have been running that have contributed to the planning approvals that the Secretary spoke to in the opening presentation.

Mr MAAS: Great. Thank you very much, Deputy Secretary. And, Chair, I think I might actually leave it there. So, thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Maas. Mr Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Thanks, Chair. Thank you, Secretary, and your team, for appearing here this morning. Budget paper 3, page 55, has a range of initiatives to support environment biodiversity, including the *Biodiversity 2037* strategy. A recent VAGO investigation highlighted that the department proposed three funding options to government for the funding of the biodiversity strategy. The lowest of these was called life support, and the government funded just half of what was requested under the life support option. The audit also found that the department cannot demonstrate if or how well it is halting further decline of Victoria's threatened species populations. Now, both the VAGO report and evidence in a parliamentary inquiry recently discuss the New South Wales program called Saving our Species, which uses a set of guidelines to estimate and evaluate the species response to management interventions. Given these findings, has anyone from the department taken the opportunity to look at the Saving our Species program and meet with staff from that particular program to discuss ways to improve the transparency, monitoring and evaluation of Victoria's efforts to safeguard our threatened species?

Mr BRADLEY: Thanks, Mr Hibbins. I might make a brief opening comment to put it in context of the VAGO report, and the Deputy Secretary might wish to supplement. In terms of the VAGO report, it does highlight areas for improvement in relation to the prioritisation of interventions to protect threatened species, but in making that comment about the original funding for the *Biodiversity 2037* strategy it does not fully recognise that since the announcement of the government's commitment of \$86.3 million and \$20 million ongoing to implement *Biodiversity 2037* in 2017 there has been over \$298 million committed through subsequent budgets, including over \$286 million in the last two state budgets alone, to protect biodiversity and the natural environment. In the 2020–21 year in question, that included \$29 million for continued support for the biodiversity bushfire recovery, \$18 million and \$4.4 million per annum ongoing for the implementation of the Victorian deer control strategy and \$92 million for storing carbon for productivity, participation and natural restoration initiatives. There are a range of other commitments in that budget period as well.

The VAGO report does raise the New South Wales model of Saving our Species, and certainly our departmental officers are very familiar with that program. The *Biodiversity 2037* strategies include both landscape-scale initiatives, including some of those where we have achieved record outcomes during the 2020–21 year through pest predator, pest herbivore and weed control, but we also have within the program very specific programs focused on individual threatened species. So the Deputy Secretary might want to comment around our focus on that in the context of the New South Wales model.

Ms LAU: Thank you, Secretary. And I will add to that, that yes, senior officers from the department have been in touch with New South Wales with regard to their program. That was a program that was called out in the Victorian Auditor-General's report. In that report it did not, nevertheless, indicate the measured outcomes coming from New South Wales through the *Saving our Species* report. It did highlight that Victoria has had a very strong focus on protecting large-scale landscapes, which is good for the broad landscape as well as for a range of other threatened species. Those landscape-scale projects stand to benefit at least 80 per cent of threatened species through core natural resource management actions, and then there are a suite of species-specific actions that we have undertaken for our faunal emblems as well as a range of icon species, whether that is work with helmeted honeyeaters or dolphins or a range of other icon species that are called out for particular efforts. You may be aware that during and post the 2019–20 bushfire season there were a number of rescue efforts for both aquatic and terrestrial species. In addition, there are programs that are targeted at things like gene mixing for species where they are particularly critically endangered.

Mr HIBBINS: Can I just get some further details in terms of the specific species? The VAGO report indicated that there had been I think \$20.2 million allocated to interventions on 10 species in total. Are you able to provide the committee with information on just exactly what these 10 species were, how they were selected and how much was spent on each one?

Ms LAU: I do not have the data for me on each of the species broken down. I am happy to provide that on notice. We do publish the icon species on our website. There are a range of them that I might not be able to recite right now, but we can provide that to you on notice. John, did you want to add?

Mr BRADLEY: Yes. I might be able to supplement that answer, Mr Hibbins. I can just give you an indication of the projects on which DELWP is working with partners across the environment sector partly through that bushfire biodiversity response and recovery program, including spotted tree frog surveys and captive breeding programs. In an effort to save this species a number of frogs were collected to commence a captive breeding program at Healesville Sanctuary. We have got Macquarie perch surveys, relocations and stocking, where tagged adult Macquarie perch were transported from Dartmouth to fire-affected upper Buffalo in May 2021. The community participated in the release of some of the 400 translocated perch at an event in May 2021. We have worked on the phantom wattle, which is a threatened flora species, critically endangered and endemic to Burrowa–Pine Mountain National Park.

The deer exclusion fencing helps to protect the Shelley leek orchid, and you will have seen the government's significant investment in deer exclusion fencing during the period. There is a program of long-footed potoroo monitoring, which will help to determine that species' ability to survive risks such as the intense bushfires of 2019–20. We have mentioned the eastern bristlebird program earlier, so I will not dwell on that. As the Deputy Secretary mentioned, a number of aquatic species, such as the mussels, fish and crayfish, were successfully rescued and returned during the 2019 bushfires, and 105 threatened plant species have been the subject of focus

in that program as well. There are a range of other species that are involved in those programs, Mr Hibbins, but I will pull up there.

Mr HIBBINS: Sure. No worries. Thank you. Can I ask now about the funding that was announced in 2020–21 that went to Energy Australia in their plan to keep the Yallourn coal power plant running until 2028 with financial support from the Victorian government. There were a number of parts to that announcement—a new Big Battery, I think support for the workforce—and can I ask what aspects of the package the Victorian government actually contributed to? Was it the power station operating until 2028, was it the new battery or was it the worker package?

Mr BRADLEY: Thank you. It certainly was an integrated package. The government responded to a request from Energy Australia to engage with them about their proposal for the closure of the Yallourn power station and bringing forward its closure by four years. As part of that the government's priorities were to try and make sure that that occurred in a way that achieved an orderly transition and not only managed a just transition in terms of economic activity in the valley and the workers involved and making sure there was a significant period of time to support that transition for the people involved but also made sure the energy system could manage that transition. So the 350-megawatt battery that will be delivered as part of that agreement will help to ensure firming capacity in the grid and will be online well before the power station is due to close. The agreement as a whole with Energy Australia was therefore important for helping to provide certainty for other investors, bringing new capacity, both renewable and other forms of firming capacity, into the market and to de-risk their investment. But also it helped to provide certainty for the community in the Latrobe Valley.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you. There seems to be some conflicting information in terms of the power station's actual operations as a result of this funding. I think there has been some assumption that the power station might just stay available, operating in some periods—peak periods or when it is needed—but I think Energy Australia has quoted that all units will be operating until 2028. What is the understanding of how the power station will actually operate up to 2028? Will it run at full capacity or will it be just used at intermittent times?

Mr BRADLEY: So the power station agreement sees the closure, as proposed by EnergyAustralia, in 2028. We would expect that to be all four units occurring in that transition of closure. The intent of the agreement is to make sure that the power station is available and ready to serve in terms of meeting reliability and security objectives in the market up until the point of its closure. We have seen, as you will be very aware, declining performance from coal-fired power stations, the ageing coal-fired power stations, where their forced outage rates doubled over the past five years or so and have become increasingly unreliable. So having certainty about the life of the power station through to closure helps to make sure that the maintenance—significant maintenance—that is required in that power station occurs and provides confidence in the availability of the power station until that point of closure in 2028. But the intention of the agreement—and the design of the agreement is intended to ensure that we are not distorting the operation of the power station in the market but that it is available and ready to be called in by AEMO under that framework that AEMO administers to make sure that its capacity is available to support reliability.

Mr HIBBINS: Again, just to clarify, do you anticipate a staged closure in terms of the current capacity of the power station, or will it be that the current capacity as it is now will then end in 2028?

Mr BRADLEY: We would anticipate that all four units would remain open until 2028.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes. Okay. Thank you. Can I ask now in regard to the Sustainability Fund: how much is currently in the Sustainability Fund?

Mr BRADLEY: Thank you. Just one second. I am sorry, Mr Hibbins. Xavier Hinckson is ready to answer that question—our Chief Financial Officer. I apologise.

Mr HINCKSON: Thanks for that question, Mr Hibbins. The trust account balances are available in the note to the department's financial statements. So on page 272 the Sustainability Fund balance is noted as \$132 255 000.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. Terrific. Thank you. Can I move now to planning reform. Now, in the questionnaire on page 58 there is funding provided:

Immediate legislative changes will be investigated including a review of the *Planning and Environment Act* ...

Can I ask what the status of that review is?

Mr BRADLEY: Sorry, Mr Hibbins. I just had trouble hearing your question. Do you mind just saying that again?

Mr HIBBINS: Sorry. Page 58 of the questionnaire. Funding is provided, and then there is:

Immediate legislative changes will be investigated including a review of the *Planning and Environment Act* ...

Can I ask what the status of that review is?

Mr BRADLEY: I will just check and see if the Deputy Secretary is ready to answer.

Mr HIBBINS: Sorry—page 52.

Mr BRADLEY: Good. I thought I was going crazy.

Mr HIBBINS: I apologise.

Mr LYNGCOLN: Thank you for the question. Under the headline the ‘Big Housing Build’ in the 2020–21 state budget there was \$111 million over four years to reform the planning system, including the look at the *Planning and Environment Act* that you mentioned. Those reforms are looking to make a clearer, faster, fairer planning system, including potential legislative changes to the P and E Act to simplify planning rules and processes, build the capacity of local council planning, provide a clearer and more consistent approach for planning and assessing major projects and prioritise the assessment of infrastructure projects.

There are a number of non-legislative reforms that have already been made, and I refer to my earlier answer on some of the streamlined provisions to facilitate social and affordable housing. We are going through the process at the moment of looking at the legislation. The commissioner for better regulation previously did an end-to-end review of the planning and building system, which will be a major input to that legislative consideration, and that report is actually now live on the website and available. So we will be looking at legislative changes that respond to the issues that that has identified. In broad terms that is likely to look at things like the planning pathways for major projects to provide clarity around the roles of various entities that have a role to play in the planning system around delivery in precincts, and you will have seen already some legislative change that has been made in relation to the Suburban Rail Loop.

Mr HIBBINS: So the review goes beyond just what is required for the Big Housing Build; it is a much broader look at—

Mr LYNGCOLN: We are looking at all aspects of the planning system. As I have said, that review by the commissioner for better regulation was end to end, looked at all stages of the planning process. We are not expecting to totally change the structure of the *Planning and Environment Act*, but we will be looking at all stages of the planning process and where improvements can be made to make the system more efficient but to continue to ensure there is an opportunity for community input into those planning processes and to deliver out of planning decisions good outcomes.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you. Now, the questionnaire also highlights VC194, which is obviously to fast-track delivery of key infrastructure projects. Has the minister designated any projects or state projects under this scheme?

Mr LYNGCOLN: There is a number of provisions for streamlining. I would have to probably take on notice that specific one. But, yes, there are new provisions that have been put in place to streamline particular types of projects, but I will take on notice a list of which projects have been designated under that provision.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. And a question: will it involve like a call-in process, or will developments go straight to the minister through the scheme?

Mr LYNGCOLN: There will be discretion for the minister around that. Generally what we have seen where we have created these processes is the minister has the ability to become the decision-maker but to still put the decisions to a process. In streamlining those projects what it would typically do is turn off the sorts of permit

requirements that might go to a number of different decision-makers and councils and bring them into a single process, but there would still be requirements on the project to conduct consultation to address any of the impacts of the project, and then the minister may make use of advisory committees to consider any impacts before making a decision.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you. Now, I might ask also about the current priority projects and the fast-tracking. You know, when it comes to state significance, there is quite a range of projects that have been undertaken. Yes, there is social housing, aged care, hospitals I think arguably of state significance, but then you are looking at retail and apartment buildings and hotels and that sort of stuff. So for the latter type, I mean, how are you assessing that they are delivering a public benefit?

Mr LYNGCOLN: So it would depend on the stage at which the minister has called it in. Often the projects that the minister has been looking at have already been somewhere in a planning process, had consideration given to them, often a report from council with a view, and then they have reached the decision-making point and either a council has not made a decision or has made a decision and there has been a referral to VCAT, and then significant time is expected to pass before there would be a resolution of that. So typically where the minister has called it in, views have been known of the public and councils and the like, and generally, as I said, the minister has referred matters to an advisory committee that can provide some expert advice on any outstanding contentious issues, a report from that that the minister can weigh up before making a decision.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hibbins. Deputy Chair.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Secretary, I will go back briefly to the staffing issue. As I indicated, 444 additional full-time equivalent VPS staff and 20 additional executives. Where do you put them all? Have you had to lease new offices for those staff?

Mr BRADLEY: As the member is very aware, the staff have been working from home, managing to juggle homeschooling, impacts of COVID and working online to deliver an incredible performance, and we are very grateful for their efforts over that period of time. We have increased our FTE by 340, which does include not only staff to deliver some of those significant budget initiatives that I referred to earlier, including the renewable energy program and the *Recycling Victoria* agenda, but also we have seen project firefighters with contract extensions, who are obviously working to help significantly in the field, providing bushfire recovery support, and staff engaged in the Working for Victoria program.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry, Secretary, you just said it increased by 340, but that is not what the annual report says. It says 444 FTE and it says a reduction in the number of field staff. Which is right?

Mr BRADLEY: On the issue of the reduction in field staff, the Deputy Secretary has some more information to be able to speak to that for you, if you are happy for her to answer that.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Before we go to that, though, can you answer the question on why there is a discrepancy. You are telling me 340 additional staff. The annual report says 444. I am happy to take it on notice, if you—

Mr BRADLEY: Yes, I am happy to take it on notice. I am sure it is the categorisation, the classification, of staff. I am talking about FTE staff of 340, which increased beyond 2019–20, but we can clarify that on notice if that assists.

Ms FERGUSON: Mr O'Brien, the variation that you see in the numbers relates to, as I suggested, the timing around when our project firefighters, who are seasonally employed for contract periods between, typically, six and nine months, end. Normally they end around May, after the autumn planned burning season has ended, and then we bring them back in in the lead-up to the next summer season. In June 2020, however, we had extended all of those project firefighters who were still with us through into September. So it inflates numbers artificially for that period, which is why you are seeing that variance there.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sure.

Mr BRADLEY: Mr O'Brien, before you go on could I just confirm—and Xavier can speak to this if you would like that—that that page you are referring to in the report does reflect 340 is an increase in the FTE. It might be a headcount versus FTE issue that we are stumbling over.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. I will come back to that if need be. Given that, either way, I think—did you say it was a \$1.3 billion increase in the department's budget? Is that what you said earlier?

Mr BRADLEY: No, it was more like 15 per cent, an increase to \$3.2 billion in output, up from \$2.8 billion in the previous year.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Page 10 of the annual report talks about how Parks Vic is working on economic recovery and bushfire recovery. The bridge that provides access to both Thurra River campground and Point Hicks in Croajingolong National Park—very important for particularly the community of Cann River for tourism in that area—was destroyed by fire. The Parks Vic website currently has that reopening in 2023–24. That is just extraordinary. That is nearly four years after the bushfires. And it indicates that it is taking so long due to the scale and complexity of the work. How can that possibly be? This bridge was built 30 years ago by engineers. We have got additional money in the department. How can it take four years to rebuild one bridge?

Mr BRADLEY: Joining us at the table is Matt Jackson, the Chief Executive Officer of Parks Victoria. I know Matt has been following very closely the Croajingolong restoration work and the work in Gippsland that has been underway, so he will be able to answer that issue.

Mr JACKSON: Thank you, Secretary. Good morning, committee. Thank you for the question, Mr O'Brien. Can I firstly acknowledge that for tourism the bushfires in Gippsland are significant, and we understand the community concern and the revenue generated. And our priority has always been—whether it is Buchan Caves right through to Cape Conran—to get the stimulus funding in and get that resolved. To go directly to your question, that bridge was significantly impaired during the fires. Whilst I appreciate that it is a bridge that is 40 years old, coming at the end of its life, the difference in the design to bring infrastructure onto that island now, the cultural heritage requirements that we must go through, the engineering designing to do that has been a very complicated assessment. I can confirm, though, that that is design ready and will be going out to tender for development. That will then allow for Point Hicks campground, which has the investment, to be finalised. So we are designing the campground in advance. We cannot implement or get onto the island until the bridge has been repaired. So that it is known. That is a high priority on our list, and we are working with the department and the roading department to get that implemented.

Mr D O'BRIEN: But with respect, Mr Jackson and Secretary, to say it is a high priority when we are nearly two years since the bushfires and it has still not even gone out to tender. You mentioned cultural heritage. I met with GLAWAC only a few weeks ago, and they said, 'Hey, not us. It's not us that's holding these things up'. I cannot fathom that, and I am sort of more putting this to you, Secretary. By comparison, in this budget, the 2020–21 budget, Parks Vic is spending \$50 million on playgrounds—26 new playgrounds at Parks Vic assets. Twenty-four of the 26 are in the metropolitan area. This one project in a little country town that has been ravaged by bushfire, it has had its jobs lost through cuts to the timber industry, it has been ravaged by COVID and border restrictions, and we cannot get to tender in two years, and it is going to take four years to rebuild a bridge. Surely that is not acceptable.

Mr BRADLEY: I am happy for you to answer.

Mr JACKSON: Thank you again for the question and further advice, Mr O'Brien. Again, I can confirm that, one, the bridge is an insurable asset. So two things, we have to go through the insurance processes to do that. We are looking at a bridge of around \$7 million to \$8 million. We are designing a bridge that was put in many, many years ago, as you have acknowledged, and we have to bring the bridge to today's standards. So not being an excuse, the process will be—firstly, I can point off, we are not saying it is traditional owners holding up any project. It is one of many approval processes that we need to go through. Just because the bridge was there in its past use, we need to make sure we look at all regulatory approvals and processes, design and insurance. So we acknowledge that it has been a challenging time. It is a priority. I must say that again: it is a priority for us to get that done. But we are going to tender, and then that will allow us to do one to Point Hicks. So the bridge is going to tender, a complex design. It is a new design compared to the old bridge, and it is an

insurable asset. So we apologise for any inconvenience, but we do acknowledge that it is a very important part of our capital program.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So when will that tender go out?

Mr JACKSON: I would have to take that on notice on the date, but I can assure you that it is ready to go out, working with the department, who are the roading department.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I just find it extraordinary, Secretary. I do not know whether you can take on notice whether there has been a similar example of a bridge in a Parks Victoria facility or asset that has taken four years to rebuild. I bet you there is not one anywhere in the metropolitan area. It staggers me that this is taking so long. If you can provide any further information on notice, that would be welcome.

Can I go back quickly, sorry, to Deputy Secretary Vaughan. Page 61 of the annual report indicates the government was intending to commence six flood studies in the financial year but did not actually start any. Can you tell me where the locations of those proposed studies were?

Ms VAUGHAN: Locations? Just give me a minute. I will get those. Apologies, Mr O'Brien.

Mr BRADLEY: While Ms Vaughan is just bringing that material together for you, Mr O'Brien, I just would recognise that while there has been a delay in achieving that target due to the ongoing impacts of the bushfires and the pandemic, which led to delays in launching the risk and resilience grants—that is the mechanism by which we work with the flood management sector to access government funding—we have now released the applications in May 2021, and successful applicants were notified in July. We got about 20 flood project proposals through that process, and they have been nominated and approved to receive funding from the 2021 round, including flood studies for nine townships. So while we have not achieved the outcomes we wanted in 2020–21, in 2021–22 we will exceed that BP3 performance measure target of six new flood studies.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So there will be nine this year, in the current financial year?

Mr BRADLEY: Yes, nine.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Have you got the list of those towns?

Ms VAUGHAN: I have not actually got them in front of me, sorry, Mr O'Brien, but I am happy to provide them on notice.

Mr D O'BRIEN: On notice, that would be good.

Ms VAUGHAN: I can provide both the six that were proposed and also the nine.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Secretary, you just told us about the additional staff and people working from home, so how is COVID used as an excuse for a grants program not being released? No-one stopped working. They were still working. They just were not in their office.

Mr BRADLEY: The Deputy Secretary will be closer to this program and might wish to comment, but what we have seen is an impact on the priorities of the department as we have pivoted to deliver the response to the 2019–20 bushfires—that significant recovery effort in a set of fires that impacted over 1.5 million hectares of land and thousands of kilometres of road, many, many bridges and crossings, so significant work there, and then a community that has been impacted by both that and the COVID-19 pandemic. So that risk and resilience grants program, which we use as the tender process to engage the flood management sector, was delayed and delayed during the financial year towards later in the period, in May, but, as I said, it has been a very successful outcome which will see flood studies for nine townships.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I could be facetious and say an emergency stops us preparing for an emergency—a different emergency. Sorry, I will wait. That is a comment.

Mr BRADLEY: It has been a period of unprecedented challenges, Mr O'Brien, as I mentioned at the outset, with both the recovery from the 2019–20 bushfires, the COVID pandemic and then storms in June. I can

indicate to you that our staff and the partners we work with have been working incredibly hard throughout that period, but it has had an unavoidable impact on some projects.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Continuing on the issue but a different part of the department, on page 68 the annual report states that the assessment of planning scheme amendments through the year took 184 per cent longer than targeted, so 71 days instead of 25 days, and that was also apparently due to COVID impacts. Again, what are the COVID impacts when the planning department, again, was still working from home? It is still working, presumably. Why is it nearly three times longer to meet the planning assessment targets?

Mr BRADLEY: The Deputy Secretary joins us at the table. I think we recognise that we are getting increasingly complex planning scheme amendment requests, and he can talk you through the way we are resetting our approach to that measure and that delivery of the service.

Mr LYNGCOLN: Yes, thank you. That particular BP3 measure, which obviously we have missed by a fair margin, has been the topic of previous discussions at this committee as well. The 25-day target, being frank, is not a realistic one, and in the current year that has been amended. But in terms of the—

Mr D O'BRIEN: To what, sorry?

Mr LYNGCOLN: To 35 days. But the impacts in 2020–21, COVID was one of them. And that was not so much an impact on staff but any part of the process that involves other engagement—you know, councils, community. There is a whole range of people in the process that have had impacts from COVID, so it is not so much the impact on our staff. As the Secretary also mentioned, with COVID we have taken on a lot of planning decisions to facilitate development activity, so that has created in that statutory planning area a whole lot of work as well, and I talked to the value of approvals done there. And then, as also the Secretary mentioned, there is the issue around complexity, and we are looking at the way that we measure this, because if an amendment comes in and it is in friction with a major question of policy and some policy work needs to be done, there is no stopping of the clock on the amendment. Even though intentionally the amendment is held aside until that policy work is done, the clock is still ticking in terms of the BP3 measure, so we are also going to do a review of how the measure works to make sure it is realistic and a proper measure of the performance of the department.

Mr D O'BRIEN: During the year, and this is also referenced in the annual report, the Building Victoria's Recovery Taskforce and development facilitation program were established. Given that the assessment times blew out by 184 per cent and you actually created a new body to try and speed things up, did that work? And more particularly as a starting question, what was the cost of the set-up of that task force?

Mr LYNGCOLN: The building recovery task force initially took on a look at that, and that has now been set up as a function within the department. It was funded through the \$111 million planning reform program that I mentioned. One of the bits of funding for that was to that facilitation function.

Mr D O'BRIEN: That was, sorry, the \$111 million program?

Mr LYNGCOLN: \$111 million over four years overall for planning reform, and that includes the legislative and non-legislative reforms I talked to earlier and regional hubs that have been set up to provide planning capacity support to local governments in regional Victoria, but also there was a component of funding. I would have to take on notice the breakdown for that facilitation function—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes. I was going to ask if you could provide a breakdown of—

Mr LYNGCOLN: And in terms of 'Did it work?'—

Mr BRADLEY: Mr O'Brien and Julian, just the specific figure for the development facilitation program that you are after is \$4.5 million.

Mr D O'BRIEN: \$4.5 million?

Mr BRADLEY: \$4.5 million.

Mr D O'BRIEN: That is the total cost of the program over four years?

Mr BRADLEY: No, that is the development facilitation program cost in 2020–21.

Mr D O'BRIEN: 2020–21, okay.

Mr LYNGCOLN: And in terms of 'Did it work?', as I mentioned, the minister through that program did give approvals of projects with an investment value of over \$300 million, 818 jobs, 155 new dwellings and nearly 200 000 square metres of commercial area, so for a relatively small investment we have seen a significant pipeline of approvals coming out of it.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you. Secretary, you mentioned in your presentation the June storms and flood event, and there have been a couple of tranches, including just recently some joint federal-state recovery funding announced. Yarra Ranges council has put forward five different business cases requesting funding through the disaster recovery funding arrangements. Are you able to tell me how much money, if any, Yarra Ranges has been allocated under those programs?

Mr BRADLEY: Just to clarify, Mr O'Brien, these funding applications for the disaster recovery funding program are administered by the justice and community safety portfolio.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. So not your department at all?

Mr BRADLEY: No.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Right. Have you had any of the disaster recovery costs?

Mr BRADLEY: Yes. Certainly we can talk to you about a range of things involved with disaster recovery both on the energy side and then also in relation to forest fire in regions. We might turn firstly to the Deputy Secretary in relation to the prolonged power outage payment program.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I am aware of that one. I was more interested in the clean-up side of it. But what I would ask in the short time I have got left is about the issue of power outages, particularly for business, and in my case particularly the dairy farms. Is there a funding program at all within the department that provides resilience for energy? Obviously when your house goes out, it is terrible. You have got to throw the milk and the frozen meat out. But when the dairy farm goes out and you cannot milk cows for four or five days there is an animal welfare as well as a business issue. Is there a government program at all to assist farmers with that?

Mr BRADLEY: There has absolutely been a program around increasing resilience particularly in bushfire-prone areas and storm-prone areas through microgrids and the Neighbourhood Battery initiative, which I realise does not go to dairy farmers. But also in response to the 2019–20 bushfires there were three sites and about \$17 million that was invested in your part of the world, Mr O'Brien, in the Gippsland region for three towns to create microgrids in those locations.

Mr D O'BRIEN: No, a microgrid is not much help when the sun is not shining at 5 o'clock in the morning when you are getting up to milk the cows. That is the question I am asking, so perhaps you can take that on notice.

Mr BRADLEY: Happy to, yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. Your time has expired. And as we are halfway through proceedings we may take a 10 minute break and resume at 11.05. Thank you.

I declare the hearing open. The call is with Ms Richards.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Secretary, and thank you, officials, not just for your appearance today but for all of the extraordinary work you have put into the last 18 months, 20 months, which is a good segue to the area I would like to explore, which is reconstruction after emergencies. In particular in the questionnaire on page 18 the department has identified program outcomes for the 2019 bushfire response and recovery, and I am interested in exploring what actions and planning it took to support these communities as part of this work.

Mr BRADLEY: Thanks very much. If it suits, I might ask the Deputy Secretary to answer that question. The Deputy Secretary of Planning is just joining us now.

Mr LYNGCOLN: Thank you for the question. Obviously the 2019–20 bushfires did have a devastating impact on communities, particularly in East Gippsland and north-east Victoria, and supporting those impacted communities remains a key priority for us, including the role that the planning function has to play in supporting people to recover and rebuild. We did see in those bushfires approximately 181 000 hectares of privately owned land fire affected, forming close to 13 per cent of the total fire-affected areas in Victoria, and 458 dwellings and 51 businesses and community buildings either damaged or destroyed, so it is a significant task that we have got.

In terms of what we have been doing to support communities to recover from those bushfires, DELWP and the VBA have been working closely with affected councils to provide direct support, information and advice for local communities. The government provided \$3.78 million in funding in the 2021–22 state budget, in addition to the \$4.4 million in 2020–21, to fast-track rebuilding and recovery and to build all-hazards resilience and betterment for impacted local communities. So not only do we want to support people to rebuild, but we want to make sure that the way in which they rebuild is going to be safe and protect them against potential future emergencies as well. So that funding has provided support to communities in Towong and East Gippsland councils, providing building and planning permit related fee support, cost offsets for technical assessments that need to be done to assist with those planning approvals and professional advice.

There has also been a lot of heritage impact from the fires. There has been assessment of 28 fire-impacted heritage sites completed so far and heritage teams working in the Orbost and Corryong historical societies and the Heritage Network East Gippsland to identify opportunities for community-led heritage recovery projects, and that helps not just to restore lost heritage but also gives community, obviously, a focus in the recovery process as well.

We have been in eastern Victoria, under the state recovery plan with Bushfire Recovery Victoria and the commonwealth, investing in the community recovery package to support bushfire-affected communities, including \$20 million for reconstruction and recovery activities. And then we have also made a number of changes to the planning system to support recovery. The Minister for Planning amended the planning provisions to provide streamlined regulatory processes to assist households and businesses to recover from the bushfire events—and there was an amendment introduced in March of 2020 that provided immediate assistance to people through the provision of temporary accommodation, so it allowed approval of accommodation that could be brought in to give people somewhere to live while they were rebuilding as well as for businesses—and then to look at how time could be reduced from the normal planning processes for rebuilding. There was also an amendment in May of 2020 that applies to all bushfires since 1 January 2019. So in the past where we have made amendments to support particular fires, that is now a more general provision so that in any case where there is an emergency like that, those provisions could apply. That provides greater certainty, particularly through exemptions for third-party notice-and-review requirements, which takes a significant amount of time out of the planning process.

There were also changes to the building regulations that allowed Bushfire Recovery Victoria to get on with the job of clearing bushfire-affected properties, which is the critical sort of first step towards reconstruction, and then in August of 2020 there was an exemption introduced into the building regulations to allow landowners who have lost their homes because of a major emergency to construct and occupy temporary accommodation on site while their permanent home is rebuilt. Also financial supports have been provided. In May 2020 the department provided a \$70 000 grant to Cardinia shire to assist the Bunyip community to rebuild dwellings, and in January of 2021 the government set up a planning and building assistance rebate scheme. That scheme partially funds up to \$5000 of property for professional services to support permit applications, and as of September 2021 more than \$82 000 in rebates had been approved for applicants.

DELWP is also supporting landowners to rebuild to contemporary planning and bushfire standards. So in a number of these areas there are bushfire management overlays and attack-level assessments that need to be done to ensure that the standard of houses being built will be resilient to future fire. It is not possible for all landowners to rebuild. The threat in some of those locations is so great that to rebuild there would be very difficult, and so there has been the buying back of land as a last resort on those occasions where it would not be safe to rebuild.

Where it is a bit lineball as to whether it would be safe or not, there has been a complex sites task force set up—so rather than just sort of leave it to councillors to grapple with those more difficult ones, a task force that

allows experts to sit down and offer tailored advice to landowners trying to make decisions on those more complex sites. That task force has got the necessary skills to provide that support to councils, including for bushfire land use planning, bushfire behaviour surveying, domestic building and fire safety engineering, and that task force is also working with other key agencies such as the Country Fire Authority, councils, catchment management authorities and water corporations. I might hold there, I think, in terms of that, but there is a fair bit there in terms of planning support for bushfire recovery.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Deputy Secretary. There is also mention of flood and emergency risk resilience in the department's other program outcomes. Are there similar planning actions undertaken to provide assistance following the storms in June as well?

Mr LYNGCOLN: As well as fire, we have obviously seen a range of emergencies in the state, and the storms that you referred to, we are seeing both flooding impacts as well as, from trees and the like, the damage to property. So in a similar way we have been looking at those sorts of similar types of planning provisions that can be put in place, again to help people rebuild quickly, get through planning processes in a more expedited way and take time out of the planning stage of that that otherwise would be quite time consuming. So yes, the learnings that we have taken from our approach to planning playing a role in emergency recovery through fires we now apply more generally in those other sorts of emergency situations.

Ms RICHARDS: So that is a good segue to my final question on this particular topic, and that is: can this apply to other natural disasters and emergencies?

Mr LYNGCOLN: Yes, absolutely. The planning system plays a really critical role, really, in both planning ahead to avoid the impact on residents of a range of emergencies, so whether that be fire, flood, storm, being close to other industrial uses and the like. So in the strategic sense the planning system seeks to look at those different land uses and where there might be risks. There will be mapping of risk done, in some cases overlays put within the planning schemes to make sure if a planning decision has been made in those areas that those potential emergencies are being taken in place. So ideally we have people living where they are away from those risks, but where that is not the case and there is an emergency and there is an impact, regardless of the type of emergency, we have been setting up the planning system in such a way that it is going to aid people to recover in an efficient way.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Deputy Secretary.

Mr LYNGCOLN: Thank you.

Ms RICHARDS: I am going to move now to another topic and explore climate. I note in the questionnaire you have reported that the Victorian government has developed sector pledges which outline actions to cut emissions across Victoria, and I am interested in perhaps exploring what will be delivered through these sector pledges and what benefits they will deliver to Victoria.

Mr BRADLEY: Thanks very much for the question. It has been a really important piece of work where the department has coordinated a whole-of-government approach to the climate change strategy, which is required by legislation to be produced every five years and will set out how Victoria will meet the targets and adapt to the impacts of the climate pledge. In terms of the individual sector pledges that you referred to, if I highlight the kind of summary impact of them, the pledges include almost \$2 billion in funding to accelerate climate action and invest in a clean energy future, and actions under the pledge are estimated to reduce emissions in Victoria by 3.2 million tonnes of gas emissions in 2025 and 6.1 million tonnes in 2030. So the energy sector pledge I referred to earlier includes a commitment of \$1.6 billion in the clean energy package announced in the 2020–21 budget, including measures to achieve the 2030 commitment that 50 per cent of Victoria's electricity will come from renewable energy sources, and we have got the VRET2 auction that is currently being implemented by the department and also 778 000 households receiving solar in the form of panels, hot water systems and battery solutions—and 15 000 small businesses.

The transport sector pledge sets a target for 50 per cent of all light vehicle sales in 2030 being zero-emission vehicles, and to help achieve that we have released the zero-emission vehicle road map that I referred to earlier and that \$100 million package of policies and programs to kickstart that transition, and that includes measures to directly bring down the price of those electric vehicles and make them a compelling proposition for

consumer choice. We have also established the expert advisory panel to advise ministers on how to achieve the target for 50 per cent new light vehicle sales by 2030.

Our land use change and forestry sector pledge includes a commitment that from 2030 commercial native timber harvesting in Victoria's state forests will cease, and a further \$92 million will help to restore land and plant millions of trees across more than 6000 hectares. The agriculture sector pledge includes funding of \$20 million for research, development and commercialisation of new technologies and tools to support Victorian farmers to reduce emissions and respond to climate change, with a further \$30 million to help farmers to be more energy efficient and reduce their energy costs through the *Agriculture Energy Investment Plan*.

The waste sector pledge should result in half the amount of organic waste going to landfill by 2030, and we have seen some really significant progress in the 2020–21 year, with councils participating in measures to reduce organic waste as part of that \$515 million investment of the government to transform waste and recycling.

And then finally, the industrial processes and product use sector pledge commits the government to working with industry to reduce leaks of harmful greenhouse gases from commercial refrigerators and air conditioning, but we will update it every five years and it will be a continuing program.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Secretary. You note that a report is published every year by the government on Victoria's greenhouse gas emissions, and I understand that that is based on the most recent data available. I am hopeful that you can take the committee through the key findings of that report.

Mr BRADLEY: It has been a significant piece of work. I might ask the Deputy Secretary if she could speak to the detail of it.

Ms LAU: Thank you. The most recent available published data with respect to greenhouse gas emissions against the target of reducing by 15 to 20 per cent on 2005 levels by the year 2020, the actual and our most recent data is for 2019, and that has exceeded the target with reductions in the order of 24.8 per cent. So we are well on track and have already reached and exceeded our 2020 target. Work underway, including the pledges that the Secretary just outlined, has us increasingly well positioned to hit our next raft of targets to reduce emissions below 2005 levels by 28 to 33 per cent by 2025 and by 45 to 50 per cent by 2030.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Deputy Secretary. You also note in the questionnaire that DELWP has led the development of a whole-of-government pledge. Can you please take me through the details of that pledge and what will be delivered?

Ms LAU: The whole-of-Victorian-government pledge commits all Victorian government organisations to have operations powered by 100 per cent renewable electricity by the year 2025. It also reflects the commitment for all new public transport to be zero emissions by 2025 and for 400 zero-emission vehicles and associated charging infrastructure to be implemented. There are similar, I might mention, voluntary pledges that are also being made by local governments. We have seen more than 30 councils committed to achieving net zero emissions by 2050 across their local communities or for their own operations. And so to acknowledge these actions, there are a number of voluntary pledges that have been submitted under the *Climate Change Act 2017* and also with more than half of Victoria's 79 councils working towards pooling their energy purchasing and switching to renewable energy, both for the climate benefits and for the financial savings for ratepayers. Then sitting within those commitments are also elements of—I think we have got 29 councils that have switched now to kerbside food and garden organics waste collection services that divert that organic waste from landfill and reduce the associated emissions, and we are also seeing many councils starting to integrate zero-emission vehicles into their fleets.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you again, Deputy Secretary. You have noted the comprehensive analysis and modelling provided for an evidence-based approach to setting ambitious but achievable interim emissions reduction targets for 2025 and 2030. Could you please take the committee through the outcomes of this modelling, and particularly the impacts on jobs of setting these ambitious climate targets.

Ms LAU: The modelling has underpinned the sector pledges that the Secretary has taken us through. It is on that basis that we are confident we can reach the targets. We anticipate that in fulfilling the pledges the benefit

from those will continue to enable strong growth and to create jobs as part of the implementation of those pledges.

Mr BRADLEY: I will just supplement on that, if that suits the member. As part of the modelling we have also identified the economic benefits of making progress in reducing emissions. For many Victorians the most noticeable economic impact of the emission reductions is likely to be lower energy bills. Actions to reduce emissions in the climate change strategy will reduce energy costs for Victorian households and businesses by an estimated \$2.6 billion over the next four years and \$13 billion by 2030. And so overall in the short term we expect the investment in emission reductions to boost the economy and generate very significant numbers of jobs, in the thousands, including in regional Victoria. And as we recover from the coronavirus pandemic we expect it to be a significant point of stimulus for the Victorian economy.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you both for your evidence.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Richards. Mr Limbrick.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for appearing today. I wanted to start off with what I imagine is a fairly simple question. Over the last financial year the pest control targets were met or exceeded for predators and herbivorous pests. However, weed control targets were dramatically under budget due to COVID. What COVID restrictions affect weed control targets but not pest control targets?

Mr BRADLEY: Yes. Thank you. It is actually a really significant feature of this particular year. I mentioned earlier that as part of the response to the 2019–20 bushfires and the focus on recovery there was a really significant scientific effort to basically reprofile where we were putting our investment and secure additional investment from government to focus on the biggest threats to biodiversity and recovery, particularly in those areas impacted by bushfire. And what we did do as part of that program was form a consensus with the department scientists, the Arthur Rylah Institute, the commonwealth agencies and others in relation to the prioritised areas of intervention, and that did see us focus our objectives in relation to managing the threats to biodiversity.

And so you see in pest predator activity in priority locations we outperformed, with 700 000 hectares treated instead of the target of 400 000 hectares. In pest herbivore treatments in priority locations we achieved 700 000 hectares instead of 300 000 hectares. But that was a conscious effort to look at the areas of most acute risk, particularly when we saw the impacts after the bushfires and that there was in some areas more open space in the fire-impacted areas. It was easier to get in there and deal with some of those immediate challenges, like deer pressures, and so we did divert resources into those programs very immediately. But the Deputy Secretary might want to supplement.

Ms LAU: I might supplement. The Secretary did note some of the pest control. Weed control: there has been some extension of funding arrangements that will take us to the end of this calendar year from that program, and we are anticipating that against a target of 140 000 hectares for weed control in priority locations we will at current estimates exceed that—in the order of 160 000.

Mr LIMBRICK: What I was actually asking about, though, is: what are the COVID restrictions that affect weed controls? Because that is what it said in the questionnaire, I think. Sorry, it was in the budget paper. It was under target because of COVID-19 restrictions, and I am not sure what restrictions would affect weed controls.

Ms LAU: Under the current arrangements we are no longer expecting to be under target for weed control, and through prioritisation of activity there is a stronger impact on things like vegetation replanting than there is on pest, plant and animal controls.

Mr LIMBRICK: Right. Okay. Thank you. Another thing which I was interested in is the Parks Victoria budget. The expenditure was over budget. Look, I appreciate that there are lots of fixed costs in this sort of budget, but a question was put to me that I could not answer. If during that financial year, for much of that, people could not access parks, why wasn't there a reduction in expenditure, because many of those costs are surely related to visitors, I would have thought?

Mr BRADLEY: Thanks for the question, and again Matt Jackson, the CEO of Parks Victoria, has just joined us at the table, but I think one of the interesting things about the way the pandemic has impacted the use

of our parks is that it has actually been swings and roundabouts. In terms of overall park visitation, park visitation overall has been significantly higher than the projections at the time of the budget, at 86 million visitations instead of 80 million and, as I mentioned in my opening comments, that has been heavily concentrated in that greater Melbourne area where people have been really taking advantage of the open space and using those parks around the greater Melbourne region. But we have seen some decline in visitation, such as, I mentioned, piers and jetties, down about 5 per cent. But Matt might be able to talk about whether or not there were opportunities, if you like, to move resources or save on resources where there was a lower level of visitation in some locations.

Mr JACKSON: Thank you, Secretary. Thank you for the question. I think it is important to note, as the Secretary mentioned, there has been a transformational change in the way of the last 12 months in the health and wellbeing of Victorian communities. Our number one priority is to keep our parks open, safe and clean, and that is an obvious benefit, whether it is a playground in regional Victoria or it is national parks under COVID guidelines. What you will see in our funding is we have had a lot of significant stimulus and capital funding come into Parks Victoria. That is a great result. We were talking about some of the impaired assets in East Gippsland right across the portfolio for building new assets. Our return on our balance sheet results and financial results show that that finance coming into the system is recorded this year and will be obviously expensed over the forward years because of the capital program, so there is a significant increase in funding coming into the park. Our resources went, as the Secretary resolved, straight into our pest animal and plant programs through our ELW programs—environment, land and water—keeping our compliance programs in place to make sure that our rangers and the parks are safe, and also making sure we continue to operate and keep all our staff involved, including, as the other deputy secretaries have mentioned, our fire programs, preparedness, PFFS rangers and so forth. So overall business as usual where possible. Mainly significant increases in parks and waterways, but overall it was a significant program for the year.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you very much. I would like to ask a couple of questions about the Solar Homes program as well, if I may. In the presentation there was a statistic ‘reduced emissions by 360 000 tonnes of CO₂ equivalent’. Where did that CO₂ emission reduction come from? Presumably that means that we stop burning gas or coal somewhere, or how is that actually calculated, that figure?

Mr BRADLEY: Thank you. Joining us at the table is Stan Krpan, the CEO of Solar Victoria. Stan, did you understand the question clearly enough in terms of the estimation of CO₂ savings in the program?

Mr KRPAN: I did. It is publicly reported, and it is essentially off the national electricity market, so it is an offset, so to speak, that is calculated by the amount of energy generation that is being put into the system that is displacing other generation interstate or across the market.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. And also related to this, one of the issues brought up by the Auditor-General in the report that was tabled on 24 June spoke about how the Solar Homes program was not actually able to report on whether they had saved money off consumer power bills or carbon emissions due to a methodology not being there. Is that correct? It had been running for almost three years and had not actually been reporting on whether it was saving money or carbon emissions? Surely a methodology should go in before the program goes ahead, shouldn't it?

Mr KRPAN: The report commented on the monitoring and evaluation framework. The monitoring and evaluation framework was put in place at the end of 2020, so it was not in place at the start of the program. It is now in place, and an independent evaluation will be undertaken in 2022. So the commentary from the Auditor-General was as a total the program has not been able to quantify, if you like, across now 160 000 or so customers what are the savings in total, what are the emissions reductions in total, what is the energy generation capacity in total. That is available, but one of the criticisms from the Auditor-General was that a study of savings across each of those customers was essentially of a sample of 129 or so customers in the AusNet area, and they had indicated that a preference, I suppose, from the Auditor-General's office was that a methodology should include a broader sample and indeed look at energy bills in addition to what was effectively a projection based on energy generation and energy usage of average households, which is how the average savings were calculated.

The average saving in that study were \$1073 per household. The government's announcement when it announced Solar Homes in 2018 was \$890 per household. So indeed on that study we were exceeding, but the

Auditor-General has indicated that the preference would have been that that was a broader study and indeed done on actual energy bills rather than on projections. It is quite a detailed methodology, so it is not as though it was just a back-of-the-envelope calculation. It was done by the Centre for New Energy Technologies, but it was really on that methodology. The monitoring and evaluation framework, as I say, is now in place and has been for some time. We are working our way through that. We work with experts in the field on the evaluation of the program and indeed across the four key, I suppose, targets. One of those is jobs creation. The government indicated 5500 jobs over the life of the program. In 2020 - 2021 alone 4000 new jobs were created under the program. You have talked about the emissions reduction, which was a per annum emissions reduction across the national energy market, and we are certainly well on track to meeting the expectations there. In terms of capacity added to the system just through Solar Homes, it is now 1 gigawatt, which is effectively the equivalent of a large power station, across our 180 000 or so homes now.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. With these savings, though, they are focused on individual consumers, right?

Mr KR PAN: That is right.

Mr LIMBRICK: But those individual consumers taking up the option of adding solar and batteries add negative externalities to the network, don't they? And the Auditor-General also picked up on this, in that there were problems with integrating the power into the grid. I also understand that there have been—I am not sure whether in this financial year—negative pricing events. Were there many negative pricing events that happened during that year?

Mr KR PAN: We might deal with that in parts.

Mr BRADLEY: Yes. Do you want to do the first part, and then Andrew and I can deal with the rest?

Mr KR PAN: Yes. Obviously it is looking at individual homes and how much they are saving. As I said, those savings are exceeding, and indeed we find—

Mr LIMBRICK: But the integration increases costs for all consumers. So those consumers that are taking up the solar option are increasing costs on other consumers on the network, aren't they, overall?

Mr KR PAN: That is not the case. There is quite a detailed answer and explanation of why that is not the case, and indeed both on wholesale prices and retail prices over the life of the program they have actually reduced. There is a significant investment at the time—and I will hand over to my colleague to explain that. For Solar Homes in itself—a \$10 million investment in what is called the Grid of the Future, but it is part of a much broader package of investments into the grid itself.

Mr BRADLEY: Maybe if I could just supplement very briefly: that 1000 megawatts, a gigawatt, of capacity that has come on in solar is putting downward pressure on wholesale electricity costs, which are a significant portion of the energy bill for residential customers who do not have solar. So by depressing that overall wholesale price over the course of the year, that is one of the factors that is actually helping to save customers money, whether they have got the solar installed on their roof or not. There are definitely grid integration issues that have been planned as part of this exercise from the beginning, and indeed the network service providers, which are regulated independently by the Australian Energy Regulator, have put forward solar integration proposals that are about managing that and the hosting capacity of the network in a way that allows solar to be integrated and maximises output from the solar panels as they are installed. So there does need to be a managed approach to those grid issues, but the overall effect of solar is very good for the household installing it but also beneficial to the whole-of-system cost.

Mr LIMBRICK: And what about these negative pricing events; were there many of those that happened during last financial—because I know that there were a number of significant ones that have happened in recent times that caused major disruption, is my understanding.

Mr BRADLEY: Yes, we did see in September for two trading intervals in the wholesale electricity market for the first time—and they were in the middle of the day—that we had negative pricing for the whole of that period for the month of September, and that is an indication of the way the grid is being transformed by the very powerful impact of renewables coming into the market and putting downward pressure on those wholesale prices. The periods we are talking about are very brief periods in one month, but we do need to be prepared for

a system that is going to see and be able to manage the integration of variable renewable energy and in a way that makes sure that we have got all the benefits of affordability, the new capacity coming into the system, but also we have got a well-managed transition. One of the other things that we might recognise is that all the renewable energy that came into the system during the financial year in question today for the committee has actually contributed to how AEMO estimates the reliable capacity on the system at the time of the peak and increased that reliable capacity by an estimate of over 300 megawatts. So renewable energy is improving the reliability as well and putting downward pressure on costs in the system.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. When we have these negative events, though, who are we paying to take that electricity? Where does it go?

Mr BRADLEY: So the market as it settles and all of these market participants will be looking at their position over the course of a year rather than moment by moment trading intervals—when they look at the total economic outcome for them. But in those events where you have got negative wholesale prices, it is effectively a charge on those customers for generating into the grid. It is the market signalling to those generators that their output is not required at that particular interval, and that is what is taking us toward the need for a much more flexible, responsive energy system, which is why we have got such a significant investment going into things like batteries and technology which can be more responsive.

Mr LIMBRICK: But when you say that those generators have to pay to put things into the grid, that is not home consumers. They do not pay. So who is paying in that case, then?

Mr BRADLEY: It is consolidated in the overall settlement costs of the market. The Deputy Secretary might want to elaborate.

Ms HARRIS: That is right. So at the wholesale market end, so not where the household top PV situation is—

Mr LIMBRICK: That is someone else, yes.

Ms HARRIS: Sorry, yes. So in the wholesale market some generators when they put in their bids might choose to bid in negative prices, and if that is the way that the price settles for that period, what happens then is generators who are dispatched at that time will pay and that will go into the arrangements, and the people getting paid on the whole are retailers, basically, on behalf of customers. So at least those periods are good things for consumers. So that is at the wholesale market end. At the small-scale level, as all solar is exported into the grid the normal arrangements for feed-in tariffs apply to exports that are put into the grid. And so you can really think about the wholesale market—it is sort of net of whatever is going on at that local distribution level.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. One of the things that I think was spoken about in the Auditor-General's report was the possibility of smart inverters. My understanding of these is that they will actually switch off the connection to the grid when it is not required. My understanding is that the home might be generating electricity, but it is not going into the grid because it is being directed by someone controlling it to just switch off and disconnect from the grid to stop these grid stability issues. Has there been much work with the rollout of these, or are they not—

Mr BRADLEY: That is a really significant area where we have seen the Solar Homes program at scale actually changing the industry and influencing the standards that the industry adopts. I am just wondering if, Stan, you might want to comment on that.

Mr KR PAN: Sure. Victoria was one of the first jurisdictions effectively to roll out smart meters en masse, and we did that—

Mr BRADLEY: Sorry, smart inverters.

Mr KR PAN: Smart inverters. Did I not say that? Sorry.

Mr BRADLEY: Yes, you said 'smart meters'.

Mr LIMBRICK: Inverters, yes, not meters.

Mr KRPAN: Smart inverters—both probably—en masse. We did that through what is called the Solar Victoria Notice to Market. The Notice to Market has been a feature that we issue every year as part of the Solar Homes program. We fund effectively about 85 per cent of installations in Victoria, and the Notice to Market has since 2019 mandated under all of our programs that all retailers, all installers must use smart inverters. It is now part of the Australian Standard coming in in December. So effectively we are about a year and a half ahead of the mandatory requirement in regulation, which is one of the ways in which the Secretary has pointed out we have been able to influence the market.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. Secretary, deputy secretaries and department officials, thank you for being here today. I wanted to explore the power saving bonus and outcomes in that regard. In the questionnaire you reported that \$72.1 million was allocated to the program up to 30 June 2021. Could you explain how many people that money supported in the first half of the year?

Mr BRADLEY: Thank you very much for the question. I think probably the Deputy Secretary is ready to respond to that.

Ms HARRIS: Yes, if I may. Can I first just clarify if you are referring to the \$250 power saving bonus, the one that was announced as part of the budget that commenced on 1 February?

Ms TAYLOR: I believe so.

Ms HARRIS: The \$250 power saving bonus program was launched on 1 February 2021 and is going to be available until 31 January 2022. Since that program was first launched, more than 320 000 applications for the bonus payment have been submitted and of those applications more than 210 000 were received and paid between 1 February and 30 June 2021, representing over \$50 million in payments to eligible Victorians. For that program, applications can be submitted online through the Victorian Energy Compare website or you can do it over the phone or through one of our special community outreach program partners supporting the \$250 power saving bonus program. If you like, I can provide more information about that very particular part of the program, which is very important, the community outreach program.

Ms TAYLOR: Yes. I think that would be helpful.

Ms HARRIS: That is really to make sure that people who might have difficulties in terms of making their applications through the online system or might have other difficulties in terms of navigating the energy sector more generally can be provided some extra assistance through all of that. It provides an opportunity not just to get the \$250 but also to learn more about energy affordability and energy support programs that they might be eligible for. Since the program was first launched, community outreach partners have helped more than 33 000 Victorians submit a power saving bonus application either online, over the phone or in person, and of those applications, more than 17 000 were submitted in the five months of the 2020–21 financial year that the program was operating, representing more than \$4 million in payments to vulnerable Victorians.

The list of our current community outreach partners includes the Brotherhood of St Laurence, the Consumer Policy Research Centre, Good Shepherd Community House, State Trustees Ltd, Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria and the Consumer Action Law Centre. So this program is helping a number of different households who are currently eligible for the following concession programs: it helps people on the Centrelink pension concession, Department of Veterans Affairs pension concession, JobSeeker, youth allowance, Austudy or Abstudy, or if you hold a Department of Veterans Affairs gold card.

To make sure that people were aware that this program is around, there was an advertising campaign between February and June, which included the following activities: radio advertising targeting culturally and linguistically diverse groups, community radio advertising, regional press advertising, digital advertising, social media and search engine marketing as well. The second phase of that campaign is running between November, this month, and January 2022 to further promote the program and encourage eligible households to apply before the program shuts on 31 January 2022. In addition to providing the \$250 power saving bonus, it also really raises awareness of the Victorian Energy Compare website, because that is another key support program

of the government to make sure that people are aware of their energy concessions program and the utility relief grants program that they might otherwise be eligible for.

Ms TAYLOR: With regard to that website, the rationale of directing people to the website, for someone like me it makes sense, you go straight to websites, but what has really driven that decision-making?

Ms HARRIS: The Victorian Energy Compare website is a really important part of the system in that people can go on there, match their own household consumption data and work out what the best deal is for their circumstances, so to really be able to compare all the different offers that are in the market and be able to tell which one is the best for you. So typically the experience has been that households can save \$330 on energy bills annually by using that website and switching to a better plan than the one that they are on. So the \$250 of course is important in its own right as an assistance measure, but also being able to get onto that site, being able to compare and potentially make even bigger savings in terms of being able to get on a better plan for their circumstances.

Ms TAYLOR: Very good. Thank you for that. So now I would like to move on to Solar Homes, noting we have had a bit of a discussion, but I think there is more that we can explore there for the benefit of the committee. In the questionnaire it shows that a significant amount of funding has been put into this Solar Homes program in the last financial year. It notes there has been a steady demand for solar PV systems and an increasing demand in battery rebates. Could you please discuss the delivery of the various streams of the Solar Homes program and how Solar Victoria has been able to support consumers in the move to solar energy?

Mr KR PAN: Thank you. So it was a significant year. It is one of the record years, and we had our record month in this period, 2020–21, for Victorians taking up solar. It is quite surprising I think, given that it is countercyclical—most of us were under restrictions and there were real concerns about the economy—that Victorians have continued and indeed exceeded previous years in terms of solar take-up. So in terms of 2020–21, 64 953 rebate applications were supported and 64 559 solar systems installed, which as I say is a record year. It is a significant uplift on the year before. In terms of how we break that down, 61 473 of those were owner-occupied solar PV systems installed at people's homes; 1183 were on rental properties, which was again a significant uplift on the year before; 639 solar hot water applications; and 2841 battery rebate applications. As you indicated, there was a significant uplift in batteries, more than double the year before—so there was about a thousand the year before. So all up I think now, in terms of Solar Homes and the government's commitment, we are well on the way. Since the launch in 2018, 170 000 Victorians now benefit from solar PV under the program and 180 000 customers have been served with a rebate of some sort.

Ms TAYLOR: Very good. Now, you did mention before about the jobs that have been created through this, but it would also be good to explore I think the focus on training within the Solar Homes program, so if you could expand on that in particular, that would be helpful.

Mr KR PAN: Sure. So all up the government has invested \$11 million in Solar Homes and then the energy efficiency upgrades, which we call the Home Heating and Cooling Upgrades Program—so \$11 million towards training and workforce development. In 2020–21 we worked our way through—we mandated essentially—a safety training program, which includes white card construction induction training. It includes working safely at heights, which is a particular risk in the area, obviously, of working on people's roofs et cetera. There are three components of that training, and essentially the government paid for the entire training. We also mandated it for all participants in the program. So accredited installers get some training, but we mandated it for everybody. Some of the higher risk workers, if you like, are people just coming new into the job, and obviously with new jobs and that expansion you want to make sure that trades assistants and new apprentices et cetera are being picked up, and so we mandated that training for everybody. More than 3500 workers in Victoria have now been trained for free through that Working Safely in Solar training program. The training program continues. We are doing other work that by the end of this year will lead to more licensed electrical inspectors being authorised to undertake it. Victoria has an independent inspection regime, so that is an area of growth, if you like, and we are encouraging electricians to take up that qualification, which is obviously an expansion of their qualifications but also allows for safety to be assured—and also a real focus on both solar and women electricians.

Ms TAYLOR: Good to hear. Just thinking further on this issue of safety, I believe that in the questionnaire there is reference to the completion of a significant number of audits of systems by Solar Victoria. Could you expand on that, please?

Mr KR PAN: Sure. We run an audit program that is comprehensive. It is a risk-based audit program—5 per cent of systems. That was a commitment that was made at the time that Solar Homes was announced—5 per cent of systems installed—and in 2020–21 we met that target of 5 per cent. More than 6000 audits have now been undertaken as part of the program, and this is over and above the licensed electrical inspector training and requirements that are mandatory in Victoria before solar gets connected to the grid. Over and above that, there is 5 per cent that we audit. There is a comprehensive program of escalation and of rectification if there are any issues that are identified, and that has a self-improvement aspect to it. We work really closely with the industry on the targeting of the audit program to those higher risk jobs, and notwithstanding that, we have seen a reduction in the issues for rectification. So when we started about 3 per cent of systems required some sort of intervention because there was a safety concern. That is now 1 per cent or less.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. Now, there was some discussion earlier about how Solar Homes has reduced the cost of energy consumption. I do not want to duplicate that, but if there is anything further to add with regard to how grants have been able to lower energy bills for Victorian households, that could be useful, because I think that is what consumers want to know, that there is a good outcome.

Mr KR PAN: Yes. There are a number of programs across the portfolio, both in energy and obviously Solar Homes, that are seeking to address energy bills and particularly for those who are most vulnerable to energy bills or bill shock—for instance, if you have been, as many of us have with many of us being at home, using more power, and power particularly for heating or hot water et cetera. In Solar Homes, as I indicated, we are well above the \$890 per year savings that was modelled by the government. On that sample it was \$1073. But we also survey our customers regularly, and we get very good satisfaction. About 72 per cent of customers say that they would not have installed solar without the Solar Homes program, and indeed more than 70 per cent of them say that they are either meeting their expectations around bill savings or exceeding them. So even on the self-report, in addition to that study that I spoke of earlier, people are reporting really significant savings and that they are happy with their systems.

The Home Heating and Cooling Upgrades Program also supports people with funding of up to \$1700 to upgrade heating. That is a program that was announced in 2020–21 but launched formally on 2 August by the minister. We have around 3000 applicants have come through on that program, and we would expect them to save about \$300, depending on the type of heating that they are replacing, with a really highly efficient 4-star energy-efficient home heating and cooling system, which is a reverse-cycle air conditioner, basically.

Ms TAYLOR: Yes, really good.

Mr BRADLEY: With your agreement, I might just supplement around a couple of those other measures. In addition to those programs there is also the Victorian default offer that was introduced by the Victorian government that provided a default kind of fair cost for electricity bills for Victorians. We saw, again, that the 2020–21 Victorian default offer that was determined during the period remains about 9 per cent less for residential customers, about \$141 in savings per year, and about 8 per cent less for small business customers. And as I was mentioning earlier to Mr Limbrick, the implication of the government's initiatives to bring renewable energy into the market have contributed to wholesale costs that have fallen. So the wholesale cost of supply in the three months to 7 November 2019 was \$100 a megawatt hour. That cost has now fallen to be \$44 a megawatt hour on 7 November last year and \$29 a megawatt hour this year. So there have been really significant declines in wholesale costs that flow through to the customer bills and are reflected in that Victorian default offer that is set by the ESC.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. Now, on page 4 of the questionnaire it mentions the program is part of the Victorian government's agenda to tackle climate change and reduce carbon emissions. I note there was a little bit of discussion about that earlier, but can you please talk about that and what the program has already achieved in this space?

Mr KR PAN: In terms of climate change and emissions reduction, as you have heard, 360 000 tonnes per annum across the national energy market, and we would expect that the program will deliver on the expectations there. In terms of generating capacity, as I said, 1 gigawatt of capacity. So in terms of the transition to the Victorian renewable energy target, that is well on track. By way of announcements et cetera the government have indicated that 12.5 per cent of the 2025 target for renewable energy in the state would be met by the Solar Homes program. We expect that will be exceeded for a variety of reasons. One is the speed of

take-up, but the other is that the size of systems is getting bigger. We are expecting that that might be at about 15 per cent. About 1.3 per cent of energy supplied across Victoria currently is provided by customers of Solar Homes.

Ms TAYLOR: That is really good. I have probably got just enough time to move to recycling. In the questionnaire you have reported that significant milestones were achieved under the *Recycling Victoria* program in 2020–21. Can you please expand on these milestones and explain how the government funding of this policy has assisted to achieve them?

Mr BRADLEY: Karen, are you happy to answer the question?

Ms LAU: Yes, thank you. So this is part of the government's almost \$380 million investment in waste and recycling. The focus of efforts has been in the space of the transition towards standardised four-bin kerbside recycling; planning for the container deposit scheme; support for recycling and resource recovery infrastructure; a body of work on tackling issues around hazardous wastes; the Recycled First program, which gets recycled materials into the Big Build transport agenda; and the preparatory work for regulations that are coming to place a ban on a range of single-use plastics.

We have over the course of the year in question worked with councils on transition planning for the four-bin recycling system. This includes an initial \$10 000 payment to councils as well as funding agreements to enable and support councils with upgrades to transfer stations and to drop-off points in rural and regional Victoria as well as for the purchase of new bins and support for education and behaviour change that helps councils to work with their communities to transition to a new system.

The CHAIR: Thank you. The member's time has expired.

Ms LAU: Shall I pause, Chair?

The CHAIR: Yes, thank you. Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you. Secretary, with respect to Mr Hibbins's earlier questions about the deal with EnergyAustralia to keep Yallourn running until 2028, did the floods in June that hampered production at Yallourn trigger any part of that agreement, including any payments to EnergyAustralia?

Mr BRADLEY: No. The short answer is no. There have not been any payments to EnergyAustralia as a result of the floods in June. We have been working very closely with EnergyAustralia in relation to the significant risk that that flood event caused—the cracking of the Morwell River diversion. There was, as you would be aware, very significant cracking in the structure, and they are now in a process that has been authorised by government with regulatory approval to dry out the river, divert water around the diversion and allow them to get in and undertake that detailed inspection. That will see them develop the repair program for its repair. We are expecting that that is going to be a considerable process and take over 12 months to repair. But the government, through its agencies, has made resources available to work on the government side, both in our department, in DELWP—the earth resources regulator making resources available—but not a payment as such to EA.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Secretary. Given other adverse scenarios, like storms that damage power poles—I have got these amazing pictures of a power pole that broke in half in my electorate and caught fire as it immediately hit the ground, that does happen; and in 2018 we had very adverse outcomes of electrical elements and roadside vegetation—what level of certainty can you provide to this committee and all Victorians that the lights will stay on this summer and there will not be blackouts and people will not be without power for weeks on end?

Mr BRADLEY: All electricity systems manage risk and manage the risk of very significant extreme weather events, including storms, but also in our part of the world the risk of bushfire and the risk to energy reliability of other conditions, including extreme heat events, and so that is managed in a probabilistic way. The Australian Energy Market Operator produce both an electricity system statement of opportunities—it does forecasting for the summer ahead—and they assess if there is a need for any additional reserves for that coming summer. Their assessment is that they are not likely to see either of the reliability standards that are used to plan for summer preparation breached, that there is not an expectation that that will be breached in the coming

summer, and so their view at the moment is that, while the Yallourn situation is a concern, it is not causing them to have a need to bring on additional reserves in Victoria. If that was needed, that would be their role to do that.

Mrs McARTHUR: Well, Secretary, I do not know how many power poles have been repaired. Many were broken in this last round of storms. But, you know, if this incident had occurred in the summer, we would have had another bushfire out of control. So that is the interest I think Victorians would have in whether there is certainty in power supply.

But could I go now to perhaps Mr Jackson, the Chief Executive of Parks Victoria. Mr Jackson, am I right in noting that Parks Victoria's corporate plan for the period in question requires that the organisation, quote, 'support evidence-based park management and decision-making', would that be correct?

Mr JACKSON: Thanks for the question, Mrs McArthur. Where possible, yes.

Mrs McARTHUR: Great. And therefore do you share my concern then about the Victorian Auditor-General's recent criticism of parks in his report on *Managing Conflicts of Interest in Procurement*, this document? This report notes that parks repeatedly broke its own procurement rules in employing without due tendering process a single expert. Contracts were split to avoid rules, exemptions sought after the consultant had begun work and the claim made that there is no other expert qualified to make these assessments. Would you agree with the Auditor-General?

Mr JACKSON: Firstly, to put the context in, the procurement report from the Auditor-General was focusing on procurement from 2016 to 2020. I note that the report for the procurement you are talking about is into the Grampians-Gariwerd landscape management plan for rock art.

Mrs McARTHUR: Correct.

Mr JACKSON: Can I just go straight to my statement that I did include in VAGO's report, which I am sure you have made available. At point 1.3 VAGO concluded: nothing came to their attention to indicate self-interest unduly influenced the procurement processes they reviewed. The first thing to note in that response is that, one, the staff involved in that had no decision-making and/or decisions in the closing of rock climbing and/or the plan's procurement processes.

Mrs McARTHUR: So you reject the assertion that there was a personal relationship between the expert employed and the contract manager, as demonstrated in the VAGO report?

Mr JACKSON: No. What the VAGO report has said is there is no self-interest that influenced the outcomes. The outcome of a perceived conflict of interest could have been noted better in the report. We have acknowledged that in the Auditor's report. We have since retrained over 1000 staff in our organisation in perceived conflict of interest—noting that the reports found that those decisions, again carried forward, were not, from either the consultant or the employee, used in any decision-making. So yes, we acknowledge that we found the three Auditor-General's reports as active and correct, and we have reviewed those.

Mrs McARTHUR: So have you commissioned a review of that advice provided?

Mr JACKSON: No. My public statement, which I will refer to, says, on the grounds, that, again, there was no induced self-interest found by the employee in the decisions with that contractor. We also stand by the decision that that individual has over 40 years of expertise in mapping cultural heritage assets in the Grampians landscape, supported by Traditional Owners. So we stand by the decision that was the right process.

Mrs McARTHUR: So you will continue to not put those sorts of consultancies out to tender?

Mr JACKSON: No. If it was a different landscape approach across the estate or a different skill set, then we would follow the normal probity processes and procurement processes. So on that occasion, again, we will not need to review. My statement is quite clearly that the Auditor-General found no self-interest in the procurement, other than a perceived conflict of interest. We have addressed that, and we have no grounds to say that the report, which has no recommendations on closures and/or methods moving forward, other than identifying Traditional Owner assets in the landscape—so there is no need to have those reviewed.

Mrs McARTHUR: So you totally reject the criticism that Mr Gunn has been criticised in the past for mistaking tourist graffiti and vandalism for climbing impacts and on occasion even mistaking natural geology for climbers chalk, and given the catalogue of errors revealed in VAGO in procuring this expert advice you now do not intend to take any further action? You are going to continue as usual?

Mr JACKSON: What I will put on the statement is again that that report done by Mr Gunn has none of the findings or recommendations or anything to do with prior or future decisions other than identifying tangible assets within the Grampians area. So on those grounds we do not believe anybody of experience in that area—so there is no reason to change that report. I do note that, however, the perception that some chalk and/or other impacts on rock climbing or other bushwalking in the Grampians is subjective, and we have acknowledged that.

Mrs McARTHUR: Excellent. So how many deer, feral pigs, dogs and cats do you estimate there are in Victoria's parks?

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mrs McArthur, could you please relate your questions to the—

Mrs McARTHUR: In the last financial year.

Mr JACKSON: Sorry. I cannot comment on what the number is in Victoria's parks—

Mrs McARTHUR: No idea?

Mr JACKSON: and I would not know how to qualify that. So can you refine the question, please?

Mrs McARTHUR: How would you embark on a reduction program if you do not have an assessment of the numbers?

Mr JACKSON: Well, if you are referring to post bushfire, an example of that would be, as the Secretary and the department have already noted, we work closely with them on their biodiversity programs, threatened species location, the data we have in the systems, the affected areas from post bushfire and floods, and then we would tailor programs.

Mrs McARTHUR: I am not referring to bushfires in particular, just the numbers of these feral animals. You do not have an assessment of how many there are?

Mr JACKSON: No, I do not have an assessment of a total number, but we look at a risk-based approach across the state to make sure we target the most vulnerable and threatened areas. That is in partnership with many other partners, including Zoos Victoria, CMAs right through to the department, and then we apply that across multiple landscapes. So a risk-based approach, clearly evidenced-based decision-making, and where I mentioned before post bushfires, we target vulnerable areas to make sure we look after the last remaining special bits of Victoria that were not affected by the fires.

Mrs McARTHUR: Good. Further on from Mr O'Brien's earlier questions this morning about the numbers of the increased staff in offices compared to on the ground, the anecdotal evidence over not even the last financial year but earlier than that indicates from many second- and third-generation locals in the area that the sensitive areas, for example in the Barmah, are overrun with environmentally damaging weeds such as blackberry, horehound, St John's wort, khaki weed, dogrose, African boxthorn, arrowhead, desert ash, willow and also in particular the rush species that affects the moira grasslands. So how do you equate the on-the-ground anecdotal, experienced assessment with your work of reducing all these noxious weeds?

Mr JACKSON: What I will comment—and probably the locals or the feedback that you have I will not comment on that; I do not have the availability. But what we will say is in all of the landscapes across the state we have pest plant and animal or management plans in place. The Barmah protection flood plain plan looks at including pest animals, plants and feral animals in control programs, and that is in program. So we have continued over the last 12 months with significant pest plant and animal programs in the Barmah National Park, and we will continue to implement the plan until 2023. I am very comfortable that we either know or are addressing threats within the Barmah National Park and towards the significant Ramsar listing of that area.

Mrs McARTHUR: So you reject the notion that all these noxious weeds are out of control?

Mr JACKSON: No, I am not rejecting the notion. I am saying that we have got a targeted approach under that plan and we—

Mrs McARTHUR: The targeted approach does not seem to be working.

Mr JACKSON: Well, it is a large landscape. You know, it is over 60 000 hectares, so we need to make sure that we look at that program. So we do have an understanding—

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you. What is the current brumby population in the Alpine region?

Mr JACKSON: Well, I am not going to state a number, again, because there have been bushfires, but obviously in 2019 there was an aerial survey of the Alpine National Park—to be up to 5000 horses with a growth from 2300 horses, and that is consistent with New South Wales findings. Yes, we had the bushfires in 2019. I can confirm that post that we have done aerial surveys; we are doing them now. We were trying to do them last year at both Barmah and the Alpine National Park, but COVID restrictions put that on hold, so we are now trying to use military-grade FLIR imagery to fly the transects of the Alpine National Park and the Barmah National Park to get a better understanding of the horse numbers.

Mrs McARTHUR: So that figure you referred to would indicate that they have doubled in five years. That would be a 22 per cent increase every single year. Would that be credible when horses actually are lucky to produce one foal in a year?

Mr JACKSON: Well, I am not a horse expert, but what I can tell you is the Alpine intensive program that does that modelling is peer reviewed by international specialists, so independent review. That modelling is done consistently every five years. The growth from the modelling, which again is peer reviewed internationally—not by Parks Victoria or New South Wales parks—is saying that they have grown and doubled in those numbers. Those numbers have been done under intensive, consistent modelling, peer reviewed, and are now in place.

Mrs McARTHUR: So we are basing our eradication of the brumby population—and I understand you actually intend to eradicate the brumby population—on modelling.

Mr JACKSON: Well, modelling is a form of an appetite. But two things, if I can go straight to not just numbers. So if we take numbers out, horses are in the park, deer are in the park. We have an integrated pest management program for the Alpine National Park. So we are looking at all herbivores' impacts, horses. And you know on 1 November we released our new alpine management plan that will include targeting all species, including horses, in the Alpine National Park.

Mrs McARTHUR: There is also evidence that you have rejected the rehoming option. Many proposals put forward have been rejected. Is it cheaper to shoot from the air than rehome?

Mr JACKSON: If I can go to your first question, Mrs McArthur, we have not rejected any rehoming. There might be some people that are not qualified or do not meet the criteria or have pulled out since rehoming. And you might be talking about a rehoming program in Barmah, which I will speak about in a moment, but in between Barmah and the Alpine National Park in 2019 to 2020 we are now up to 300 people under EOIs. Thirty of those completed an EOI. We have got down to a rehoming ability of between 41 and 51 horses that are qualified.

Mrs McARTHUR: How many do you intend to eradicate then?

Mr JACKSON: Well, there are two things. Are we talking about Barmah or the Alpine National Park?

Mrs McARTHUR: Barmah and the Alpine.

Mr JACKSON: If I start with the Alpine National Park, we acknowledge in our plan that in the border between Kosciusko and the Alpine National Park there are thousands and thousands of feral horses. So the intention is not to eradicate horses. We are targeting, again, threatened areas for species protection and habitat post bushfires in other areas with a lack of rehoming. So it is a targeted approach in the Alpine National Park for protecting it for future generations.

Mrs McARTHUR: If you are eradicating them from the air in a forest area, the accuracy is very questionable, and the animal welfare issue is significant. You would agree with that, I am sure. And all veterinary experts do agree that you need to be up close and personal with a horse if you really want to shoot it dead. With regard to the carcasses, if you are shooting them from the air, how are they removed, given that they will then be fodder for other feral animals like dogs, cats and foxes?

Mr JACKSON: With regard to the first part of your question, the first priority in the Alpine National Park, if we are still talking about the Alpine National Park, is to rehome. So rehoming will still be an annualised process to get as many horses as we can to be rehomed. The second priority is ground shooting. Aerial shooting will only be used in extreme circumstances, and generally that is because it is in remote areas where there is no visitation, no access or you cannot even get in on the ground by foot.

The second part of your question would be we would be shooting like deer or other aerial programs, and again we have not shot any horses by air to date, despite what you might read in media. We will be leaving them in situ. That is no different to leaving deer or other species in situ. We do not shoot around or control any horse programs around visitor experience times, near waterways or other areas, and again, as you have mentioned, it is under very strict veterinary and/or ethical controls.

Mrs McARTHUR: And do you ensure that all public notification is provided if you are embarking on this form of eradication?

Mr JACKSON: It is an interesting question. Where possible in our programs we do, but unfortunately we are not going to and will continue to not talk about our eradication programs with horses, because unfortunately some members of the community are bringing death threats on our staff, including myself and contractors. So where possible we work with VicPol, and we work in remote areas. We will not publicise or talk about our horse programs unless we have to do that.

Mrs McARTHUR: So if the public are out in these public areas, they could be subject to injury if they are not notified about potential aerial shooting.

Mr JACKSON: It is a very good question. This is no different to our normal areal programs. Again it is done around times of less tourism impacts. First, the programs are done in very remote areas with low-impact use. We have a risk assessment process that is obtained by our staff to go through to make sure we do that. We then work with Victoria Police to make sure access to areas or other areas cannot be used. I am very comfortable we have an integrated, controlled, evidence-based, risk-based approach to all of our shooting programs, not just for the Alpine National Park.

Mrs McARTHUR: Can I just ask, Secretary, about cladding? Have you done any assessments or work in the last financial year on buildings in rural, regional Victoria—for instance, Geelong—in relation to cladding?

Mr BRADLEY: Thanks very much. To get the right answer on that, I might ask Dan O'Brien, the CEO of Cladding Safety Victoria, to join us at the table.

Mr Dan O'BRIEN: In Geelong specifically?

Mrs McARTHUR: Yes.

Mr Dan O'BRIEN: Thank you. There have been at least two private residential projects in Geelong.

Mrs McARTHUR: Any public?

Mr Dan O'BRIEN: Yes, Cardinia Park and—

Mrs McARTHUR: Yes. Been assessed and repaired?

Mr Dan O'BRIEN: They have been assessed and repaired.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. Thank you. No others in regional Victoria assessed and repaired?

Mr Dan O'BRIEN: No. There have been a number in, I think, some TAFE areas—Bendigo TAFE and others. Public buildings—there have been a fair number of regional public buildings that have been done.

Mrs McARTHUR: And completed?

Mr Dan O'BRIEN: Yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs McArthur. Your time has expired. I will pass the call to Mr Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, department Secretary, deputy secretaries and officials, for joining us today. I want to return to the topic of recycling in Victoria and the theme of questioning that Ms Taylor took you to, Secretary, in particular around kerbside transition. I note in my own community some of the kerbside diversion for noise walls on the Mordialloc Freeway is, if not nation leading, some of the most innovative things around the world in terms of recycling. But you have reported that the department has supported the development of local kerbside transition plans and developed a draft statewide transition plan. For the committee's benefit, can you please detail what engagement has taken place for the development of these plans?

Mr BRADLEY: Yes, thank you very much for the question. Certainly the kerbside reform has been one of the most significant elements of the *Recycling Victoria* agenda to establish for the first time across Victoria a common colour-coding scheme and a common approach to managing kerbside transition in a way that works sympathetically and in collaboration with councils. So since February 2020 DELWP has been working closely with councils to develop the draft transition plans and progress the distribution of funding, which is based on those draft plans. Those funding allocations are subject to change as councils work through their service model and make changes to their service model, but we will be providing extensive support to councils in the planning and delivery of new services in line with the requirements in the new legislation.

We will be engaging directly through meetings with individual councils as required. We are hosting a statewide council forum on transitional approaches and we are finding that that activity working collaboratively is helping to overcome shared challenges. Throughout 2020–21 we have conducted consultation with industry and councils to identify the potential opportunities to set standardised bin content lists, and we will consult more broadly in coming months and use that feedback to design the lists for the new waste and recycling streams that will be put forward in the future.

Mr RICHARDSON: I want to take you to the Recycling Victoria Infrastructure Fund. In the questionnaire provided to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee you stated that the first round of the fund projects were announced in January 2021. Can you please detail how these projects will deliver outcomes that will benefit all Victorians?

Mr BRADLEY: Thank you. I might see if the Deputy Secretary wants to speak to that answer.

Ms LAU: Certainly. In January 2021 successful applicants were announced for the first round of the Recycling Victoria Infrastructure Fund. These are projects that share joint commonwealth and state investments, half-half, in the order of just over \$40 million. There are four new glass-processing facilities as part of this investment—two in regional Victoria and two in Melbourne. They will increase Victoria's glass recovery capacity by more than 200 000 tonnes per annum. There are also three companies that will share in funding to increase processing capacity around problem plastics. That is in the order of 23 000 tonnes per annum. Then there is also a significant investment to increase the processing capacity of mixed kerbside paper in the order of 95 000 tonnes per annum. That is material that would otherwise be ending up in landfill. They are the projects to date that have been funded through the Recycling Victoria Infrastructure Fund.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you for that overview. I might go back to the questionnaire. It is reported that the Circular Economy Business Innovation Centre funded 12 projects in 2020–21 to address food waste, which is a significant issue for our communities. Can you please detail for the committee's benefit how the department has engaged with industry on the issues of food waste and any outcomes of that engagement?

Ms LAU: We have been working really closely with Sustainability Victoria to lead the work around CEBIC. Yes, there are 12 projects there that have been committed to to date. The focus very much has been on recycled food waste, looking at solutions to reduce that by the order of 50 280 tonnes per annum. We anticipate that this

will contribute around 4.2 per cent towards Victoria's target to halve food waste by 2030. There is also work underway through those 12 projects to identify, to develop and to trial solutions for an additional up to 693 000 tonnes of food waste each year. These are projects that are underway. There is also an industry outreach element in the first year of CEBIC operations. There is work there for thought leadership events that bring together leading circular economy experts to really get into the challenges and opportunities for business through the circular economy; a number of workshops and round tables with business, industry bodies, research organisations and governments for a range of solutions; and a number of publications that have come out of that. There is also one-on-one support through CEBIC and its team to over 100 businesses. In the end our circular economy projects will be a feature of government investment and council investment, bringing industry, academia and science to the table, and that is what CEBIC is about.

Mr RICHARDSON: Fantastic. Thank you for that overview and that evidence. Secretary, I want to just take you to the topic of suburban parks and the very important program, and on page 32 of the questionnaire you reference the suburban parks program. I am wondering if you can elaborate on what the program has achieved in the last financial year and how you have delivered on construction and upgrades of parklands across the state, particularly acknowledging how significant open spaces have been to mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic.

Mr BRADLEY: Thank you very much. Again, this sits in Karen's area, so if Karen is happy to address that, I will refer to her.

Ms LAU: Yes, happy to, Secretary. The suburban parks program is a \$154 million program covering off on a commitment to create 6500 hectares of new and upgraded parks, many of which are around Melbourne's growing suburbs. Incidentally, recent restrictions, pandemics and needing to stay close to home have really brought home the importance of having local parks. The program covers more than 100 parkland projects, including 15 new and improved large suburban parks, 15 off-leash dog parks, 29 new pocket parks, eight new trails and the revitalisation of 41 existing local parks announced as part of the \$10 million parks revitalisation grants program. Most of these parks will be delivered in 2022, noting that funding for these extends into the 2023 year, and then there has been supplementary investment in another 17 off-leash dog parks, with \$2.5 million worth of funding through the building works package. In terms of the budget year under discussion today, works completed in the year 2020–21 include dog parks in Cranbourne East, Rowville, Belmont, Carrum Downs, Eynesbury, Pakenham, Mill Park, Kilmore, Dandenong North, Warracknabeal, Ararat, Portland and Yarragon.

There have been a number of cultural value studies undertaken. These are really critical in informing public parkland planning. Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation has led that work with respect to Jacksons Creek regional parklands, and the Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation in relation to the Seaford wetlands rejuvenation project. There has also been substantial planning, design and engagement for a raft of proposed parks and trails. There has been pretty extensive community engagement around that work, and Parks Victoria has been conducting over the course of the budget year in question the community consultation for projects to refresh parklands for the Werribee River and Toolern Creek regional parks, upgrades to the Plenty River Trail and Wattle Park, as well as the first stage of consultations for three new parks at Kororoit Creek, Clyde and Werribee township. We have also been working with landowners in affected areas where there is acquisition anticipated. There has been landowner engagement in particular for acquisition for the three new parks around Kororoit Creek, Clyde and Werribee township. There has also been a range of other community engagement events around the design, in particular of the dog parks and the pocket parks.

With all of this work underway we are anticipating new community infrastructure across a large suite of parks, walking trails, cycling trails, signage, lighting, viewing areas, seating, play areas, picnics and of course purpose-built dog infrastructure for all those COVID puppies and those other persons' best friends.

Mr RICHARDSON: And we know important to mental health and wellbeing our pets are, particularly again during the pandemic. I am wondering, for the committee's benefit—it has been of interest to members, the progress of the dog parks and their construction across the state—if you have got an update for the committee.

Ms LAU: Sure. Off-leash dog parks—the minister announced funding through round one in May of 2020 for nine new dog park projects. They include dog parks at Cairnlea, Cranbourne East, Mickleham, Carrum, Rowville, Maribyrnong, Eltham North, Werribee and South Yarra. There is a second round that has subsequently been announced for another six off-leash dog parks, and they are to be located at Elwood, Ringwood North, Balwyn North, Mitcham, Essendon West and Reservoir West.

Mr RICHARDSON: Just finally, obviously the pocket parks and the local open spaces have been really important during this time as well. Are you able to elaborate on any initiatives in the past year that have ensured Victorians have access to open space locally?

Ms LAU: In relation to pocket parks, over the course of the budget year in question the first 15 were announced. The work for those is currently underway or in some instances complete. We have pocket parks at South Melbourne, St Kilda, Bentleigh, Moorabbin, Brunswick, Caulfield South, Flemington, Sunshine West, Ivanhoe, Preston, Oakleigh, two in Collingwood and one in Yarraville as part of round one. The round two subsequent pocket parks to come will be located in Prahran, Eltham, Montmorency, Oakleigh South, Footscray, Dandenong, Glenroy, North Melbourne, Frankston, Sunshine North, Notting Hill, Moonee Ponds, St Albans and Strathmore.

Mr RICHARDSON: Fantastic.

Mr D O'BRIEN: A lot of Melbourne parks, Tim.

Mr RICHARDSON: Yes, well, get on board, Danny. Get on board.

The CHAIR: Come visit Glenroy.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you very much, Deputy Secretary, for that evidence. Can I take you, Secretary, to the implementation of the *Water for Victoria* strategy. In particular page 19 of the department's 2020–21 annual report notes your area is charged with delivering *Water for Victoria*, and there are a number of references to progress throughout the report. Are you able, for the committee's benefit, to update us on what kind of approach you take to implementing this strategy?

Mr BRADLEY: Yes. Thank you very much. It has been a very busy year of progress, and I mentioned as my part of my opening comments the significant completion of that Connections Project, the most significant project of its kind anywhere in Australia. The Deputy Secretary, though, can take us through the detail of progress in the year.

Ms VAUGHAN: Thanks, Secretary, and thank you very much, Mr Richardson, for the question. *Water for Victoria* is actually a really broad policy platform, and it deals with, you know, everything from environment and traditional owners through to economic development and infrastructure. So it is a really broad policy program in order to kind of build where we want to go as a community.

We have really focused on the overarching challenge of water management. That is no surprise to you; you would have heard it a lot about the impacts of climate change and also of an increasing population. Those two drivers together really mean that there will be less water in the future, so we are looking for those key directions in order to manage water better. That includes things like recognising Aboriginal values in water and also, as I spoke about earlier today, enhancing our water grid so that we are able to move water around to the parts of the state as needed. *Water for Victoria* will continue to really guide our work programs throughout the whole sector.

There is a lot of collaboration between the partners that we actually use on a daily basis, but also into how we develop our policies for water management. That includes our water corporations, our catchment management authorities, the Victorian Environmental Water Holder and also traditional owner groups, local governments, and community partners. A real key part for the successful development and delivery of the program is that those partnerships continue to drive that implementation, and we track that.

Our approach really focuses on strengthening local relationships, you know, a really important part of the development of regional Victoria. Water is central to that, so we really want to put community at the centre of our decision-making in how we go about our water planning. We have got a really strong system of planning,

you know, various reports and strategies that come out, but also really strong governance across the top, and then we also report back regularly on our progress as well to make sure we are on track with the actions under Water for Victoria.

Mr RICHARDSON: In covering off on that topic, what do you see as some of the broader outcomes achieved for the community in delivering that strategy and some of the measurables and deliverables in that space?

Ms VAUGHAN: I should have actually said that this is not a new strategy. It was actually released in 2016, but because of the broad nature of it we are continuing to roll it out. In terms of actions, as of 30 June 2021 we had delivered 43 of the 69 actions. They were complete, and work is well and truly underway on the remaining 26 actions. We are really focused on that delivery and making sure we get that done. In terms of delivery as well, I will just also highlight that—I referred to governance before—we have a very strong project control board across the top where we quarterly track how we are actually going against the delivery of those actions and making the appropriate tweaks as we go. That reporting on Water for Victoria actions is on our website, so you can see our progress in that.

We have been really focused on the challenges of climate change recently. Well, not recently—it has been a longstanding thing in Victoria. And so one of the highlights that I really wanted to go through that we have achieved over the past few years is an integrated suite of programs that support waterway and catchment management health. So a really fundamental, important part to having a healthy environment, you know, it really helps to ensure we have good socio-economic outcomes as well. And so out of that we saw 9400 hectares of improved vegetation alongside priority waterways. We saw 90 per cent of environmental water actions achieved at planned sites. We have 3700 hectares of catchment area that is under active stewardship for catchment health and resilience, and on-ground works and watering programs were undertaken across 300 river reaches and wetlands across the state. So, you know, quite a significant program there.

I referred to the economic outcomes there. The waterway health programs are also estimated to provide around about 350 jobs in 2020–21 alone across Victoria, and that is both within regional agencies but also there is the flow-on employment into local contracting and consulting businesses as well.

Mr RICHARDSON: Fantastic. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. And that concludes the time we have set aside for consideration of the financial outcomes with you today. Thank you very much for appearing before the committee and for your evidence. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the request. We thank you for the time.

The committee will take a 1-hour break and resume with the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing this afternoon. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.