

PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 4 - REGIONAL NSW

Tuesday 25 February 2025

Examination of proposed expenditure for the portfolio areas

AGRICULTURE, REGIONAL NEW SOUTH WALES, WESTERN NEW SOUTH WALES

CORRECTED

The Committee met at 9:15.

MEMBERS

The Hon. Mark Banasiak (Chair)

The Hon. Scott Barrett

The Hon. Greg Donnelly

Ms Cate Faehrmann

The Hon. Wes Fang

Ms Sue Higginson

The Hon. Emma Hurst (Deputy Chair)

The Hon. Stephen Lawrence

The Hon. Nichole Overall

The Hon. Peter Primrose

PRESENT

The Hon. Tara Moriarty, *Minister for Agriculture, Minister for Regional New South Wales, and Minister for Western New South Wales*

CORRECTIONS TO TRANSCRIPT OF COMMITTEE PROCEEDINGS

Corrections should be marked on a photocopy of the proof and forwarded to:

**Budget Estimates secretariat
Room 812
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000**

The CHAIR: Welcome to the first hearing of the Portfolio Committee No. 4 - Regional NSW additional round of inquiry into budget estimates 2024-2025. I acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to Elders past and present, and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of New South Wales. I also acknowledge and pay my respect to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us today. My name is Mark Banasiak. I am the Chair of the Committee. I welcome Minister Moriarty and accompanying officials to this hearing. Today the Committee will examine the proposed expenditure for the portfolios of Agriculture, Regional New South Wales, and Western New South Wales.

I ask everyone in the room to please turn their mobile phones to silent. Parliamentary privilege applies to witnesses in relation to the evidence they give today. However, it does not apply to what witnesses say outside of the hearing, so I urge witnesses to be careful about making comments to the media or to others after completing their evidence. In addition, the Legislative Council has adopted rules to provide procedural fairness for inquiry participants. I encourage Committee members and witnesses to be mindful of these procedures. I welcome and thank Minister Moriarty for making the time to give evidence. I remind you that you do not need to be sworn as you have already sworn an oath to your office as a member of Parliament. I also remind all other witnesses that they do not need to be sworn as they have already been sworn before this Committee during this inquiry.

Mr STEVE ORR, Secretary, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, on former affirmation

Mr JAMES BOLTON, Deputy Secretary, Regional Development and Delivery, and Chief Executive, Regional Growth NSW Development Corporation, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, on former affirmation

Ms RACHEL CONNELL, Deputy Secretary, Agriculture and Biosecurity, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, on former affirmation

Mr SEAN SLOAN, Deputy Secretary, Fisheries and Forestry, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, on former affirmation

Mr ANSHUL CHAUDHARY, Chief Executive Officer, Forestry Corporation of NSW, on former affirmation

Ms KATE LORIMER-WARD, Chief Executive Officer, Local Land Services, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, on former affirmation

The CHAIR: Today's hearing will be conducted from 9.15 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. We are joined by the Minister for the morning session from 9.15 a.m. to 1.00 p.m., with a 15-minute break at 11.00 a.m. In the afternoon we will hear from departmental witnesses from 2.00 p.m. to 5.30 p.m., with a 15-minute break at 3.30 p.m. During these sessions there will be questions from the Opposition and crossbench members only, and then 15 minutes allocated for Government questions at 10.45 a.m., 12.45 p.m. and 5.15 p.m. This time around we will begin with questions from the crossbench.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Good morning, Minister. I want to start by talking about shark nets. It would obviously come as no surprise that we talk about shark nets today. Over the past few months you've conducted consultation with coastal councils about the ongoing use of shark nets in the communities. Can you run me through what the next steps will be from you and your office around Labor's election commitment on the nets and removing the nets?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Sure. Good morning, everybody. It's nice to be back here for supplementary Budget Estimates. I acknowledge there is a lot of interest in shark nets on our beaches in New South Wales. We have been doing quite a bit of consultation and further study on how the new technology that we have been using over the last couple of years is working. I've talked a lot about the fact that the new technology seems to be a good thing to be using to monitor for sharks and to provide protection for swimmers, which is the priority. We're trialling a whole range of that again over this summer period, which includes the drones and the SMART drumlines that have been trialled for a couple of years, as people would be aware. We have made the decision to take the nets out a month early this year. They used to be in until the end of April; they will now come out at the end of March, which is the first time that has ever happened. That was based on advice about turtles and when turtles are coming in.

We have also begun the first trial, I think, in Australia, of lights that we have put onto nets to act as a deterrent for turtles and other marine life, to stop them coming close to the nets. I'll be looking forward to getting information about how those things work and the broader technology that we're using over the course of the summer. As I have indicated a lot about this, the new tech is very expensive, so we have to make sure that it's working and doing the job that we need it to do. We will continue that trial until the end of this season. The Government will then consider the evidence that comes from that, as we did last year. I'm happy to keep the public in the loop about those considerations.

In relation to consultation, we did say that we would consult with local councils over the course of this summer. We've done that. We got feedback from councils across the State. As expected, there are mixed views, just like there is in the community. There is feedback that people don't want the nets on their beaches. However, that feedback isn't a full stop. What a lot of councils have told us is they want more of the tech. So in order for us to make proper decisions about what to do going forward, I'll have to make some assessments at the end of the summer period. Again, I'm happy to be transparent about all of that. The priority is keeping people safe and making sure the things that we're trialling and using are working.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: So the next steps after that consultation is to see where that research is up to on the new tech and how that has been working before any decision is made?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: That's partially it. We got feedback from councils to get an idea of what local communities wanted on their beaches, but of course it's not automatic—ideally we're going to get to local decision-making, but it's not completely up to local councils, because they're not part of the program. They're not paying for the program. So the Government wanted to get feedback, which we've done, and that will absolutely

be considered, but along with all of the other things that we're doing, and the new things that we're trying this year, and budget considerations.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Just on what you said about it's not entirely a council decision, regarding the future of nets, will it be a State decision in regard to the next season or will you be looking at allowing councils to make their own decisions, or will it be a combination of both?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We'll have to give some consideration to that. The Government hasn't made a decision about next season, so we'll work through that. We wanted to do the consultation post local government elections, to get feedback. We've done that. It will absolutely be part of the consideration. It won't be the only consideration, and we'll make a decision at the end of this summer period when we have more information.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: What is the timeline around that decision? Are we going to see some steps forward from your department soon?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: You have seen steps forward. We're bringing the nets out a month early, which is a really significant thing to do. It's the first time they've come out a month early in decades.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I meant further steps forward. Will we be seeing some further decisions, more decisions soon, at the end of this netting season?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'll need to assess the information based on what we've been trying this summer. I certainly appreciate the question, and I know there's a lot of interest and mixed views. There are people who really want the nets and people who don't want the nets, but I'm going to look at the results of how the new tech is working, how the lights are working—all of those things—and the Government will make further decisions as we go. I'll keep people in the loop, but I can't give you a hard and fast date for it.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: In regard to some of that research and those pieces looking into the effectiveness, particularly of the nets, I note that the New South Wales Fisheries Scientific Committee and the Threatened Species Scientific Committee have expressed their concerns that shark nets are being used despite evidence that they're ineffective and there is more success with the deployment of modern alternatives. The Fisheries Scientific Committee said on 26 September 2024 that they're disappointed that a decision was made to continue with the net program for the previous season, despite substantial evidence and growing support from multiple councils, NGOs and the community for their removal, and now there's a range of effective and sophisticated technologies that actually minimise the impacts on threatened species and also protect human life. How will that scientific advice be considered and taken into account in your decision around the continuation of nets in New South Wales?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I will consider that advice, like I'll consider all of the feedback that we've been getting. The Government will consider all of that feedback. I note the views of that committee. I note the views of people across the community about this. I take all of that very seriously. We're making decisions about keeping people safe and what technology works before we invest in it. There's the trial this year of doing more to protect marine life at the same time as protecting swimmers. I'll factor all of that in when we're considering what to do going forward.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Picking up on what you said around making sure that we're focusing on human safety, I understand that you're saying that's your priority. A study was released in November last year. I believe there were quite a few authors on that paper from your department, which is great. It showed that since 2000 there is no difference in the risk of a shark interaction occurring at a beach with a shark net versus one without. There were even several years when the risk of shark interaction was higher when a shark net was used. Again, given that you're talking about human safety as the priority, is that the type of evidence that you'll be taking into account in your decision? We've got mounting evidence that the alternatives—and I understand that they're expensive—are protecting human life. There is a lot of mounting evidence that nets are not protecting human life.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: There's also evidence that they are, because they have protected people at beaches for decades. I will factor all of these things in. It's why we're trialling all of this new technology.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Sorry, Minister, can I interrupt? This is a study that was released last year. As I said, there are several authors on this study from your department. They have assessed the use of nets since 2000 and have found that there is no difference. In fact, sometimes shark interactions were higher when a shark net was used. Where is this alternative research that you talk about? Why are we hearing from the department that there is no evidence since 2000 that they have been effective at that when you're suggesting there is evidence that suggests the opposite?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: The nets have been in for decades.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I understand that they've been in for decades. But the research is saying they're not effective.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: As I said, there are a lot of views on this. I respect that there are a lot of views on it.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I'm not talking about views. I understand there are community views.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm going to answer the question.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I just want to talk about the research.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I appreciate that there's a lot of interest in it. There are a lot of views on this. They've been in for decades and they have provided a service. We are trialling a whole range of new things to hopefully be able to move into the future. I'm not going to make a decision on a whim about something that has been in place for decades. We are properly looking at it and doing some new things this summer. I want to see how that works. The Government will then make some further decision about it.

The CHAIR: Minister, could I go to the Dubbo sports hub? Obviously it has been a point of interest in parliamentary sittings over the past couple of weeks. My knowledge is that on 26 September 2024, PCYC submitted a 78-page business case for the alternative location, which is seven minutes from the original site, confirming the project could proceed within the existing budget. That proposal was supported by the New South Wales Office of Sport. Why did you reject that variation when it seems the Office of Sport had supported it?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm happy to answer questions about this. It has been a topic of conversation in Parliament. I have answered questions about the fact that the advice I received was that this wasn't a variation request. I know people think that it was a variation request. From memory, there have been three or four variation requests. I'll check the details on that. This project has supposedly been in the works for nearly seven years and there is still no location. There wasn't a proper plan in place to deliver it. Every six months for seven years there seemed to have been more money allocated to it by the previous Government but still no plan and no delivery of the project.

I would prefer it if there was a sports hub in Dubbo built by the previous Government, as they promised some years ago. But they didn't deliver it. What I received was a request for essentially a new project and got advice that it wasn't a variation to the previous project; it was an application for a new project. That's okay. People are entitled to make applications for projects around New South Wales, but they have to be considered in the proper way. In this case, any new proposition here will have to be considered through the Government's processes.

The CHAIR: I didn't want to stop you there, but who did you receive the advice from that this wasn't a variation but a new project? Was that someone from within your department that was overseeing the tenders?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Yes, my department.

The CHAIR: When was that advice received, just so we can get some dates around this?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It would be at some point last year. Someone might be able to tell me the exact date, or I can take the dates on notice. I'm thinking it was around October last year. I'm happy to provide more specific—

The CHAIR: I'm aware of a document that suggests that the project was rejected around 30 October, with the suggestion to find an alternative site that would be within budget. I believe, Mr Bolton, that you signed off on that document. Does that bring the date a bit more into focus as to when it might have been? Are you aware of a document?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Are you asking me or James?

The CHAIR: You first, and then maybe James can comment as to that document that I am referring to.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: What is in my memory is around October last year, so that sounds about right. That's when this was being considered, when a variation request came through. But I received advice that it was a new project. Again, that's okay. We work closely with the PCYC. I did some work with them last week with some funding for a football program with Brad Fittler, so we work closely with the PCYC. They're entitled to make an application for this project or any other project, but the advice that I got was that this was a proposal for a new project.

I'm happy to talk people through the timeline for the past almost seven years about the previous Government's failure to deliver this project. I would have preferred that it was built. I would have preferred that people were playing basketball in it right now, but the previous Government misled the community and didn't

have a place to put this thing. Late last year there was a proposal for a new project. If people want to make an application for a new project, it'll be considered as a new project. That's proper process. I'm not going to lie to the community. The community of Dubbo is right to be disappointed that this project wasn't delivered after they were promised it by the previous Government for two terms.

The CHAIR: Mr Bolton, just so we can get the latter end of the timeline right, on 30 October you signed off on a recommendation that the project not proceed as planned. It was already signed by four other people on 22 October. The recommendation was that "no tender be accepted for the contract for Dubbo indoor multi-sport facility, PCYC. Insufficient funds are available for the project to proceed in its current form. The client should review their operational requirements for a viable facility, revisit the project's scope and consider all available options, including alternative sites to progress that project". That doesn't marry up with the timeline that they submitted a variation request in September and you have now rejected a proposal in October, saying that they should look at an alternative site. Were you considering the variation at that point, with that document that you signed, or were you considering the pre-existing project? What advice did you then provide to the Minister about the notion of an alternative site?

JAMES BOLTON: There are a couple of things being considered here. One is the tenders through the function of Public Works providing advice. That's separate to the matter and the recommendation that has gone to the Minister around the request from the Office of Sport to consider a new proposal, which occurred in late October. The request came to the department in late October, or that October sort of time frame. I'll get specific dates on notice.

The CHAIR: But you had already signed off in October, saying, "Go find an alternative site."

JAMES BOLTON: Which is a separate matter to the recommendation to the Minister. The consideration to the Minister was around the funding arrangement, and then that consideration was put on the Minister's desk or went to the Minister's office in late November, from memory. But, once again—

The CHAIR: You say it's separate, but it's the same project and it's all connected. Did you tell the Minister that there was this separate process in Public Works where you had already made a decision that they should go and look at an alternative site? I'm trying to understand what was in front of the Minister when she made this decision to reject the current proposal in this form. Was she aware of the Public Works tender document? Had you made her aware of that?

JAMES BOLTON: The Minister was aware of the information around the cost increases to the proposal, the submissions that were received for the tender and our decision to not proceed on that site.

The CHAIR: Minister, were you aware of this tender document that had already gone out to PCYC? I'm assuming it had been decided on 30 October when they said, "Go look at an alternative site," but they had already submitted an alternative site.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I was aware, in general terms, about the tender process for trying to make this project work. I was also aware that the likely cost blowouts for any variation or any new version of this, seven years in, was likely to equal \$70 million. This thing started at \$4 million. Perhaps if it had been built at the beginning, when it was originally promised for \$4 million, we wouldn't have this situation.

The CHAIR: What do the PCYC and the people of Dubbo need to do to get this back on track? My understanding is that the PCYC have put a flag in the sand and they have made an offer to purchase the site or they have purchased the alternative site. What else do you need from them to make sure that this money stays in Dubbo and goes towards those sporting facilities? Forget the Charles Sturt site; that's obviously dead in the water. What do we need to do to make sure that Dubbo gets that sporting facility? From your end, what do you need from the PCYC in Dubbo?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It's a new proposal at this point. What I'm aware of is that, post the decision—so when we said this is something that, based on its history, the new information from last year and it being a new project, can't continue as it did for 6½ years at that point—there wasn't \$70 million to allocate to a new proposal. The decision was made. I don't know this to be true but I understand that some months later, in January, the PCYC made a private decision to purchase a private business. That's a matter for the PCYC.

The CHAIR: Do you plan to hold off on reallocating that money so they can put a new proposal forward, or have you planned to reallocate that money somewhere else within Dubbo?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It's not as straightforward as that. This money isn't on hold for this project; the decision has been made. But the PCYC, like any other organisation in New South Wales, are entitled to apply for or work with the Government on a new concept, because they have purchased a new building—well, it's actually an old building—Sportsworld, as I understand it. Again, I don't know that to be true, but that's what

I'm told. If there is a request from the PCYC to do anything with that building, we will have to consider it, like we would any other proposal that is before government. We've made a really big point of having proper processes in place, particularly in my area of responsibility, because the previous Government didn't, and money was wasted and money was misspent. I've got proper processes in place. It was a key election commitment, for us, to have better processes in place for how these kinds of decisions are made. Proposals like this new proposal are able to be considered, but I can't give a guarantee.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, welcome to budget estimates. The first thing I want to touch on is that I was in Kempsey on Sunday to hear from approximately 700 locals on the issue of regional crime. Neither you nor any of your ministerial colleagues were there. Why didn't you attend so that you could hear from locals directly?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I have been to Kempsey. I was asked about this last week in the Parliament, and I indicated that I have been to Kempsey as the Minister for Regional New South Wales. I didn't attend this particular event over the weekend, but I've seen reports about it. Regional crime is something that the Government is taking very seriously across the board, just as people would expect. The Government has taken a number of steps to tighten conditions, particularly in relation to bail and other issues, to try to address it. But we know this is a long-term issue that needs proper consideration and well-considered plans to support communities.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm going to touch on some of those issues a little bit later, but my colleague Nichole Overall invited you to spend a night in Kempsey. Are you planning on spending a night in Kempsey any time soon?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I might. I've spent many nights in regional New South Wales. In fact, I live in regional New South Wales. I travel a lot, as is well established in this place. I'd be very happy to work with the community of Kempsey, just as I am all regional communities.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'll take that as a commitment that you will spend a night in Kempsey in the next, say, month.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No, Mr Fang. You don't control my movements. I'll give consideration—

The Hon. WES FANG: No, but I think the people of Kempsey would like to hear from you.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Point of order—

The CHAIR: I'll hear the point of order.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I just think that it's not really—

The Hon. WES FANG: Don't waste time, Sue. Come on.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I think that it is not the business of the Committee and I think that it's not really bringing the Committee into the repute that it should to be discussing where the Minister actually spends her nights sleeping.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Indeed.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: It's beyond the realm of the inquiry, and the Minister can sleep where she chooses.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Indeed.

The CHAIR: We have wide latitude to ask questions in this place. It can be around travel and it can be around ministerial diaries, but perhaps it should not be phrased in the sense of where the Minister is staying at night. We are still entitled to some level of privacy but, in terms of ministerial movements, that is within the scope of this estimates.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'll move on. Minister, you said in one of your first answers that you had spent some time in Kempsey. When was that? When was the last time that you were actually in Kempsey?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'll have to check my diary. I believe I was there last year. I met with the land council. I'm sure it would be in my diary disclosures, but I'm happy to check the specific time and come back.

The Hon. WES FANG: By leave, I table the Minister's diary disclosures.

Document tabled.

The CHAIR: Have you got a copy for the Minister?

The Hon. WES FANG: There are 10 copies there. Minister, can you highlight in your diary disclosures when you were last in Kempsey?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'll have to check the details of the date. Like I said, I'll take on notice the specific time that I was there.

The Hon. WES FANG: Do you agree that that's a copy of your diary disclosures from the website?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm sure it is, and I've said I'll take the date on notice, Mr Fang.

The Hon. WES FANG: By leave, I table a post from the Minister's Facebook page.

Document tabled.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, this is off your Facebook page. Could you indicate to me if it is off your Facebook page and what it is?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I was visiting the building. I'll check the details of the paperwork. The building had been refurbished, so I was there. In fact, if we are technically looking at the details, it wasn't for a meeting, which is what gets disclosed. But, again, it's on my page here; I'm open about my visits.

The Hon. WES FANG: No, Minister—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: This is a building that was refurbished—

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm going to interrupt there, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'd like to be able to answer the questions.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, you indicated to me—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm trying to be open and transparent. I'm not going to get cut off mid-sentence for the whole hearing.

The Hon. WES FANG: You indicated to me that I should check your diary disclosures to see when you were last in Kempsey.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Sure.

The Hon. WES FANG: That was the answer you gave me. Minister, I've provided you with your diary disclosures and I've now provided you with a copy of your Facebook post. Can you please indicate to me where in your diary disclosures, which you now have in front of you, this meeting was disclosed?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Sure. Mr Fang, as I was saying before you interrupted me, I was there to look at the building that had been refurbished. If you want to get into what's technically classified as a meeting for disclosures, that's fine. I have been transparent about it because, as you pointed out, it's on my social media. I was there to see the work that had been done on the building, through government funds, and to inspect. It was a lovely piece of work. The building looks amazing. That's the truth of it.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, thank you for that answer. However, that doesn't provide me any clarity as to why, in your diary disclosures, this meeting is not listed.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It literally does. I was there to inspect the building.

The Hon. WES FANG: Why wasn't it listed in your diary disclosures?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Because they're about meetings, and again we can have a technical discussion about all of this, which I don't think serves the interests—

The Hon. WES FANG: No. I don't think you need to have a technical discussion with me.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm just not going to be interrupted all morning, Mr Fang.

The Hon. WES FANG: You need to have a technical discussion with the Premier's Department as to why your diary disclosures are not up to date.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm here to answer questions.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Point of order: The Hon. Wes Fang is well schooled in budget estimates hearings and the way they operate.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm just a humble bloke from Wagga.

The CHAIR: Drummoyne.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Questions are followed by answers to enable the Minister to answer. To cut in and effectively stop the Minister is unparliamentary, and I'd ask you to call him to order.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: To the point of order: Contrary to the procedural fairness resolution of the House, the Minister should be allowed to answer her question, subject to the direction of the Chair.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Hear, hear!

The Hon. WES FANG: To the point of order—

The CHAIR: I was going to rule and let you move on, but okay.

The Hon. WES FANG: I just want to make the point because it is going to be important as we move forward. Budget estimates is supposed to be robust. Ultimately—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Good point of order.

The Hon. WES FANG: Ms Sue Higginson needs to be quiet because it's not helping her cause and it's only going to occur during her questioning. We are supposed to be robust in questioning. I am not being aggressive. I'm not being anything other than—

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: You are talking over the Minister.

The Hon. WES FANG: —trying to elucidate an answer from the Minister as to why she hasn't disclosed.

The CHAIR: Would you like me to rule so you can get on with your questions?

The Hon. WES FANG: Thank you. I just want to make sure that we can have robust discussions without points of order being taken all the time.

The CHAIR: Order! I fully support robust questioning of Ministers and other witnesses. But, for the sake of Hansard, we need to allow a bit of breath on both sides between answer, question, answer, question, just so Hansard can actually delineate between who's saying what and it doesn't descend into complete chaos. If we could allow a few seconds between each other's backwards and forwards, that would be great. Mr Fang, you have the call.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, are you confident that this is the only meeting that wasn't disclosed in your diary disclosures?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: As I have provided the answer to this hearing, I was there to inspect works that had been completed on the building. I think it was through damage, flooding damage, and it was refurbished so that it was a more usable building for the community.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, that's not an answer to the question that I asked. I asked you—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I am confident that I am providing you with the answer.

The Hon. WES FANG: No. I asked you about any other meetings. Are you confident that you haven't not disclosed any other meetings in your diary disclosures?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Mr Fang, I've answered the question. I was there to look at a building.

The Hon. WES FANG: Which wasn't disclosed in your diary disclosures.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I was there to look at a building.

The Hon. WES FANG: Just moving back to the Dubbo sports hub issue, Minister, is it right that the entirety of the \$48.6 million that was allocated to the project was allocated under the Coalition Government?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: You didn't build it. Why didn't you build it?

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, that's not an answer to the question that I asked.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It is an answer to the question, actually.

The Hon. WES FANG: No. Minister, was the \$48.6 million allocated under the Coalition Government?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: In 2018—let me talk you through it, Mr Fang, because it's important.

The Hon. WES FANG: No. I've heard the timeline. I heard it when you provided the answer. I prefer—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: The previous Government allocated \$4 million to move the PCYC.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, I heard the answer when you provided it to the Chair.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: In 2018 you made \$9 million.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm asking you was the—

The CHAIR: Order!

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: In 2019 it was announced as a \$44 million project—

The Hon. WES FANG: That is not an answer.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —but there was no funds to make it \$44 million.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Point of order—

The CHAIR: Order! I am not going to hear excessive points of order when I suspect that it's going to be the same thing. I remind both the Hon. Wes Fang and the Minister of my previous ruling to allow some time between question, answer, question, answer.

The Hon. WES FANG: Thank you, Chair. Minister, was any—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Can I answer the question? I'm trying to answer the question.

The Hon. WES FANG: No. All I asked you was did the money come from the Coalition. The answer's yes. That's all you need to say.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No. I'll decide what I say. Excuse me, I'm trying to answer the question.

The Hon. WES FANG: Has any additional funding been allocated?

The CHAIR: Order!

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: There is a point of order.

The CHAIR: The Minister is free to answer the question how she sees fit. You are entitled to redirect or reword the question, ask multiple times, that's fine, but you cannot direct the Minister to answer a question in a particular way.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Point of order: Actually, the member cannot redirect under the provisions.

The CHAIR: That is correct. They cannot redirect. They can ask the question in a different way. They can go on to another topic if they so wish, but you can't direct a Minister or another witness to answer a question in a particular way.

The Hon. WES FANG: I accept that, Chair. It is clear that the Minister is seeking to provide lengthy answers to eat up the time, and the Minister has already provided that answer to you in your question.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: This is embarrassing.

The Hon. WES FANG: I am going to continue my questioning.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Fang.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I haven't concluded my answer. Can I finish the answer?

The CHAIR: Can you just finish your answer. Then Mr Fang can ask the next question.

The Hon. WES FANG: Yes.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: So \$4 million was allocated in July 2018. Nothing happened. In September 2018 an additional \$9.3 million—this was two governments ago; this was you guys two terms ago—was allocated in September '18—

The Hon. WES FANG: I am going to redirect, Chair, because the commentary's now not pointed.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —and a project of \$44.5 million was announced. But there wasn't \$44 million, it was \$9 million.

The CHAIR: You cannot redirect.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, can you confirm that none of the funding was allocated—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: In May 2019 work was expected to start. You didn't.

The Hon. WES FANG: —since Labor came into government?

The CHAIR: Order! Mr Fang, you can't redirect.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: In November 2019 the former Government announced an additional \$10 million of drought stimulus money. Nothing happened.

The Hon. WES FANG: The Minister is now just eating up time. If this continues, it's pointless for budget estimates.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: You have asked me a question. I want to be transparent.

The CHAIR: She is answering the question.

The Hon. WES FANG: It's pointless for budget estimates.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No, it's literally transparency about all this.

The Hon. WES FANG: No, it's not, because you've already provided this answer.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: In November 2019 the previous Government announced an additional \$10 million, again of drought stimulus money. Stimulus money is supposed to stimulate the economy following an event, but nothing happened.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, how much money did Labor provide to the project?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Let me see what came next—

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, how much money did Labor provide to the project?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —because nothing happened. In 2021, a development—no, that is not money. Let me see. February 2023, an additional 23 million—

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, it's a simple question. It's a simple question, Minister. How much money did Labor provide to the project?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Mr Fang, I'm trying to provide an answer to the question.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: No, you're not.

The Hon. WES FANG: No, you're actually wasting time now.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm not. This is really relevant.

The Hon. WES FANG: People can see this. Anyone who's tuned into this will see that you're wasting time. I'm asking you a question.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: People are entitled to understand the history of this, Mr Fang. It's important.

The Hon. WES FANG: I understand the history probably better than you do, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Then why didn't you build it? Why didn't your Government build it?

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, I'm asking you how much money did Labor indicate to this project.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Point of order—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Why didn't the local member for Dubbo, who was the Minister at the time—

The CHAIR: Order! I will hear the point of order.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: It's a train smash, and the problem is that Hansard—

The Hon. WES FANG: You're so right about that, Greg.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: This is your questioning. It's a train smash. Hansard cannot possibly record the exchanges going on. I ask you to reflect on that, Chair—I know you understand this is the issue—and bring your wisdom to help the Hon. Wes Fang; guide him through this.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: To the point of order: It would be very unjust to point all the blame of this trainwreck that Mr Donnelly just referred to on Mr Fang, when the Minister is clearly just wasting time, reading out statements she has in front of her.

The CHAIR: As I've ruled previously, the Minister can answer a question as she sees fit. It may be frustrating to the Hon. Wes Fang and the Opposition that she's not answering it or getting to the point as quickly as they would like. Unfortunately, she does have that ability to answer in that way. But once again I refer everyone back to my ruling: Let's try and keep it civil, in terms of question, answer, question, answer. It is a trainwreck, and it's a trainwreck for the people of Dubbo that are trying to listen and understand what has gone on, if we descend into chaos and something that's not really constructive. For the sake of the people of Dubbo who want the answers, can we try and keep this civil? Minister, have you finished with your history of the project?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No, Mr Chair. There is quite a saga attached to this project, which actually is really important for the people of Dubbo to understand. They're right to be asking questions about the history of this.

The Hon. WES FANG: This is embarrassing for the Minister, Chair.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It is incredibly important that people do—

The Hon. WES FANG: How are you allowing this to continue?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Point of order—

The CHAIR: As I said, she's allowed to answer as she sees fit.

The Hon. WES FANG: This is literally embarrassing for her.

The CHAIR: I would just advise the Minister if she could be as brief as she possibly can so the honourable member can get to other questions on this topic.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Mr Chair, what I can say is, in answer to the question, yes, money was allocated from the previous Government for a project that they never delivered. In 2018, almost seven years ago, plenty of media opportunities pretending to dig holes in the ground for sod turns for locations that didn't exist. This is a significant problem. The previous Government have a lot to answer for in terms of the failure here. Year after year, sometimes six months at a time they just threw more money at it—

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —but had no location. They didn't deliver the project and I think the people in Dubbo deserve to understand that.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, you're now wasting time. Did Labor provide any funding to this project?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Mr Fang, your Government promised this from 2018. You didn't deliver it.

The Hon. WES FANG: No, Minister, did Labor provide any funding to this project?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: You didn't deliver the project.

The Hon. WES FANG: Did Labor provide any funding to this project? It's a very simple question, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: You didn't deliver the project.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, did Labor provide any funding to this project?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: That's a very simple answer, Mr Fang.

The Hon. WES FANG: The people of Dubbo deserve to know.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: They do.

The Hon. WES FANG: You said that the people of Dubbo deserve to know.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: They do.

The Hon. WES FANG: How much money did Labor commit to this project?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Mr Fang, money has been committed to this project—

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, you gave long answers before.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm trying to answer the question.

The Hon. WES FANG: How much money did Labor commit to this project?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: This is quite silly, Chair. It's really silly.

The Hon. WES FANG: How much?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm trying to answer the question.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Answer it.

The Hon. WES FANG: Well, answer it. There you go. The floor is yours.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: As I've outlined the history here, since 2018, money has been allocated to this project—

The Hon. WES FANG: No, no, no. You've answered the history bit.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: There is no project.

The Hon. WES FANG: You've answered the history bit, Minister. How much money has Labor put on the table for this project?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I want to work with the community going forward.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, is the amount of money that Labor has put on the project zero?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No. I've outlined the history here. There was money allocated to the project.

The Hon. WES FANG: You said no. How much money has Labor put on the table for this project?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: There was money allocated to the project. You failed to deliver the project.

The Hon. WES FANG: Yes, under the Coalition Government. How much money has Labor put into this project?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: How many times do we need to do this?

The CHAIR: Just like you're free to answer the question how you see fit, the Hon. Wes Fang is allowed to ask the same question over and over again.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm going to keep asking the question until I get an answer.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Okay.

The Hon. WES FANG: You said the people of Dubbo deserve an answer, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: They do.

The Hon. WES FANG: So how much has Labor committed to this project since they came to government?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: What we've worked through over the last two years is—

The Hon. WES FANG: Not what you've worked through, Minister. How much? Dollars. Give me a dollar figure.

The CHAIR: To be fair to the Minister, you did cut her off within about three seconds.

The Hon. WES FANG: Because she's not providing a dollar figure.

The CHAIR: As I've previously ruled, she's allowed to answer in a way that she sees fit. She may come to a dollar figure in a moment. You should allow her some time to give some prelude comments, or introductory comments.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: The history for this and how money was allocated is relevant. The money that was allocated to this project has been in this Government's budget—it has been.

The Hon. WES FANG: And it was allocated under the Coalition Government. How much additional money did Labor put into this project, Minister, since you came to government?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Mr Chair, I've answered the question.

The Hon. WES FANG: No, you haven't.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: The money allocated to this project has been allocated in the budget.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, the people of Dubbo are watching this. Can't you just admit that Labor has put no money into this project?

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Point of order—

The Hon. WES FANG: You've cancelled the project, but you've put no money in.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: You didn't build the project.

The CHAIR: I will hear the point of order.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: The Minister has clearly indicated that, in the Labor Government's budget, this money was allocated. I don't know how the question can continue to be asked.

The Hon. WES FANG: Don't you run defence, mate. You're just as deep in this.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: I don't know how it can continue to be asked when it has been answered about 12 times, including, very clearly and directly, that it remains in the budget.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Hear, hear! It's badgering. It's beyond it.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Tedious repetition, Wes.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Move on, Wes.

The CHAIR: The Minister did only just indicate that it was in the budget. I admit that there were probably about 15 times before that when Wes put the question and she didn't indicate that. Unless Mr Fang wants to move on—

The Hon. WES FANG: No, I'm happy to move on, Chair.

The CHAIR: Excellent.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, can you confirm that the New South Wales Government will not cancel or ban hardwood forestry timber industry in New South Wales?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We are working on plans for what the forestry industry should look like into the future. It's incredibly unfair to everybody involved that there's so much uncertainty. So many debates about significant industry in New South Wales are regularly engaged in with the workforce and businesses in the sector, who want certainty about what things should look like going forward. We are putting plans together, as a government, for that. We're committed to a sustainable industry into the future, but work is underway for what that looks like going forward.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, I asked you very simply just to confirm that you wouldn't ban the native hardwood industry in New South Wales. You didn't do that. Can we draw from that answer that there is consideration of banning native hardwood forestry?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Hardwood native forestry exists as an industry. I've just talked about the industry. I've talked about the fact, at length in public—

The Hon. WES FANG: But you know there's a concern that Labor is going to ban it, just as they did in Victoria.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —that the Government is working on plans for what it should look like as an industry into the future.

The Hon. WES FANG: Why won't you refuse—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm not going to pre-empt any decisions or discussions that—

The Hon. WES FANG: Are you saying it's possible? Are you saying that Cabinet is—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Mr Fang, I'm trying to answer questions, and you're just constantly peppering me. I don't think that that assists the public who are watching this, trying to listen to the answers.

The Hon. WES FANG: Is Cabinet actually considering a ban on native forestry, Minister? Is that what's happening here?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'll wait for you to finish.

The CHAIR: The Hon. Wes Fang's time has expired.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Minister, I just want to continue talking about shark nets. I agree with you that there are different community views, and I agree with you that these have been used for decades. But, I guess, my point was really about the scientific research and making sure that the latest scientific research that shows that shark nets are ineffective will hold significant weight in your decisions going forward, in regard to further use of the nets. Will that evidence be taken into account in that decision-making and a heavy weight put onto that scientific evidence?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I understand the question, but I'm not going to put percentages on the weights of what we'll be considering.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I'm not asking for a percentage.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I understand that.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I just want to understand that that will make a significant consideration in the decisions.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: All of the things that we've talked about here and in the public domain will form part of the consideration of the Government, going forward.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Have you been briefed on that latest research, particularly the study I mentioned in November 2024 about shark nets not being effective?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm not sure about the specific piece of work that you're talking about. I might have, but I would have to check about the specific piece of work. But I regularly engage with the department on this. I regularly engage with the community on this. I regularly engage with a lot of people about this issue.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Minister, how much has been allocated for the shark management program for 2025-26 and the next three financial years? Has that been decided?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It has not. This is, of course, a supplementary budget estimates hearing for the last budget. The next budget will be handed down at some point—someone will remind me of the date; I can't remember the exact date—over the next couple of months, and consideration for what the budget will be will be part of that process.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Are you committed to maintaining funding for the existing baseline for the alternatives, such as drones and listening stations, moving forward? Is that something you're going to continue to invest in?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I will make my budget bids, like every other Minister, and that will be a decision for government and for the Treasurer. We'll work through the budget processes, like every other thing that I need to manage.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: So you're not sure at this point whether you'll be maintaining the funding for the effective alternatives?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We'll have to work through the budget process. I can't pre-empt the budget process—the next budget process.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Minister, I have a couple of quick questions about the blue gropers. There was a 12-month trial ban on the fishing of blue gropers, which is due to expire next week on 28 February. I'm sure you know that there are thousands of community members who are eager to hear that the protection of blue gropers will be made permanent. Are you able to give us an update on that decision or when the announcement will be made on the decision?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I know there's a lot of interest in this particular fish, which is the State's fish.

The Hon. WES FANG: What colour is it?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm certainly aware of the interest from a range of perspectives. The decision on that is pending, so I won't be making any announcements about it today, but it is right to say that we had the ban in place for this 12-month period because of some incidents that happened just over a year ago. I'll be considering, and have been considering, a range of things in relation to this. As people would have seen last week, it's not just necessarily a decision about one particular fish. We're doing research on a whole range of things in relation to how to manage the marine estate. There was a report released a week or so ago—no, a bit longer than that—in terms of work that we're doing on effects of the climate on our oceans and that there may be some impact

on this particular species of fish as part of that. I'm looking at a range of things. You're right to say that the trial—or this ban is due to end at the end of this month, and I'll have more to say before then.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: So sometime before the twenty-eighth, you'll make an announcement?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Yes. People are entitled to know the response.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: There was a recent research paper that came from your department, showing that blue groper numbers declined by 50 per cent in Sydney since 2008. Is that a relevant factor that you'll include in that decision?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: For the specifics, I might ask Sean to talk to the very specifics of it. I think what you're referring to is the report last week, where it's thought by the scientists that the warming water in some parts of the State may be causing this species of fish to move—they prefer cold water—from warm water to cold water. But the specifics about that, I'll hand to Sean.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I probably don't need specifics. My question was more about whether that will be a relevant factor that you will consider in regard to the decision about whether or not that ban is permanent or not or will continue for a longer period of time.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: There is a range of things that we consider. Stock assessments are part of that. That is often how decisions are made about how many fish people can catch of a species. There is interest, certainly, from the rec fishing space on that. But, as I have outlined, the consideration we give is broader than just one particular issue. There is a lot of interest across the community about this particular fish. There was a lot of interest about this particular fish before we put this in place. All of those things have been considered and will continue to be considered. But it's not one thing.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I understand it won't be just one thing. I was just making sure that the fact that the number of blue groper is declining quite significantly in the Sydney area will be one of the considerations.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I wouldn't put it in those—I would need Sean to talk to the facts on how you put the question.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I might come back to Sean this afternoon.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: But all of these things—a whole range of issues will be considered as part of it, if that helps.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: But the number of blue groper will most likely be one of those parts.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Well, this one is due, so, yes.

SEAN SLOAN: Ms Hurst, would you like me to make any comment?

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I might come back to you this afternoon, but thank you. Minister, I want to ask you about the SGAR poisons. I am sure you are familiar with the growing concerns surrounding second generation anticoagulant rodenticides, known as SGARs. These poisons are obviously extremely harmful to rodents, but there are also a lot of secondary poisons poisoning and also inadvertently killing other wildlife as well. A recent study by Edith Cowan University has found that five species of carnivorous mammals could be wiped out by these SGAR poisons. I know that there is an ongoing review by the APVMA but, at the same time, there is a growing number of community petitions and scientists calling for the banning of these poisons much sooner than that review. Is that something that you are considering as part of the POCTAA review or is that something that your department is looking into in these early stages while the APVMA review is still ongoing?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: A couple of things. I am certainly aware of the Federal review that is occurring. I have talked about this before, I think, in the Parliament. I am awaiting the outcome of that. We have provided some feedback about the concerns that have been raised by people across the community. People have raised concerns with me in a range of different ways. I have passed those on. But I am letting the experts do the review and provide the advice and then we will look at it from there. More broadly, in relation to POCTAA, at this stage, no, but we will see what the outcome of these reviews are. Of course, I take all of the concerns about these things very seriously. Where things can be used, they have got to be used following the right instructions and care and all of those very important things. But we will await the outcome of the review.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Does your department have any involvement in that review? Are you going to be making a submission or representation around the New South Wales position in that review?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It is not for New South Wales, necessarily, to take a position. They are the body responsible for dealing with the review. I would also say—and someone can correct me if I am

wrong—that the way these poisons are dealt with actually sits with the EPA rather than us. But obviously these are things that are used across the sector, so it's relevant. But the relevant agency for New South Wales is the EPA. Across government, that is how these things are considered. But this is a matter for the Federal body to finalise a review on.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Do you know if these SGAR poisons are being currently purchased or used by your department through, for example, LLS? Is there any data around that, including how much is being spent on these poisons?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Let's ask LLS. I will ask Kate.

KATE LORIMER-WARD: I would have to take that on notice. I think the only one I would be aware of was the rodent baiting program on Lord Howe Island that was specifically targeted as part of a program there.

The CHAIR: I might move on to some budgetary issues, particularly Wollongbar laboratory in the Northern Rivers. Are you aware that in 2024 some \$500,000 worth of internal project work was outsourced because they couldn't hire technical assistants?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Sorry, Chair, I can't quite hear you.

The CHAIR: The Wollongbar laboratories in the Northern Rivers—I am being corrected about my pronunciation. In 2024 there was around \$500,000 worth of internal project work that had to be outsourced because they couldn't hire technical assistants. Are they still having those issues in hiring those technical assistants and, if so, what is being done about it?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: We are in flood recovery still.

The Hon. WES FANG: Sue, be quiet, would you. It's not your turn.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: When everybody is ready, I'd be happy to answer.

The CHAIR: Ignore the children in the corner. Let's proceed.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: The specifics of that question I will either have to take on notice or I will ask the department, who may know the specifics. What I can say is that you would likely be aware, or people would be aware, that we are doing a whole review on how research is working in New South Wales through my department. That work is well underway. We have got the former chief scientist Mary O'Kane doing this work, which she is doing a terrific job at, with a panel, to assess how things are working and what needs to be adjusted for the future. We also allocated \$60 million for the refurbishment of a number of research stations mid-last year, and work is underway to upgrade some of the research stations. But for this specific question I am not sure. I will check if the department has an answer.

STEVE ORR: I can provide a comment. I think what you are referring to, Mr Banasiak, is the tension that is provided in the private sector versus what we provide as a department. If it's okay, we can come back to that.

The CHAIR: If you have some further details in the afternoon, you can come back on that. I am just looking for how much project work has been lost from that research facility because they haven't been able to actually hire the technical research assistants that they need to actually complete the work and it has to be outsourced. Can I go to some other staffing issues? Minister, I note that there have been four additional senior executive roles in the Fisheries and Forestry division, but we are seeing high levels of vacancy at the Fisheries officer compliance level. Are you aware of what the vacancy rate is for fishery compliance officers at the moment?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: In relation to the first part of your question, you would recall that we restructured and set up a new department last year. In terms of the executive role changes that have been made for how we have split the department, that would form part of that structural change that we made, which I believe is going to serve the people of New South Wales, particularly the people of regional New South Wales and the ag and fishing sector, in a much better way. Specifically about Fisheries officer vacancies, I will ask Sean.

SEAN SLOAN: Chair, my understanding is that, at the moment, there are 10 vacancies in the Fisheries officer ranks. I think last time we were in this Committee there were a number of vacancies which we filled. There is an ongoing turnover in staff that we will always be managing in that workforce. That is part of normal business. That is something that we deal with on an annual basis. In terms of the executive structure, I can speak to that if that helps.

The CHAIR: No, I think the Minister has covered that quite well. Minister, have you given any direction or instruction around not hiring any additional Fisheries officers in New South Wales?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No.

The CHAIR: Mr Sloan, can you explain why I'm hearing that Fisheries officers have been told that there will be no recruitment because of budgetary cuts and so those 10 vacancies won't be filled because of budgetary cuts? One of those positions is actually in your office where you reside in Port Stephens, I've been told. Why are Fisheries compliance officers on the ground being told that there is a freeze on recruitment because of budgetary cuts?

SEAN SLOAN: I certainly haven't given any direction of that nature, Chair. As I mentioned, there are always vacancies in this part of the business, as there are in other parts of the business. It's true that we do have budget constraints. We're operating in a budget constrained environment, so we do need to factor those things in.

The CHAIR: Obviously you're working with a finite amount of money. Prioritising the good work that compliance officers do and filling those vacancies would be a priority. Some of these vacancies have been vacant for over 12 months. Why are we having trouble recruiting people to these roles?

SEAN SLOAN: Chair, some of the vacancies are in hard-to-fill locations. Particularly in the western part of the State, where we have staff leave those offices, we do tend to have difficulties filling those roles. The way we generally handle vacancies in this part of our business is we do recruitment drives and bring in a number of staff to fill vacancies and then we move forward. Rather than doing ad hoc backfills of those vacancies, we tend to do it in blocks. That's been the way that we do it, Chair. Can I just say that the Fisheries compliance work is an integral part of the fisheries management process. We have the science that informs our management; we have our management rules; and then we have compliance to engage with our community, to enforce the rules and to educate the public. It's an integral part of the business. That's the way I view fisheries compliance and certainly see Fisheries compliance officers as an integral part of the fisheries management process.

The CHAIR: First to the Minister and maybe to you, Mr Sloan, does it concern you that you have such high a turnover rate of Fisheries compliance officers? Is there a concern as to either the stresses that the job creates or the working environment that they are in that they're burning out within four or five years and you're having to replace them? Does that concern you?

SEAN SLOAN: Chair, actually the turnover rate is pretty standard, in my observation. But I do acknowledge the fact that the work is challenging at times. It's at the coalface and, with the number of different challenges that Fisheries officers have to contend with on a daily basis, they're challenging roles. We obviously put all of the supports around our officers including very comprehensive training to make sure they're given every opportunity to be successful in their roles. But the turnover is actually, to my observation, pretty standard.

The CHAIR: Going to resourcing of the compliance officers, does every compliance officer have a vehicle of their own that they can utilise, or are they going two out? What's the protocol?

SEAN SLOAN: No, they don't all have their own vehicles. There is a fleet of vehicles and they share. They pool those vehicles and usually an office will have a vehicle—

The CHAIR: Are you able to on notice give a breakdown of the pool of those vehicles—where they are located—so we can ascertain how many vehicles are available to officers per area?

SEAN SLOAN: I'm happy to take that on notice, Chair, and find that information.

The CHAIR: Minister, I will go to a specific issue around fisheries compliance—and we touched on this last estimates—to do with illegal fishing and the sale of fish resources, particularly of abalone. Do you acknowledge that this is a significant problem in this space, in terms of the ability of Fisheries compliance officers to get a hold of this issue and control this issue?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It's a really complex situation, Chair. I know that you're aware of that. Fisheries have the responsibility for managing the resource. There are people who hold commercial licences for abalone, and they run businesses off the back of that. There are also cultural issues in relation to—issues is not the right word, but there are native title claims in relation to the cultural significance of this particular species. It's a really complex situation. I am genuinely trying to find a way through to the solution for managing the stock, to make sure licence holders are able to run their businesses, but also so that Aboriginal people with a connection to country and to this particular species have the opportunities to be able to fulfil their needs in relation to this. There isn't a straightforward answer, I'm afraid. I know that you and others are aware of that. I have met with the industry a number of times. I'll continue to engage with them about potential solutions here. I have met with Aboriginal leaders, particularly from the South Coast, about some potential solutions here. I'm going to continue to that; I've got a meeting coming up soon. We've got the responsibility for compliance, which is what your question is about, but it's not as straightforward as that.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: This is my first time at this so I presume you'll be kind to me, as with all these bulldogs across the aisle here. Minister, as part of your responsibility, does it sit with you to set the direction for the department?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: To set the direction for the department? I'm not quite sure what you mean by that, but I'm happy to answer the question. My job as the Minister is to outline what the Government's priorities are and what the Government has told the community it is going to do. The department then gets on with doing the day-to-day work.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: So that would be the—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Policy development and all of those things that government departments do. I don't direct the day-to-day machinery of the department.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: But the overall direction of the department, based on Government policy, falls on you.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Sure.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Minister, are you happy with the results of the People Matter survey and what it says about your leadership of the department?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I don't think it refers to the Minister's or the Government's leadership. I think these are internal surveys about staff. That's a matter for the secretary of the department, so I'm happy to hand over to him to answer questions about it.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: No, sorry, I'm asking specifically for your views on them. You're suggesting that a poor result in the PMES reflects on these people sitting next to you?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No, that's not what I said. These surveys occur in departments on a regular basis. They provide feedback for the internal workings of the department. It's not a matter for me. It's a matter for the secretary. I actually haven't seen the recent version of it, but I'm aware of some of the feedback. There's a lot of change going on in this department. I outlined earlier that we've created a new department. There's been some significant restructuring going on. I would imagine there are views about that, but the internal workings of the department are a matter for the secretary.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: So you haven't seen the results of the People Matter survey?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I haven't gone through it, no.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Minister, a couple of things that were particularly worrying to me—and I thought they would have been to you as well—as a former staffer of DPI—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: You did work for the department, didn't you?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I did.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: After the election in 2019; you lost the election and got a job in the department.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: No, that's not correct at all, Minister. If you want to swap spots, you can sit here and ask questions and I'll sit there.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm good.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Two of the things that came up were "I would recommend my organisation as a great place to work" and "I am proud to tell others that I work for my organisation", which came in at 9 and 8 per cent. Minister, why don't people want to work for your department anymore?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: These are questions for the secretary. I get asked at every estimates hearing—there is such a significant interest from the National Party in the internal staffing arrangements of the department.

[Interruption from gallery]

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm sorry, I don't need to be heckled from the gallery, Mr Chair. That's just not going to happen.

The CHAIR: No.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I really do want to say this for the record, as I regularly do: I respect everybody who works in our department. They do such incredible work. They are such valuable public servants who cover a diverse range of activities for the Government and for the people of New South Wales. They have all got my full respect. But the internal workings and internal staffing arrangements of the department are a matter for the secretary and the department, so I'll hand over to the secretary to answer that question.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Sorry, I was asking specifically for your views on this. The reason we care about this is because we acknowledge how important a role the department plays in primary industries, as you just suggested. Some of the things in here are quite concerning when you look at the overall picture and, as you said, focusing on what the Government is setting as far as the agenda. One of the concerns is, if you look at the comments on senior leadership, less than half the people in your organisation feel that executives provide clear direction for the future of the organisation. Minister, could that reflect on the fact that the senior executives themselves are not clear about the future of the organisation and have their own doubts?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm going to ask the secretary to answer these questions. The internal staffing arrangements are a matter for the department and for the secretary of the department.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I'm asking for your view of these results.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: And I'm saying that the staffing arrangements are a matter for the department.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: So you don't have a view on how the department is performing?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I've just outlined my view of how the department is performing. I think they're fantastic. I think people across the department do incredibly important work every single day. I have respect for every person who works in the department for the people of New South Wales, whether it's research or whether it's policy advice. There's a range of roles. The executive, the team sitting around me, is terrific. They do fantastic work. There has been significant change over the course of the past couple of years because this Government has restructured. We have set up a new department. There will be people who have views about change, and I respect that. The Government has set up a new department that is functioning well in the interests of the people of New South Wales. The internal mechanisms, internal staffing arrangements and internal work of the department is a matter for the department. It's not appropriate for me to interfere in that.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: What percentage of staff do you think it would be fair to have on temporary contracts?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Less than there used to be. The temporary contracts and casual employment arrangements in the department, I would say, were not managed properly under the previous Government.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: So what percentage of the staff—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'd like to finish the answer.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: —do you think should be temporary contracts?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'd like to finish the answer, if that's okay.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: If you're happy to answer what I've asked.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I am answering the question. I'd like to finish the answer. I think it's important. Sometimes there is a need for temporary workforce to come through where there is a particular issue. I'll use the example of biosecurity. If there's an issue where we need surge or extra hands on deck for a particular issue, then it's appropriate for people to be brought in to deal with that. Unfortunately, over a period of time, that has happened, but there have been no arrangements for that to be managed properly. Sometimes there's going to be a need for temporary workforce; sometimes there's not. These things get managed by the department.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: You talk about a surge in biosecurity. How many additional staff were put on to deal with fire ants?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Individual staffing arrangements are a matter for the department, so I'll ask Steve to answer the specific question. I don't allocate individual staff numbers or individual staff to roles. What I can say is that this Government brought forward \$95 million in funding. The previous Government, your Government, had \$15 million on the table to deal with—

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Sorry, Minister, I'm asking about staffing.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I want to finish the answer to the question.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Is it about staffing?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Sorry, Chair, I need to be able to answer the question.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Is your answer about staffing?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm trying to be transparent and answer the question, so I'd like to be able to finish. I think that's pretty reasonable.

The CHAIR: To be—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We brought forward \$95 million in funding to deal with the national eradication program.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: She's talking over you now, Chair.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: The individual resourcing, the level of how many staff and where the staff are placed are matters for the department.

The CHAIR: To be fair, Minister, I think you had finished your answer and you were going to pass to Mr Orr to give us the figures on staffing directed towards fire ants—or biosecurity in general, was it?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: That's okay. I'll come back to Mr Orr on that later on. Back to the staff survey, one area that the Chair touched on earlier that is particularly bad, as far as the results, is the Fisheries and Forestry area. We see they're at least 5 per cent down on the broader unit on every marker, and they're the only unit to be down that far on anything. Do you think this would reflect on things such as the cloud that your Government has put over the forestry industry and—I think she'll take this as a badge of honour—your close alignment and reliance on The Greens? There are other issues that the Chair touched on before around Fisheries compliance. Are those policy settings negatively affecting the staff in that sector?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: The policy settings that the Government is undertaking, I have outlined some of that today. We're working through plans for the forestry industry going forward. The team and the department who do work on that are fantastic. If there are views internally, it's a matter for the department, so it's a matter for the secretary. The Fisheries team is a fantastic group of people who do great work on policy and compliance. I support them. I think they're fantastic. If there are particular views internally in relation to feelings about the employment relationship, it's a matter for the department and it's a matter for the secretary.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Across the board, the majority of results on the People Matter survey have declined over the past two years. Do you think this reflects on you as the leader of that organisation?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm the Minister; I'm not the leader of the organisation. The department provides work as public servants for the people of New South Wales under the leadership of the secretary. I'm fulfilling my role as a Minister in the Government. Again, I can't stress it enough: I think the people who work in the department at every level, at every post, are fantastic. I celebrate the work that they do at every possible opportunity, and I'll do it again today. If people are watching, thank you for the contributions that you are making to New South Wales. I hope that continues. The internal employment arrangements are a matter for the secretary and the department.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Do you think, then, that decline in results reflects more on yourself as the Minister or on the secretary that you appointed as the head of that organisation?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I don't think either of those things. There has been a lot of change occur over the past couple of years, which will be positive. It's having a positive impact on how this new department provides services to the people of New South Wales. I look forward to everyone in the department continuing to provide services to the people of New South Wales.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: According to the last annual report, there's 275 less staff in June 2024 than in June 2023. Do you think the department is now better equipped to meet the producers' needs and the needs of people living in regional communities as a result of these cuts?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: As I've outlined, and I will continue to outline as many times as I can as part of this session, I think the department is doing terrific work. I thank everybody in the department for the really great work that they're doing. I celebrate the important work that they do. There are fluctuations in staffing numbers in every organisation. There are fluctuations in staffing numbers in this department. I gave an example in an earlier answer in relation to temporary and contingent workforce, which is sometimes brought in on a needs basis. That will be part of that. There's not a fixed number for how many people the department employs or doesn't employ. The department is carrying out the functions that it is required to carry out. Again, I thank the team at every level for the incredible work that they're doing.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Minister, if we can shorten the answers up and cut back some of the unnecessary verbiage, I will try to resist the urge to cut off as well.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm sorry, Chair, I don't appreciate that. I'm going to answer the questions.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Point of order—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm being asked questions and I'm answering the questions.

The CHAIR: I'll hear the point of order, but I warn you that I was having a brief discussion with the secretariat on an issue.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: We just had a gratuitous insult rather than a question. That should be withdrawn and not engaged in again.

The Hon. WES FANG: That's a gratuitous point of order.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: To the point of order: It was also about telling the Minister how to answer the question. We just can't do that. It's not within our powers.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I'll move on, Chair.

The Hon. WES FANG: I can't wait for you to try asking questions, Sue.

The CHAIR: Can we keep any gratuitous insults, which I didn't hear, to zero.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Was that some kind of a threat?

The Hon. WES FANG: No.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Can I move on, please?

The CHAIR: Mr Barrett, I suggest you move on.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Point of order—

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: There have been repeated threats from Mr Fang—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I am so sick of being threatened. It's a joke.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: —at Ms Higginson, threatening to disrupt the proceedings in the future when it's Ms Higginson's turn to ask questions.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: It's a joke.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: It has occurred about four times. I have overheard it. I haven't previously intervened. He really should be put back in his place. To openly threaten to disrupt these proceedings is unparliamentary and disorderly.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: And another member, specifically. It's specific to me.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: It's true to form. It shouldn't occur.

The CHAIR: If anyone chooses to deliberately disrupt anyone else's question time—not only Mr Fang but any others—whether it's through underhanded comments or muttering under their breath, they will be put on a call. That is my first and final warning on that. I'll hand back to Mr Barrett to continue his questions.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Minister, are you aware of any further job cuts coming in the department? Pre-empting your answer, if there were, say, 50 or 100 jobs that have been directed to be taken out of the department, would you be informed of that? Would you expect to be informed of that?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: First of all, I'll refer to my previous answer. There isn't a fixed number of people who work in any organisation, including this department.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: There literally is.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: There are movements in staffing numbers based on need, based on budget and based on the work that is occurring in different sections of the department. That's appropriate. Whether there needs to be movements into the future, I'm sure there will be, based on the needs of providing services to the people of New South Wales and, again, budget considerations. This is not an unusual proposition. If there were to be movement in any section of the department at any kind of scale, I would be informed of that. Staffing numbers are based on the requirements for the department to provide services to the people of New South Wales.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: So you're not aware of any large-scale—let's say 50 plus—targeted job cuts over the next six to 12 months?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: As I've outlined, it's not a fixed number in any department. There are fluctuations—

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: There is a fixed number of people working there, Minister. Sorry, carry on.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: There isn't a fixed number of people working in any department. The staffing numbers will fluctuate over time. People can come and go as they choose. There are different arrangements put in place based on—I've given the example of biosecurity issues where we might need additional people involved. There might be other policy changes where numbers might change. Those things will be considered by the department in line with what the requirements are to deliver their remit for the people of New South Wales.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Minister, you would have obviously seen and you'd be familiar with the annual report and the fact that redundancy payments have shot up 700 per cent. They've gone from \$1 million to \$7 million. You'd be aware of the more than doubling of long service leave payments from about \$9 million to just shy of \$20 million. You've talked about biosecurity threats and you've got market threats, yet some of our most experienced and dedicated people are leaving the department. I'm not begrudging anyone taking long service leave, particularly after the stresses they've been through over the past couple of years, but are you concerned about who is leaving the department and, more importantly, what are you going to do to replace this knowledge and experience exodus?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: There are a number of things to say in relation to that. I don't know the specifics of the long service leave payments that have been made over the course of the past year. I'm sure it is reported. There are a couple of things. Again, there are movements in the department, but we took a particular commitment to the election of reducing senior executives across government. We have a role to play in this department to do that. The public service, in our view, has been too top-heavy. We took that to the election; that was a commitment that we made. We formed a government, so we are getting on with the job of delivering on what we said we would do.

There has been a reduction in the senior executive level in the department. That's in line with what we told the community we would do. More broadly, in terms of who has taken redundancy or not, I'm not in a position to provide specific answers on that because the details are a matter for the department. But, as I said, of course there are fluctuations in staff numbers. There have been changes made, based on the role that the department plays in providing services to the people of New South Wales and the staff that need to be allocated to do that, particularly in relation to that more temporary workforce over the past couple of years, and that's appropriate.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Minister, across the department you've got people looking for new jobs. About 40 per cent of people have said that they're currently looking for new jobs and I think about the same number have said that they're not going to be there in five years. That is one in five. Statistically, that is one person at the table there and a couple sitting upstairs who are not going to be there in the next couple of years. People are saying more than ever that they are not proud to work in the department, and they don't want to tell people that they work for the DPI. All the results across the People Matter surveys are trending down. Why is this not a major concern for you?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It's a matter for the secretary. The internal working employment relationships are a matter for the department, and they are a matter for the secretary. I am happy to have your questions answered. I've tried to provide the right mechanism for that.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Mr Orr, why are these stats not a concern for the Minister? Why is the Minister not concerned about them?

STEVE ORR: That's a matter for the Minister, Mr Barrett.

The Hon. WES FANG: The Minister hasn't even read them.

STEVE ORR: Hang on. Can I answer your question?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: You can answer the question. Why is the Minister not concerned about these?

STEVE ORR: The Minister can speak for herself.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: That's my question.

The Hon. WES FANG: She blamed you.

STEVE ORR: In terms of the issues, to your point in terms of staff leaving the department, our turnover rate at the moment is the lowest it has ever been, at 6 per cent. To the view you're putting forward, that people are leaving the department, it is 6 per cent. When we advertise a role within the department, seven out of 10 times it goes to a person from within the department. To your view about the number of people who are looking to move on, 81 per cent of people are saying that they're going to be here for longer than two to five years. That is higher than it was last time, in terms of the PMES results. I can talk to the PMES results, if you want, and go through the PMES, keeping in mind what we've been through. There has been a period of significant change. Our results, as they compare to the public sector, are generally higher than the public sector. There were drops across the public sector, but our results are generally higher than the public sector in just about every measure.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Including in Fisheries and Forestry?

STEVE ORR: There will be swings, flows and changes across the department. You'd expect that. Mr Sloan is well aware of some of the challenges within his portfolio. Each one of the people sitting at this table has a plan in terms of how they're going to deal with their PMES results. That's the commitment we have to the staff in the organisation. We had a very high turnout in terms of people filling in the form, at 84 per cent, which was the highest ever. It was fantastic to get all that feedback. Our commitment now is to deal with the results and the feedback we've received from the staff.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Minister, in last year's budget you announced a spend of \$21 million on animal welfare. I understand \$12.5 million of that funding was allocated to the two charitable enforcement agencies. Can you advise what the remaining \$8.5 million has been spent on or allocated towards?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We've done a number of things over the course of this last year in relation to our commitments for improving animal welfare in New South Wales. One of the big things that we are doing—and it is the first year that it has occurred—is we're developing a proper process and framework for how funding is provided to the charitable organisations that do the work of enforcement and animal welfare. This is the first time we've had a proper process for how money is allocated.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Has part of that \$8.5 million gone into that proper process? I just want a breakdown of where the other \$8.5 million from the \$21 million is going.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm not going to be able to provide the specifics, but I am providing an answer in terms of the work that we are doing this year. That is the budget that is allocated for the work we are doing this year in relation to animal welfare.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I'm asking about the other \$8.5 million, not the \$12.5 million.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: As I've said, I'm not going to give a breakdown of how that is allocated. We are still in the middle of this financial year, and work is still continuing. I'm talking about the work that we are doing in relation to animal welfare. I understand exactly where you're coming from, but I'm talking broadly in terms of the work that we're doing.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I just want to get an understanding about what projects that other \$8.5 million will go towards. I know that obviously the independent office is one of Labor's election commitments. What other areas will that \$8.5 million be going towards? I understand you might be still working out the exact figures, but I assume you would have some idea about what that \$8.5 million will be going towards.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: That is what I'm trying to answer. Again, I appreciate the question. I'm answering in terms of the broad remit of work that we're doing this year in relation to animal welfare. One of the big pieces has been a better framework for how money is allocated to the charitable organisations that do the animal welfare enforcement work. It's really important that we get the framework right. It has been too ad hoc in the past. That has taken a significant amount of work for the department to do. We passed the bill to ban puppy farming in New South Wales, and there are consequences for that in terms of expanding the register and other work that comes off the back of that. That has money allocated to its development.

You are right to point out another piece of work that we're working on now, which has live consideration from me and from the department, and that is the setting up of the independent office. There will be budgetary considerations for that. We're just past halfway through the financial year. We've got a whole piece of work that we're doing in relation to animal welfare. That's the budget that we've been allocated for this year. As part of next year's budget, we will continue to work through that.

The CHAIR: Accepting the complexities of the State abalone issue, do you accept that the abalone fishery will be the first of the high-value species to fall as a result of compliance officers not being able to get a hold of this issue?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I don't accept the premise that it's going to fall. I think there are challenges—

The CHAIR: The industry have come to you, I know, and said, "Buy us out. We're done." That's a pretty strong signal that the State abalone fishery is going to fall. I know they've come to you asking that because they can't keep going the way they're going, in terms of the illegal take, in their view. Accepting the complexities, what are you actually doing to address the fact that the Fisheries officers don't have the capacity to do their job in this space?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Let me start with that end point first. They do have the capacity to do their job. But the complexity is relevant—

The CHAIR: They don't, because 50 tonnes of abalone are going out the back door, and your department's answer to that is just to include that 50 tonnes of illegal take as part of the total allowable catch.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: That's not right.

The CHAIR: We established that in estimates last time.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It isn't a straightforward answer. I am working with the industry. I've met with the industry a number of times. The department continues to work with the industry. I understand their concerns and their frustrations about the complexity of the situation. In working through solutions here, nothing's off the table—

The CHAIR: Is one of the solutions shifting the focus of compliance to point of sale, like we have done with other high-value fisheries, like lobster?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Yes.

The CHAIR: You target them at the point of sale. Clearly, where the issue lies is people taking advantage of the idea of cultural fishing and then going on to sell it in our restaurants around Sydney and wherever else. Is that something that you're actively considering?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Yes, it is. It's absolutely actively being considered. We do need to deal with this at the point of sale, and people who are purchasing this particular species illegally shouldn't be doing that and shouldn't be selling it. We will be enhancing our activities at that end of the spectrum. But it isn't straightforward. I wish it was. Nothing's off the table. I want to work with everybody involved about finding a long-term solution for how we can manage this particular issue.

The CHAIR: That takes us to 10.45 a.m., so I'll just look to the Government for their 15 minutes of questions.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Totally satisfied with all the answers.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Outstanding answers from the Minister and the staff.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We will then break for morning tea. We'll come back at 11.15 a.m., which will be starting with five minutes from the Opposition. Then we'll resume normal times, in terms of schedule.

(Short adjournment)

The CHAIR: Welcome back from that brief interlude. We'll now just have five minutes from the Opposition, and then we'll go back to normal time. I think it's Mrs Overall.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Thank you, Chair. Morning, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Morning.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: I don't want to labour the point—no pun intended—on the Dubbo sports hub project. However, can I just ask when did you last meet with the PCYC?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I was with the CEO of the PCYC last Monday. We made an announcement about a project that we're working with them on, with the NRL and Brad Fittler, at one of the PCYCs in east Sydney—the eastern suburbs, Maroubra somewhere.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: And was the topic of the Dubbo sports hub raised at that time?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I had a long conversation with the CEO of the PCYC at that event, but I don't think it came up, no.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Has it ever been discussed with you that the PCYC believes that the newly proposed site, which has been purchased by PCYC, is suitable for the sports hub?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I've met with the PCYC about the project a number of times last year, I believe—

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: When was the last time that you did that specifically about the project?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm not sure. I'd have to check. I've discussed it with them. But I would refer to my previous answers. People are entitled to be disappointed about the whole farce and the history of this. It should be built—

The Hon. WES FANG: Point of order: That's not really relevant to the question that was asked.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: That's okay. I'll allow the Minister to continue.

The CHAIR: Are you allowing the Minister to continue, Mrs Overall?

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Yes.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: People are entitled to be disappointed about the whole history of this. I wish, as do the people of Dubbo, that this was built in 2018, two governments ago, when the previous Government committed to build it. It's had a whole range of different thought processes since then. As I outlined this morning, and I don't know this to be true, but I understand that the PCYC may have privately purchased a privately owned building at some point this year.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: So that's never been discussed with you in an official sense.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I was told that they had purchased a building. No, I understand that that is the truth, but I haven't got confirmation that they've purchased it. But I'm not going to pretend I haven't heard that they were going to purchase it or that they were interested. I think I read an article about it. That's a matter for the PCYC, as a private entity, if they want to purchase a building. My understanding is it's a building called Sports World, in Dubbo. It is a place where people can play sport now. I understand people play sport there now.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Suitable for such a site as the Dubbo sports precinct, suitable in—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm just having a bit of trouble hearing you.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: In the opinion of PCYC, that this site that they've purchased would be suitable for this project to proceed.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It is, as I understand it, a sports facility or a place that contains sports facilities where people can play sport. As I understand it, the PCYC have or are in the process or intend to purchase a privately owned building where people can play sport, for people to play sport. They're entitled to do that. If they want to have conversations with the Government or anybody about plans that they may have for that facility into the future, they're welcome to do that.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Thank you very much, Minister. We'll move on just quickly. You said that people are entitled to be disappointed. Speaking of that, the Mayor of Dubbo, who was the Labor candidate at the last election, has been extremely critical of your decision. In fact, he said, "She is clearly the anti-Minister for Western New South Wales because she seemingly doesn't care about the people who live in our community and the wider region." How do you respond to that?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Anyone is entitled to campaign or raise whatever issues they want to raise. I think the way that those views have been expressed and the campaign that has been conducted is disappointing, but it doesn't mean they're not entitled to do it. I would make the point that when I have outlined the history of this project publicly before, and I'll do it again now, the council—

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: No, that's okay because we have done that a number of times now, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No, I need to finish answering my question. The council were involved in this project, and they were the main proponent—

The Hon. WES FANG: Point of order: The history is not relevant to the question that was asked.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: We've done that a number of times.

The CHAIR: Order! You're talking over the top of each other.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Chair, I would like to answer the question. I think it's important, and the community of Dubbo and more broadly are entitled to know. I've just been asked—

The CHAIR: I think you have outlined that quite clearly, and you did have—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No, specifically—sorry, I just got asked a question about the mayor, and I want to talk about the involvement of the council. I think it's very important.

The Hon. WES FANG: Point of order—

The CHAIR: I'll hear the point of order from Mr Fang, but I'm conscious of—

The Hon. WES FANG: The Minister needs to be directly relevant to the question that was asked. That answer wasn't at all directly relevant to the question that Mrs Overall asked the Minister. The Minister can go off on a tangent when it's a Dixier, but when the member asks a question the Minister needs to be directly relevant. She was not being directly relevant at that point.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: To the point of order: Under what provision, Chair, does the Minister need to be directly relevant?

The CHAIR: I'll seek some advice on what the specific provisions are around relevance, during the next round of questioning. I note that the bell has gone. I do not want to take up crossbench time in deliberating on that, so I will come back to the Committee on that. Ms Higginson, are you seeking the call?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Sorry, I would like to finish answering the question.

The CHAIR: The time has—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm allowed to finish answering questions even when the bell rings. We've been doing that all morning. It's important to finish answering the question, which is that the council were the proponent that was supposed to deliver this project, and they didn't. In fact, I'm happy to table a letter from the council that was provided in 2020, confirming that they withdrew from the project. Everyone in the community is entitled to be disappointed about the history of this. They're entitled to hear the full story about the history of this, and we all need to move forward in terms of what considerations may or may not be given by government for anything that may or may not be able to be delivered into the future. I'm happy to table the letter.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. I think you've now given us a clear outline of the history. Hopefully we don't have to have it repeated again.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Well, I'll repeat it if I want to.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Minister, I would like to know what measures you have undertaken to ensure that the Forestry Corp's biomaterial reports accurately reflect actual logging yields and areas harvested across the public forest estate as required under condition 6.4 of the CIFOA.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We have covered this in recent debates in the Parliament, and I understand the interest in the error that was in this particular report from Forestry Corporation. I'll give the same—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Sorry, can I just interrupt, Minister, if it's okay.

The Hon. WES FANG: Point of order—

The CHAIR: There is a point of order, and I have been hearing points of order taken by all members.

The Hon. WES FANG: I was intently listening to the answer that the Minister was giving then. The Minister was no more than maybe five or six seconds into her answer before Ms Sue Higginson started to interrupt the Minister.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: To the point of order—

The Hon. WES FANG: Ms Sue Higginson took a point of order on me earlier around interrupting the Minister when she was trying to provide an answer. I think it's incumbent upon Ms Sue Higginson to then do the reverse and allow the Minister to provide a suitable answer, in the time frame in which the Minister seeks to do so, to the question that was asked by Ms Sue Higginson, in response to the budget estimates process.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Can we stop the clock, please. This is appalling.

The CHAIR: No, there is no provision to stop the clock. Do you want to comment on the point of order before I rule?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: To the point of order: I was not interrupting; I was merely assisting. I was offering a level of assistance to help the Minister answer my question.

The Hon. WES FANG: I don't think the Minister felt helped at all.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I was not referring to one report; I was referring to three reports.

The Hon. WES FANG: Maybe the Minister was getting there. You have to give her time to answer.

The CHAIR: Interjecting is disorderly, even if someone feels like they are assisting. There is some leeway there. I was seeking guidance on trying to give you a ruling on the previous matter, so I didn't hear the actual interjection. The member may continue, being mindful of that, though.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Minister, in relation to the question, I'm referring to the three years of biomaterial reports that were inaccurate that Forestry Corporation has admitted to.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: As I understand it, there were errors in those reports. What I was going to say—which I'll say now—is that whilst I'm the Minister for forestry, as the policy area, Forestry Corporation is a corporation. It's a State owned corporation with its own responsibilities, its own board and its own shareholder Ministers. I will ask Anshul to provide some further information to your question.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: If it's okay, Minister, I'll talk with Anshul after the break. This is in relation specifically to the forest estate—so logging yields and areas harvested. What have you done to ensure that biomaterial reports—and it's okay if you haven't, if you're saying you don't think you have a role in relation to that reporting requirement; that's fine. But what have you done, anything or nothing, in relation to making sure those reports are accurate and will be accurate in the future?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm happy to answer the question, and I have done in the Parliament before now. The reports need to be accurate, and Forestry Corp are required to provide proper reports. When the issue in relation to this report or these figures was brought to light, I spoke to the CEO and said the exact same thing that I'm saying now, which is that they are required to make sure that they are getting this information right. They need to have processes in place to make sure that they are getting it right.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: What guarantees have you been given in relation to getting it right?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: They are required to get their work right, and it's a matter for the corporation that they have the processes and mechanisms in place to do that.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Do you—

The Hon. WES FANG: Point of order—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Do you have an understanding of what went wrong? Have you got some clarity about what actually went wrong?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: The advice that I've received—

The Hon. WES FANG: She's interrupting the Minister again.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm not sure who I'm supposed to be talking to now.

The CHAIR: You are talking directly, through me.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Great. There's just a lot of chatter happening here. The advice that I've received is that there was human error in relation to this. I've outlined that that advice has been provided.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Does that concern you?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Unfortunately, that happens. I'm not suggesting that it's an excuse. The reports need to be accurate. That's the advice that I've been provided, and I accept that.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: In terms of human error, are you saying that that human error—do you understand what actually happened? For three years—and, actually, going back further now, it looks like this has been happening since 2019. How do you think that human error just kept on happening for all those years? Are you certain that the human error won't happen again?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I understand the question, but these are questions for the corporation—for the CEO of the corporation. I have, in answer to your question—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: So you're not sure?

The Hon. WES FANG: Point of order—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Are you not sure? Are you not sure what happened?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: In answer to your question—

The Hon. WES FANG: Ms Sue Higginson has yet again just interrupted the Minister. She's maybe three or four words in.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm happy to provide the answers here.

The Hon. WES FANG: I just don't understand why Ms Sue Higginson continues to—

The CHAIR: I'm noting that Ms Faehrmann has the time, but, yes, I do note that that was getting close to interjection.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Good morning, Minister. Where is the NSW Mainland Marine Park Network Management Plan?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: It didn't work, Wes.

The Hon. WES FANG: It did, actually.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It has been—I'll just wait for everybody to be ready.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: I have 4½ minutes, actually, all morning with you. It's frustrating, from our point of view.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: That's a matter for the Chair. I'm happy to answer the questions.

The CHAIR: Order! Please continue. Ignore the murmur in the background.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Sure. The plan is completed. We're scheduled to do the review, as you would be aware—and I'm sure you'll ask about that too. The plans will be released as part of that.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: A letter from you to me, dated 17 December last year, states that the Government has recently released that plan. What's the hold-up? Was it released in December and then quickly unreleased? What was the deal with that?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No, it's completed. I don't think that there's—I'll check whether there is a hold-up. As I understand it, the plan was to release it when we deal with the review, but I'm happy to check that for you.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: In terms of that timeline, when is that again—the review?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It's due now.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Will that include any proposals for increased marine parks, additional aquatic reserves and increased marine sanctuaries?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: At this stage, the Government doesn't have any plans for new marine parks, and we have indicated that. But this is a review that is scheduled to be done, and we will be doing it properly. It should be launched soon. There aren't any plans for new ones. I'll be honest about that.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Minister, last week in question time I asked you about the blue groper. When you replied, you mentioned that research that talks about climate change and the impact on the blue groper. You sounded genuinely concerned. Do you know whether climate change is going to impact marine life other than the blue groper?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I believe it will. We have certainly got some work happening in relation to researching the impacts of climate change and the fact that our water is getting warmer. When we do the review of the marine park—the department has already been doing some work on what the priority threats are to the estate, and that includes things like climate change and it includes things like water quality and stormwater drainage. Yes, it is something I take very seriously.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: I will go to the next question in relation to that. The CSIRO has done regional projections for eastern Australia which suggest that, in terms of marine heatwaves—you are aware of what that is?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Yes.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: By 2030 marine heatwave conditions are likely to extend for more than 300 days a year and by 2040 there will be permanent marine heatwave conditions. Why wouldn't the Government be looking at increased aquatic reserves and marine sanctuaries because of that type of prediction?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It is certainly concerning that that is the prediction. I am happy to get Sean to provide some more detail on the work that we are doing. It is important that we do research into—

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: I can go to Mr Sloan in the afternoon.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I understand that. I take this very seriously. We know that climate change is having an impact on our oceans and our marine estate. The review will factor in how we can better protect them and what needs to be done. I have just outlined a couple of things that we know need to be dealt with.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: When you say the review, this draft plan is from 2021 to 2031. Not much has happened, since you came into government two years ago, in this area. This CSIRO thing has been out for a couple of years now. Marine heatwaves are happening now. What is stopping you and your Government from putting in place greater protection for our marine environment, based on the threat of climate change?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I am acknowledging that we know that climate change is a threat to our waterways and our oceans. Where action needs to be taken, we will give proper consideration to that, just as people would expect. There is work being done.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Can we expect something to happen this year in terms of anything around greater protection?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: The review will be underway soon, in terms of our marine estate. I understand exactly where you are coming from. Your original question is why won't we consider establishing more marine parks. The truth is that I don't know that that is a solution to the situation that we have got. It is not something we are considering as part of this. It doesn't mean that these things don't need to be considered as part of a longer term solution. We know that there is an issue here. It is longstanding issue and we are doing work on how we need to better manage the marine estate.

The CHAIR: Before I go to my question, I will rule on the matter regarding direct relevance. Mr Primrose asked where this clause specifically lies. I draw members' attention to the *Budget Estimates Guide 2024-2025*. Chapter 4 "Questions to witnesses", paragraph 4.2, states:

Questions must be relevant to the matter that has been referred to a committee for inquiry and report.

Paragraph 4.4 states:

In addition, an answer must be directly relevant to a question.

And then that paragraph refers us back to Standing Order 229 (2) regarding evidence. Answers must be directly relevant to the question put.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: That is going to constrain answers.

The Hon. WES FANG: That is the exact point, Peter.

The CHAIR: That is the standing order as it stands. It is something for the chair of committees to look at, perhaps.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Point of order: That means that, in terms of the general background knowledge et cetera that is required and in terms of now being directly relevant, it is essentially almost a yes or no answer.

The CHAIR: Not necessarily.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: That is general relevance. You ruled that it has to be directly relevant.

The CHAIR: I am going by the standing orders, Peter. As chairs we are going to have to make a judgement call on that in some regards. I will do my best to make sure that call is fair and balanced, as always. Minister, can I go back to the issue of compliance officers? You would hopefully be aware of what your counterparts in Victoria are proposing in closing down five compliance stations and reducing it to three stations, and reducing 27 compliance roles down to nine and then rebadging their Fisheries compliance officers to Fisheries

engagement officers. Can you confirm that your office and you are not considering any such proposal to rebadge compliance officers to engagement officers and reduce compliance officers across New South Wales?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: In relation to the first part of the question, I am loosely aware from reports about what the Victorian Government is proposing. I won't even pretend that I am across the detail of whatever restructuring they are proposing for Fisheries. I have seen some media headlines, but that is the extent of my knowledge. I know they have done a review and they are looking at changes like the ones that you have outlined, but that is the extent of the information I understand about what is happening in Victoria. What I can say about New South Wales is that we are currently doing a review of Fisheries officers and the role that they are playing. We are working with the PSA and others on that. I am happy to get Sean to provide some more detail on where that is up to, if that would be helpful. I am happy to provide some information.

The CHAIR: I might take that offer up in the afternoon. That is fine, Minister. I might just move on to vessel monitoring systems or VMS, as it is referred. My understanding is that your department received \$1.86 million, which was far more than any other Australian jurisdiction, to look at this issue. Are you able to confirm that the vessel monitoring system is actually being made mandatory by the Commonwealth?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I have not received that advice. It may well be. Again, I am happy to hand over to Sean to provide some specific information for you.

The CHAIR: Mr Sloan seemed to indicate that he might have an answer, yes.

SEAN SLOAN: I can answer that, Chair. The Commonwealth is making the requirement of vessel monitoring systems for any vessels that interact with Commonwealth marine parks mandatory. There was a nationwide grant scheme that the Commonwealth Government released about two years ago that we participated in, and other jurisdictions did as well. On the back of that, we are looking to support our offshore commercial fleet to adopt vessel monitoring systems in New South Wales. That is something we have been trialling with the use of those funds over the past 18 months. We are also looking at the adoption of vessel monitoring systems in our inshore fleet, but those vessels are smaller vessels and require a tailored approach. We are looking at that as well. I have communicated with the commercial fleet to let them know that that is our intention by June 2026 to have VMS adopted across the offshore fleet. We have also been consulting with the commercial fisheries advisory council, which is where all of our commercial fishers, through an advisory process to the Minister, support our management of commercial fishery. They have been supportive of that adoption of VMS in the offshore fleet at this stage.

The CHAIR: Picking up on your comments there, Mr Sloan, about the trial, Minister, are you aware that there was already a fully functional and well tried and tested VMS system with Lord Howe Island? I guess my question to you is why are we taking that \$1.96 million from the Commonwealth to run a trial when a successful trial has already been run? Why wouldn't we use that money to implement the system more broadly, if we have already proven that it works?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: That is a fair enough question. I didn't know about the trial at Lord Howe Island. I take advice from the department about whether there needed to be an expanded trial. That is what they are doing. I accept that that is their advice and that is the work that they are undertaking. I look forward to further advice on it.

The CHAIR: Mr Sloan, can you tell us why we need a further trial, given that the trial at Lord Howe Island was deemed successful?

SEAN SLOAN: Yes, Chair. The short answer is that technology evolves and moves on and there are all sorts of different technologies in this space available now. Rather than just move to the more traditional methods, we are looking at all of the available methods. For example, there are now solar-powered vessel monitoring systems available and we are looking at those. That's something that hasn't been looked at previously. So we're looking at those.

The CHAIR: Surely that wouldn't change the view of whether VMS should be used or not. You're now splitting the difference between whether we go with a particular brand or certain tech. If the trial works at Lord Howe Island with a particular brand of VMS—if there's a better brand or more advanced tech, the concept is still the same. Why are we spending that much money trialling something that has already been proven? Now we're just arguing about whether a particular brand is better than the other one.

SEAN SLOAN: No, that's not what we're doing, Chair. The technology is constantly evolving. The technology for vessel monitoring provides a whole range of benefits in Fisheries. First of all, it helps us know exactly where the vessels are at any given time. That assists us with the effectiveness of our compliance programs and deployment of compliance resources, but it also helps us with collecting data from commercial fishers via the

technology link that that vessel monitoring unit provides. It assists us with stock assessment and real-time data collection and real-time assessment. We're looking at all of those things, as other jurisdictions have done as well, so that when we implement vessel monitoring, we can do it in an integrated way that allows us to do scientific assessment work as well as the important compliance work. There are a lot of different technologies available, Chair, and that's why we're making sure that when we adopt a new system, it's using the best and latest technology.

The CHAIR: What have we learnt from States such as Queensland, where they've been using VMS for decades? Surely Queensland would have ironed out most of the kinks and issues with the system, or the concept of VMS? What have we learnt from Queensland that we have directly implemented into New South Wales?

SEAN SLOAN: We're looking at all the jurisdictions, Chair. The Commonwealth has been using the more traditional VMS for quite some time.

The CHAIR: The Northern Territory has been using it for quite some time.

SEAN SLOAN: South Australia has used it. A number of jurisdictions use vessel monitoring systems. As I have mentioned, the technologies are advancing all the time. But there's also a significant cost element here. One thing that we're very mindful of is that commercial fishers ultimately will end up wearing some of the cost of the polling of the vessels. So whatever system we adopt, we want to make sure that it is suitable to ensure our ability to monitor the position of the vessels but doesn't impose unnecessary costs on the commercial fleet. We're looking at all of those issues as part of our trials, and that's why there are wider considerations.

The CHAIR: Is consideration being given for financial support for commercial fishermen to adopt this technology, given that the last BDO report we saw showed that most of the commercial sector is on the bare bones of their backside in terms of return on capital, or return on owners' equity? Is there consideration of giving some sort of subsidy or financial support for the industry to adopt this technology?

SEAN SLOAN: Chair, that's actually what that Commonwealth Government grant was for: to help us do this trial but also to help fund the fitment of those vessel monitoring units to the commercial fleet. That's part of that grant that we received from the Commonwealth Government. But the Commonwealth Government haven't paid for the ongoing management, administration and polling costs, which end up being worn by individual fishers. They are the sorts of considerations we have to take account of as part of the trial.

The CHAIR: On notice, can you come back with a bit of a dissection of how much of that 1.96 went to the fitting out of vessels for commercial fishermen and how much went to the specific running of the trial? Some sort of breakdown of costs would be great.

SEAN SLOAN: I am happy to do that, Chair. I can say that the vessels that have participated in the trial have had those vessel monitoring units fitted to the vessels with the money that was provided as part of that Commonwealth Government grant.

The CHAIR: To confirm, those vessels that have been fitted—they won't lose that equipment once the trial is over? Will they be able to keep that equipment on there?

SEAN SLOAN: I would need to check that, Chair, to see how that will roll through. But I can take that on notice.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Minister, will you rule out that you or this Government will sell off any of the DPI research stations?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We're doing a review—I think I talked about this loosely this morning—of research in New South Wales and how it's conducted. We want to make it fit for purpose for the future. We've got the former chief scientist, Mary O'Kane, doing that review. I'll be releasing the interim report that she has prepared soon, and then having a conversation with people across the sector about what we need to be doing as a government to support people in the ag sector now and into the future compared to looking at what happened 50 years ago and what might have been suitable 50 years ago. I also announced with the Premier a \$60 million package in the middle of last year to upgrade some of our key research facilities. That work is underway. I'll provide an update on that soon.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Minister, could those options you're looking at include selling off some of these assets and capabilities?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It's not a question of selling them off. The research stations, unless there are any exceptions to the rule, all sit on Crown land. So it's not a question of being able to sell them. But we're looking at what is going to be fit for purpose from now and into the future. That is an appropriate thing to do. That's something that farmers want us to do so that we can ensure our research program, which hasn't really been looked at for well over 12 years, is fit for purpose for the sector.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: So closing them down is on the table?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We're reviewing the research proposition. I'm not looking specifically at what should exist and what shouldn't exist. We've got Dr Mary O'Kane reviewing the research program and how it's conducted. All of these things will be open for discussion openly with the sector. Again, I'll release the interim report soon and it will be a public conversation.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Minister, when you say "soon", last year you told us that the ag commissioner was going to be announced soon. That was 358 days later—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: She's in place. Did you not see the announcement? Alison Stone—she's terrific, actually. You should meet with her.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Is "soon" 358 days or is it a closer period than that? Because that's what you said last time: the ag commissioner was soon. This report is going to be released soon. Can we expect it some time before March next year or is it sooner than that?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: You can expect to see the interim report well and truly before March next year.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Do you have the interim report?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I do.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Have you been briefed on the interim report?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'll be releasing the details of it soon and you'll be able to consider it. We'll be working with the sector on what some of the interim recommendations are. This is a whole piece of work that we have the former chief scientist and a panel of experts looking at to provide some recommendations. I will be working with the sector on any recommendations so that we can all move forward together. Again, this is something that people across the sector want, to see how our research program can better fit the needs of the sector now and into the future.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: How long have you had the interim report for?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm not sure. Sorry, I don't know. I can't tell you how many days.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Can you take that on notice, when you received the interim report?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Yes, I will take it on notice.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Minister, the release that you referred to before also had the Premier on it. Is this now sitting with the Premier, the future of these research and development capacities?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: So it will be your decision?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I just indicated as part of the previous answer that the announcement I made with the Premier was that we were going to conduct the review and that we had allocated \$60 million for refreshing some of our key facilities around the State. We jointly made that announcement together—I think it was back in August last year—and that work is well underway. The plan for how we deal with research, what recommendations come through and how I work directly with the sector will be a matter for me and then it will be a matter for government, which, as people would know, would be appropriate.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Will you guarantee there will be no diminishing or off-loading of DPI research development capacity or assets?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I want to improve the research offering that we've got in New South Wales. I want to work with the sector to make sure that it's fit for purpose well into the future. This is all about positively and proactively reviewing what is in place to make sure that it is operating in the way that people need it to. There's no point having research being conducted if it's not serving a purpose for people across the ag sector. This is a positive thing. It hasn't been looked at for well over 12 years, maybe even longer. It's a good thing to be looking at how—I mean, there's a whole bunch of new technology that hasn't been considered for that period of time. This is a positive.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Minister, what are the most recent figures when it comes to the gross value of production in the New South Wales ag industry?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: The industry is worth \$20 billion to the economy, which is really fantastic. It's an incredibly important sector for the New South Wales economy, but also broadly for our community. We grow the best food, fibre and produce in the world here in New South Wales. I celebrate the ag sector. We want to enhance it into the future. That it is worth that much to our economy means it's even more significant.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Are you concerned how much that has come down in the last couple of years?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: There are fluctuations in this sector, as people would appreciate, based on all kinds of things. It's still one of the highest figures that has been achieved in the history of the sector in the State. That's a wonderful thing. Obviously prices and market conditions vary from time to time, and weather conditions have impacts on certain products. It's not a fixed number. But it has been a couple of really great seasons for many, and that has been a boost for the New South Wales economy.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Minister, are you concerned that this decline is putting at risk the industry aspirations to reach \$30 billion by 2030?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We support the industry's aspirations to grow to that extent, and a lot of the things that I'm talking about as part of these answers are about that—so working with the sector for how we can improve, modernise, maybe in some cases expand part of our research offering isn't something that we're just dealing with in isolation. It's about working with the sector to give them every opportunity and to provide whatever support the Government can provide to help them reach the targets that they've set. I'd love for the sector to keep growing year on year. It obviously depends on a whole bunch of circumstances, and we'll support them every way we can. It matters for the economy.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Minister, can you tell me who the chair is of the Cattle Tick Ministerial Advisory Committee?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I can't, but I am happy for someone—Rachel might be able to provide that information.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: No, I don't need that from Ms Connell. Minister, when did the Cattle Tick Ministerial Advisory Committee last report to you?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I would have to take that on notice.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Would they have replied to you twice last year?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I would have to take that on notice. I'm happy to come back to you with the details, but I have to take it on notice.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Are you aware that as part of the cattle tick management program the Cattle Tick Ministerial Advisory Committee reports to you on its twice yearly meetings?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I will accept that if that's what you're suggesting to me. I don't know when it last has. I'll take it on notice.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Minister, would you like to see or are you expecting any changes to the cattle tick management program in New South Wales?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It's a really important program. We have to manage this threat to the industry, particularly around our northern borders of the State. There are a number of things in place for monitoring services through the department for resources on the ground, for supporting producers in the north of the State to monitor, manage and mitigate this issue. There are no plans to change that. It's something that the department is working with the sector on.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: So there'll be no changes to this program in, say, the next 12 months?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: There are no plans to make changes to it.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Minister, can you tell me where things up to in regard to the review of the tick management program in New South Wales?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I can't but perhaps someone from the department might be able to give you some up-to-date information.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: No, whether you could tell me where it was up to was my question.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm trying to provide the information to you and to the Committee. The department is right here. I'm happy for Rachel to provide the information.

RACHEL CONNELL: I'm happy to, yes.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'd like for her to do that.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Ms Connell, can the Minister tell me where things are up to regarding the tick management review in New South Wales?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: That's a ridiculous question—genuinely, come on.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Minister, part of what I'm trying to establish here is your understanding of what you've just described as a very important issue. Minister, can you tell me how far south cattle tick was detected over this summer?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Well, can we finish with the—you've asked a question—

RACHEL CONNELL: I want to provide some information about—

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: My question is to you, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No, we need to be able to answer the question.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Yes, my question, Minister—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: There was a question asked. We would like to provide information. I think there are people tuning in who would be interested. That's why we're here.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Point of order: My question was clearly directed to the Minister about her knowledge on this, and she is continuing to deflect that question.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No, I'm trying to provide an answer.

The CHAIR: The Minister is entitled to pass the answer onto one of her staff. But you are also entitled to, like previous members have, say you'll take that up with the appropriate staff in the afternoon or at a later date. That is your choice.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Which I'll be quite happy to do.

The CHAIR: But you didn't state that.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: My question is: Minister, can you tell me how far south cattle tick was detected over this summer?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm happy to take the details of that on notice.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Minister, can you tell me how the special purpose pest management rate is raised?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No. I'm happy for the department to provide you with some information if you'd like to get some information about that.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Is it collected from ratepayers?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm happy for information to be provided to you.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Do you know how many ratepayers were contributing to that fund?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I can give you that information. I wouldn't know the figure of how many ratepayers off the top of my head, but I'm happy to get that information for you. Alternatively, the department can provide the information today. We're happy to be as helpful as we can.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I can chase that up later. Minister, given that it is ratepayer collected money—unless anyone wants to disagree with that? Ms Lorimer-Ward, is that correct?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: Yes.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: This is ratepayer collected money. How come when I asked a question on notice about what this money was spent on, you wouldn't tell me what this money is going towards?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: You'll need to be more specific, I'm sorry.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I asked a question on notice and my specific question was, "What is the breakdown of how this money is spent, including programs that it funded in financial year 2023-24?" Why would that information not be available to me representing the ratepayers who are contributing to that fund?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Again, you'll need to be more specific. If you're referring to a question on notice, I think we provided you some information yesterday about this. We're here in estimates today. If you want to get some further information about the breakdown, we're here now. Kate Lorimer-Ward is right here, and I'm sure can provide some further information. But there's no tricks here. I'm happy to provide whatever information you'd like. Some of the specific details, we might need to come back on; that's appropriate.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Why wasn't that answer provided in the question on notice when I asked it?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I can't recall the specifics of an answer that was provided, but we're here right now. If you have some questions that you'd like to ask, the department is right here.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I'm trying to understand your understanding of this rate. Let's say the money has been allocated to cane toad use, because I can't actually find out that information from you. For the sake of argument, if it is used for cane toad control and we get a late outbreak of locust, do you expect that the money would be redirected from the cane toad control program that it's earmarked for back to locusts where it was originally planned?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm going to hand over to Kate to provide some specific information to assist you.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Sure.

KATE LORIMER-WARD: There is a reserve of funds that are retained inside the pest management levy fund to fund the locust control programs. They are protected funds.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Coming back to you, Minister, will you take on notice to provide me a breakdown of what that money was spent on in 2023-24?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm happy to take anything on notice.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: And you'll provide that? I just don't get why it would be a secret. There's 117,000—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: That's why we're here. Ask your questions.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I've asked my question; you can't answer it. I just don't get why—I've asked that question through a—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Sorry, the question you've just asked me is will I take it on notice. I've said I'll take it on notice.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: You've also said it's not a secret. I've asked that question through a question on notice and you haven't provided that information. If you could provide that on notice, that would be great.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Sure.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, I want to go back to the issue of regional crime. This morning Deputy Commissioner Paul Pisanos was on Ben Fordham's program and he refused to say that there are any improvements in the regional crime epidemic that we're seeing. If the deputy commissioner who's in charge of regional operations doesn't believe that things are improving, why is the Minns Government continuing with the same programs that they've rolled out before?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: A couple of things on that. I didn't hear the interview that the deputy commissioner gave on the radio this morning, but I did meet with him yesterday. This is an important issue that is facing people in regional communities across the State and it's something that the Government is taking very seriously. I did meet with the deputy commissioner yesterday to get some further information on operations that they're conducting, including operation mongoose, which is the one that's specifically dealing with some of these issues. I also met with the police Minister yesterday to get further, updated information on where that work is up to.

As people would appreciate, that's only part of the way to deal with this long-term issue. We can't police our way out of complex long-term issues, but the police are doing an incredible job. They are doing a fantastic job dealing with the issues that they have to deal with. Some of these stories that we're hearing about incidents

that have occurred in regional communities are very confronting. It's awful what is happening to some members of the community, and the police are doing a fantastic job dealing with it. The Government is also taking this seriously. You would be aware that we've made significant changes to bail laws and other things to try to deal with the short-term issue here.

The Hon. WES FANG: Dealing with that issue then, given that you have made significant changes, why didn't Deputy Commissioner Pisanos indicate that there has been improvement?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Mr Fang, this is not something that gets fixed overnight. I think that it would be more appropriate and helpful if the National Party and the Opposition could be more constructive about working with the community and with all of us to find a solution.

The Hon. WES FANG: I was in Kempsey on the weekend, Minister. You weren't.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Is that a question? I will let you finish.

The Hon. WES FANG: I was just making the point.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: What was the point, sorry?

The Hon. WES FANG: Do you support raising the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: These are significant issues that the Government is grappling with. I think it should be done in a more constructive way, and that's certainly what the community expects.

The Hon. WES FANG: That's not really an answer that is directly relevant to the question.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm not here to offer personal views. These are issues that the Government—

The Hon. WES FANG: You're the Minister for Regional New South Wales. Do you believe that the age of criminal responsibility should be raised from 10 to 14?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm not offering opinions on random policy concepts. What I'm saying to you, Mr Fang—

The Hon. WES FANG: That's not a random policy concept. You're the Minister for Regional New South Wales. Do you believe that raising the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14 will increase or decrease the amount of regional crime that we are seeing?

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Point of order: I'm really struggling to understand how this could be relevant to the administration of the portfolio. It's a policy question.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: She's the Minister for Regional New South Wales.

The Hon. WES FANG: It's directly relevant.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: She's not responsible for the legislation; a different Minister is.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: To the point of order: It's also seeking an opinion.

The CHAIR: Sorry to you, Mr Lawrence, but I think Mr Primrose gives a more compelling argument. There would be some argument to say that it is within the remit of the Minister, but Mr Primrose is right that it is seeking a personal opinion. I would ask that you either rephrase or move on to another topic.

The Hon. WES FANG: I will rephrase the question then. As the Minister for Regional New South Wales, do you believe that raising the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14 will improve or make worse the epidemic of regional crime?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: My answer to that question will be a continuation of the answers that I have given. These are issues that need to be dealt with by the Government in a properly considered way. We have put more police on the ground. We are focused on recruiting more police. As I have said, this is not an issue that people can police their way out of; it's a whole community issue that needs to be dealt with. People are entitled to feel safe in their homes. As the Minister for Regional New South Wales, it's not within my remit to deal with the specific work of police and the specific work of the Attorney General. The Government is dealing with these issues in a broad way and taking them very seriously.

The Hon. WES FANG: Given that you have refused to rule it out, does that mean that the Government is considering raising the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: This is ridiculous.

The Hon. WES FANG: It's not a joke.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: You'll have an opportunity to speak to two people who have this specifically in their portfolio. I'm not avoiding anything. I'm here to answer questions about the portfolio that I'm responsible for, and I am talking about the broader work that the Government is doing on this issue at the moment.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, do you not see that "doing a doli", as some young offenders say, is perhaps part of the issue that we are seeing in rural and regional New South Wales? Do you accept that those issues are directly responsible for the recidivism and issues that we are seeing in rural and regional New South Wales with the crime epidemic?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: As the Minister for Agriculture, and Minister for Regional New South Wales, with a focus on regional development, I don't have advice on what is being argued or not argued in individual circumstances in individual cases. I don't have that information.

The Hon. WES FANG: You are the Minister for Regional New South Wales—

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mr Fang, your time has elapsed. You will have to pick this up at the next round.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Minister, I want to ask you about Coffs Coast Wildlife Sanctuary holding after-hours events where they serve alcohol while guests interact with dolphins and seals. I know you have sent me a letter in response to this—and I thank you for that letter—in which you advised me that the facility was inspected on 20 December and some corrective actions were taken. First of all, when you say "corrective actions were taken", do you mean that a formal corrective action request, a CAR, was issued under the exhibited animals Act?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I am aware of the issue, and I know we have corresponded about your concerns about functions occurring and alcohol being consumed around these animals. People have had a look at it. I think it'll be helpful to get the department to give you some specific information in relation to your question, because I understand that this is something that you're quite concerned with. That would be Rachel.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I might just get a very brief run-down and then we can talk further in the afternoon, if that's okay.

RACHEL CONNELL: I'll come back to you on that one this afternoon.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: In your letter you talked about the fact that the rules around the beverages were being changed. There are new policies on glass near exhibits, banning of beverages—which I assume means alcoholic beverages—and limiting some of the photo opportunities. Since your letter on 20 December, I have been sent further images, which I will give the secretariat to pass up to you, which suggest that some of the new policies are not being followed. This was an event on Valentine's Day, so it was 14 February. It was some time after your letter came to me. I understand that this is probably the first time you have seen these images. Can I leave those with you to pass on to the department and ensure that there is further investigation into this and whether the new policies are being adhered to?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Yes. Thank you. You have given me some photos. I take you at your word that this is the facility. I haven't been there, so I take your word that this is the facility and the dates that you have indicated. I am happy to seek further advice and check the details for you. I'm happy to come back directly to you and also on notice.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you. Just to clarify, these images are from the facility's Facebook page, posted in respect of—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I accept what you're putting to me.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: It's just so you have that background information. They posted about their Valentine's Day event. I want to jump back to the independent office. Do you have a timeline for when we might see some legislation before the Parliament? Are we expecting it sometime this year or next year?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Work is very much underway in terms of our proposal to establish this office. I intend to have that work completed this year. I'm not in a position to provide the full details today, but I'm happy to give you some indication about what some of the thinking is about what this office will do, if that assists. One of the key functions that we're looking for it to have is oversight—you're well aware of this, but for everyone else who is paying attention to this, there just has not been proper oversight of how animal welfare enforcement and other work is occurring in New South Wales. That's a problem for a number of reasons. First of all, when we're having proper policy discussions about how to better deal with it and when we're having conversations in government about how to resource the community's concerns and provide better protections for

animals in New South Wales, it's difficult to be able to do that and make properly informed decisions without the right information.

You would be aware that we've changed the law to require the charitable organisations that we've got doing the work now to report more transparently so that people can see the types of issues that we are dealing with, what resources need to be put in place in order to better deal with these issues and even what animals are needing assistance. Part of the responsibility of this office will be better oversight of how that work is being conducted and, therefore, better information for government to make policy and financial decisions, but also for you and people in the community to get a better understanding of the actual facts that we are dealing with.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Will the office also have a role in the POCTAA review that's taking place? I know that's another Labor commitment. I know you mentioned the other day that the review of POCTAA will happen in this term of government. Is the current rough timeline to set up the independent office first and then also get input from that office before the POCTAA regulations come to the House for consideration?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: That will potentially be the case. I'm not trying to be tricky; I'm being as open as possible in terms of the thinking. Ideally that's the order that I'd like to do it in. We have made the commitment to review the POCTA Act. I do want to get that work underway. We are doing work on it already, but I do want to open that up into the public domain as soon as possible. We do want to get feedback from people but, as I've indicated before in estimates and other places, it's not the Government's intention to start again with this, because I know people have been consulted and there have been a number of parliamentary inquiries into various issues. The election commitment we made was to review it, but being mindful of all these other reviews and the feedback that has been provided over the past couple of years. I don't want to cause any delays and I don't want us to reopen everything. We are taking all of the feedback that has been provided over the past few years to formulate what we will put out as a position on it, and then we will seek feedback.

I do want to get that done sooner rather than later. I am also really conscious that we did the POCTAA regulation over the summer. It wasn't ideal to do it that way, but it hadn't been dealt with by the previous Government. I think it was seven years or maybe more since that regulation had been dealt with. I know that was a source of frustration for you and for others, as well as getting the Parliament to say to the Government, "Get it done." We did that, but I certainly understand the feedback that came through from that. We knew it would happen. It was a short timetable. There was six months and it was the summer period. None of it was ideal, but I respect the will of the Parliament and so we did get it done. When we took the feedback from people on board about that timetable, my response was, "You'll have an opportunity through POCTAA." I don't want to reopen this whole thing to start it from scratch, but I also don't want to stymie—

The Hon. EMMA HURST: But there will be some sort of consultation process.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Yes, we want proper feedback. You're looking for a timeline. It will be sooner rather than later.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: With the independent office legislation, will there be consultation or an exposure draft process around that?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We haven't resolved that yet. Like I said, I'm happy to provide you with as much information about the thinking at the moment, which is the oversight role. I think that is going to be important for having more transparency around what is happening in this space and what the charities are doing. That information being provided to the Government and to the public for making those decisions, that's the work that we're looking at at the moment. I'm happy to be transparent with the public, but I also know you've got a very specific interest in this, so I'm happy to engage with you directly about the thinking.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: So the big public consultation will probably be more around POCTAA?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Yes.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: About the veterinary shortage and some of the recommendations from the report, one of the key issues is the current lack of title protection for vet nurses and vet technicians who are entirely unregulated at the moment. I have two questions. Is this something that you remain committed to addressing as part of the review of the whole veterinary practices regulatory framework, and are you willing to meet with the Regulation of Veterinary Nurses and Technologists Working Party in this space?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Sure. In answer to the last part first, I'm happy to meet with that organisation and anyone else who is involved in this field. Often at estimates you ask me to meet with groups, and I do afterwards. It's useful information. This is an issue. The shortage that we've got for vets is a significant issue. This is not a new issue, but it is something that we do need to deal with. The recommendations that came out of the inquiry are important. Some of them have to do with engaging with the Federal Government. We're doing that.

We've also expanded the Welcome Experience to specifically focus on vets and provide support for vets to move into regional communities. It's a problem.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: With the review that was committed to in the response to the inquiry, do you expect that that review will be completed within this term of government?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Let me take the specific timeline on notice. The answer is not no, but I want to provide you with the most accurate timetable that I can. But we know that this is an issue.

The CHAIR: Minister, can you confirm that the Fisheries compliance unit in your department has received a significant cut to their operational budget for this current financial year?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: That would be a question for Sean.

SEAN SLOAN: Chair, the budget for the whole Fisheries group is—

The CHAIR: I'm looking specifically at the compliance unit. My understanding is it has been cut from \$4.8 million to \$2.3 million. I'm wondering whether you can confirm that the operational budget has been cut by close to 50 per cent.

SEAN SLOAN: No, those figures don't sound right to me, Chair. I'll need to check that and come back to you with the accurate figures. Those figures don't sound right to me.

The CHAIR: Are you acknowledging that there has been a cut to the operational budget of the compliance unit?

SEAN SLOAN: The operating budget across the whole Fisheries group has been reduced this year, and all groups are now actively working to fit within their budgets. It's not just Fisheries compliance. Chair, I don't have the exact figures at my fingertips, but I'm happy to take that on notice.

The CHAIR: If you could take that on notice, maybe we can pick it up in more detail when we come back after lunch. What specific cost-savings measures have you asked the compliance unit to implement to meet those cuts?

SEAN SLOAN: Chair, I haven't given any specific directions. Each of the directors that are responsible for their part of the business are essentially responsible for managing their budgets, and that's a responsibility that each part of the business has.

The CHAIR: What directions has the director of the compliance unit given regarding cost savings in this area? Has he asked them to cut back on sending out infringement letters due to postage? Has he said, "We've got to hold back on replacing uniforms"? Has he said, "No more overtime"? Has he said, "We need to limit our patrols to two patrols a week"? Have there been discussions with Revenue NSW about the fees they charge to process infringement notices? What measures has he or she taken to meet those budget cuts?

SEAN SLOAN: Chair, none of the things that you've mentioned are strategies that I've heard.

The CHAIR: Are you able to take that on notice and come back with a list or description of how the Fisheries compliance unit is meeting its requirements to fit within the budget cuts?

SEAN SLOAN: I'm happy to take that on notice, Chair.

STEVE ORR: Mr Banasiak, if I could just make the comment that the budget cuts have not necessarily been budget cuts per se. In fact, additional money has been provided to Sean's area. An additional \$5 million was provided to his area. I think it is probably better to characterise it as people fitting within their allocated budget as opposed to "There have been budget cuts."

The CHAIR: If what has been reported to me is accurate, that their operational budget in 2022-23 was \$4.8 million, and now they are saying, "You have to fit within \$2.3 million"—and we can debate whether those figures are 100 per cent accurate—then their budget has been reduced. Yes, they have to fit within the new budget, but effectively their budget has been reduced.

STEVE ORR: Sorry, Mr Banasiak. As Mr Sloan said, we can come back and explore that this afternoon.

The CHAIR: That would be great. Minister, my understanding is that the department has a large offshore patrol boat called OPV *Solitary Ranger*. This vessel is now over three years old. Are you able to confirm if this vessel has a standalone and sufficient operating budget to be able to do its work?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I will hand over to Sean for that. I don't know about the specific boat.

SEAN SLOAN: Thanks, Minister. Thanks, Chair. The *Solitary Ranger* is, I guess, the pride of the fleet for our Fisheries unit. It costs us about \$10,000 a day to put her to sea. Obviously, we use the *Solitary Ranger* in a whole range of things that goes beyond Fisheries compliance. We use her to do some research activities, as well as doing work for other agencies.

The CHAIR: Do you charge those other agencies for the use of that vessel?

SEAN SLOAN: We do, and those sort of arrangements ebb and flow each year. Parks Australia—there's a whole range of organisations, maritime and others, that we partner with from time to time and year on year. But the way that we fund the activity of that vessel year on year changes, depending on who we're partnering with.

The CHAIR: Perhaps on notice, can you tell us how many days this ranger has been out in the last 12 months so we get a gauge of what it's costing the department to run over a 12-month period?

SEAN SLOAN: Happy to take that on notice, Chair.

The CHAIR: That would be great. Thank you. Minister, can I just go to some issues around certain Fisheries plans? Can you just tell me where we're at with the trout action plan, the Murray cod action plan and the recreational fishing action plan? My engagement with the Council of Freshwater Anglers has indicated that they've worked extensively with your Government on these plans, and yet those plans haven't been released by your department, and they are, obviously, wondering where they're at.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Sure. I've made a couple of announcements in recent days about work that we are doing in this sector, as you would be aware. I'll start with the last one, the trout plan. We'll be releasing the details of that shortly. There has been work and feedback provided through the committees on that, and so I'll provide the details of that soon. Happy to talk you through it.

The CHAIR: Just on that, how is that plan being informed by Federal Minister Tanya Plibersek's announcement the other day, where she's talking about reducing where trout will be stocked? How is that going to inform your plans for this species, given that it is a very popular sports fish and a large number of recreational fishing fee receipt holders fish for this fish and they also directly contribute to the cost of stocking this fish? If we see a decline in their ability to catch it, we're going to see a decline, potentially, in the fishing fee receipt as well, and we could potentially go into this spiral of decline in terms of investment in restocking of this species.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Our plan is ready to be released. I know a lot of work's been put into it and feedback received through the committees that you have referred to. I'll be releasing the details of it shortly. You're right: It is a really popular species for restocking. Our restocking program will continue. We will, obviously, work in with plans that the Federal Government might have. I haven't had any direct communication with the Federal Government on it, but we committed—it was an election commitment, in fact—to have this plan in place, and I'll release the details of it shortly. But I won't be revisiting it, if that answers your question.

The CHAIR: Were you aware of Ms Plibersek's comments before I just raised them?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I haven't seen them, no.

The CHAIR: You haven't seen it. That was the trout action plan. The Murray cod action plan, same—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Same.

The CHAIR: Recreational fishing action plan—same?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Yes, and we have got to work through—the two restocking, those plans, I'll release shortly. The broader work, we'll have to work through budget processes as well. But I certainly appreciate people have put a lot of work in and a lot of thinking about how to improve recreational fishing across the State, and I want to support people to do that.

The CHAIR: Just in the 30 seconds I've got, I will try and get some clarity on yesterday's press release, where you talked about a recreational fishing advisory council to oversee the trust fund. I appreciate that was sort of an election commitment. What is going to happen to the existing committees? And what's going to happen to RF NSW, who normally approved the trust fund expenditure and then sent them up to you? Where do they fit in this new process you're outlining?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: This was an election commitment. We'll have the committee that exists now to deal with advice on policy, strategy, that kind of thing, which they are assisting with now. That will remain in place. There's currently saltwater and freshwater councils that provide advice on spending. They will be gone, and there will be this new board in place to provide advice on governance and the spending of funds to me. So it'll be policy and strategy in the same way that people provide advice now and then a new board that will provide governance and spend advice. I've said many times before—and it's a genuine view—we want to get more of a

focus on getting these funds back to the grassroots, back to fishers, back to people who are paying the fees, and the work that these committees will be doing, going forward, will have a focus on assisting and providing advice in that regard.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I'll pass to the Opposition.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Thank you, Chair. Minister, without going over again the entire history—because I think we've got that covered now—on October 30 a document was signed off by Mr Bolton, outlining that no tenders be accepted for the Dubbo multi-sport facility, as insufficient funds were available. The recommendation outlines that the client should consider all available options, including alternate sites, to progress the project. Given PCYC put forward an alternate site where the project could be done within scope and within budget, why did you not allow this to happen?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm happy to again report to the Committee and to the community of Dubbo the reasons for the decision. Mr Bolton's here to answer any specific questions you've got about those documents. But the proposition that I had, at the end of the day, was about a new proposal. People are welcome to make this new proposal, and they're welcome to engage with the Government about this new proposal that I've given plenty of answers on today. The information that I had separately to that was that this new proposal was in the ballpark of \$70 million. Those funds are just not available. But the proposition here was a new proposal, compared to a variation for however many times before that this project was not delivered by the previous Government. The new proposal with—as I've indicated before, I don't have confirmation that the PCYC have purchased a building. But, if that's something that they're looking to do, if that's something they want to talk to government about, they're welcome to engage.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Minister, the advice said a new site should be considered. Why did you not do that?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Because the advice that I considered was a new proposal, compared to yet another variation. I've talked about the history of this for nearly seven years, where the local member and other former Ministers did media opportunities, standing with shovels, pretending to dig dirt in the ground for locations that were not allocated to this proposal. There have been various proponents over the almost seven years that this project has been discussed. I outlined that the council were around from the beginning. They withdrew in 2020.

The Hon. WES FANG: Chair, I think we're now re-covering old ground.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: At some point the local university was a part of the consideration for a location.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'll take a point of order. I'm not sure this is relevant now to the question that was asked.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I wish that these things had been resolved before now. There's a lot of chatter. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to be doing here.

The CHAIR: I'm trying to see whether Mr Fang does want to take a point of order.

The Hon. WES FANG: I've taken a point of order.

The CHAIR: What is the point of order?

The Hon. WES FANG: I think that the Minister is now straying from the direct relevance, and I'd ask that Mrs Overall be allowed to move on.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: To the point of order: The Minister's clearly being directly relevant, as you directed earlier.

The CHAIR: Yes. To assure Mr Primrose, in terms of how this will be treated, it'll be treated the same way as how the President treats questions of relevance, whether direct or general, in the Chamber. The Minister is being directly relevant to the question or part thereof. So, unless Mrs Overall wants to press further or—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I haven't finished. Sorry, I was interrupted by the point of order. It is important. This is a question about location and a consideration for a new location, and then a new location. This is part of the farcical history of this project, which is a disappointment to the community by the previous Government. The council were involved at the start, as I was saying. They withdrew in 2020 because these kinds of issues weren't resolved. The university was involved at some point, and various locations were considered, as part of that.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Minister, again, I draw your attention to the more direct aspects of—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm answering the question about location.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: No, you're not. You're going over the timeline again and again and again.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Yet again, there was a discussion about location, because in October there wasn't a location.

The CHAIR: Order!

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: That's very disappointing for the people of Dubbo.

The CHAIR: Now that we have all taken a breath, Mrs Overall, would you like to ask a follow-up question?

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: I'll ask you one more thing, Minister. I ask you to answer it directly and keep it directly relevant. It's a fairly easy question; a yes or no will suffice. Will you commit to supporting the Dubbo community in seeing this important project brought to fruition by doing all in your power to back it?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm disappointed that the previous Government—

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: That's not what I asked, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm answering the question. I'm entitled to answer the question—

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: I asked will you commit to supporting that community in backing the project?

The CHAIR: Order!

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm not going to be instructed by a National Party member about how I should answer the question. I'm going to answer the question.

The Hon. WES FANG: No, you're not being directly relevant.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Well, answer the question.

The CHAIR: Order! We've had this argument before. You cannot direct a witness to answer in a particular way, as frustrating as it may be.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Directly relevant, Chair.

The CHAIR: It has to be directly relevant. I think we should at least give the witness, whoever they are, whether it is a Minister or a public servant, at least 30 seconds before we interject.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Thirty seconds—we're timing.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: This project should have been built when it was first committed to in 2018 for \$4 million. It is a significant disappointment to the community, I'm sure. They are entitled to be disappointed that this project that was promised and promised—

The Hon. WES FANG: They're disappointed in you, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —when people pretended to do media stunts, digging holes in the ground where there was no location yet, no project.

The Hon. WES FANG: No, Minister, they are disappointed in you.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Every year there was a new allocation of money but no location for this project to be delivered. People are entitled to be disappointed about that.

The Hon. WES FANG: Now there's no money in the budget at all.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I have indicated that the proposal is now a new proposal. People are entitled, across the community—including in Dubbo, including the PCYC—

The Hon. WES FANG: Where is the money, Minister?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —to engage with the Government about any proposal that they think is of interest to their community.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: And we hope that you'll back that community.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We'll follow proper process—

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Chair, before we run out of time, if I could move on.

The CHAIR: Order!

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —because that is one of the things that we were elected to do.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Lovely. I have other questions to put to you, Minister. Regional Media Fund round one, what was the total funding?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: This is a couple of years ago now, so I'll have to take the specific number on notice, unless somebody has it to hand.

JAMES BOLTON: I'll have it, in a second.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We will find the figure for you.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: It was \$3 million—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Thank you.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: —across all of regional New South Wales. Are you aware of how many regional media organisations received grants for round one?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Round one, again, is some time ago. I'm happy to take the specifics on notice. We announced it. It's all in the public domain, and I'm happy to provide the list of recipients.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: It's 47, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Thank you.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: We're already up to Regional Media Fund round two.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Correct.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: That should be more front of mind for you, as it was only 18 December 2024. That election commitment for \$3 million of government advertising to be spent on regional newspapers, is that \$3 million in addition to the Regional Media Fund round two?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No, we haven't made an election commitment to increase advertising. In fact, we made an election commitment to reduce advertising in media across the board. But we have provided support to regional media outlets through a couple of rounds of this particular fund. The first round had a focus on helping outlets to expand their digital remit and improve their resources for being able to find new audiences. The feedback that we received for the second round was that people wanted some more direct support, because we're certainly very conscious of the fact that a lot of regional newspapers are struggling and having a tough time continuing as business entities, for a range of reasons. We heard that feedback for round two and have provided some direct support.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Is there any additional funding to the original \$3 million? Is round two an additional funding exercise or are you still using up the rest of \$3 million?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No, there are two rounds. I can't remember the exact dollars. Somebody will come back to me.

STEVE ORR: Six.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: There you go, \$6 million.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Is that \$6 million in the second round?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No.

STEVE ORR: Total.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Total.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Yes. This has been announced, so it's in the public domain. I'm very happy to provide the specific details. We listened to the feedback of—

The Hon. WES FANG: You should know the specific details.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm not interested in commentary from the sidelines, Mr Fang. We released this information and took the feedback on board. Again, the first round was to modernise and digitalise; the second round was more direct support, because they are doing it tough. We'll continue to engage with the sector because that's the truth.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Yes, we're very aware that they're doing it tough. Of the original \$3 million, Minister, was all of that allocated to those 47 grant recipients?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I think, from memory—again, I'll have to take the specifics on notice, because this was quite some time ago, but I understand the question. From memory, I think there might have been a little left over, which was put into the second round, but somebody might check that for me. I'll confirm that on notice for you.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Great. If that's the case, perhaps you can just clarify as well, is that because of the numbers that did receive the grant or apply for the grants, which was 47? A bit of clarity around that would be great. The grant amount for round two, do you know what that is going to be or has it been decided?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We have announced it. I'll have to—

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: That's right. I've asked you what it is.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —the specific numbers—

STEVE ORR: It's \$3 million.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It's \$3 million. There you go.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Sorry, let me clarify. The funding amount per eligible applicant, I should state, compared to round one.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Sorry, I see. They were different propositions. People were applying for different things. Respectfully to all of the applicants, just because you apply, it doesn't mean it's automatically granted. It will have been through a process to work out whether it was in line with the grant guidelines for this particular project and whether it was something that could be delivered. For the specific details of it, as per your specific question, I'm happy to provide further information on notice, unless somebody has it.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: The funding amount is going to be approximately \$29,000 per eligible applicant.

JAMES BOLTON: Yes, \$29,000.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Minister, that has been reduced from round one.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: They were different propositions. It's not the same—the two rounds were not the same offering.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Are you aware of how much it has been reduced by?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: But it's not a question of reduction. They were different offerings.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Are you aware of what it has been reduced by?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No, I'm happy to provide all of the—

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Approximately 40 per cent.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: In order to assist, I'm happy to provide the details of both rounds on notice and both lots of recipients on notice.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: I hear what you're saying, Minister, they're different propositions, and you're quite right. Round two is to improve long-term sustainability, encourage innovation in business, creation of employment pathways and diversification across all operational areas. That's all terrific, but that's a huge ask for \$29,000, wouldn't you agree?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Well it's better than nothing, and I don't think you guys made much of a contribution.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Have you actually had the opportunity to meet with Country Press New South Wales?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Yes.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: What have your discussions been in relation to government support around all of that? Has their advice informed round two?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Yes. I think I've indicated that as part of the answer.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: No, I don't think you did.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: The first round was a focus on more of a digital aspect, I guess. I don't know if that's correctly—I'll provide the details on notice. The second round was more practical support for their business operations, because they gave us feedback that that's what they preferred. We listened to stakeholders, as a government. We made an election commitment to provide this support in line with feedback that we had received from the sector. We engaged with them, as the Government, about what they needed. We set up a process for people to apply. I acknowledge—and I have acknowledged in this answer—that regional media outlets are doing it tough. It's a changing environment, in terms of how people get news. I suspect Sydney-based newspapers are in the same boat, and people are getting news from all different types of channels. The Government will continue to engage with the sector, if it can provide further support in this space.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: The decision to restrict round two of the funding to regional newspapers only, was that also because of an election commitment?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: All of this was an election commitment, to provide these funds and to support—

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: But why specifically regional newspapers?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It was about regional media.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Regional media is more than regional newspapers, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Sure.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: I am asking you why the focus was regional newspapers specifically.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: The Government made the decision that regional newspapers needed a particular amount of support, and that's where the funds were allocated for people to apply.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Talking about, again, regional newspapers specifically, we are seeing advertisements for New South Wales Government being booked in newspapers such as *The Canberra Times* but not in regional newspapers over the border in nearby New South Wales. Can you explain why that's the situation?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: As you are well aware, since we are both in Queanbeyan, people in Queanbeyan read *The Canberra Times*. It is directly relevant.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: And *The Canberra Times* is Canberra based.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Sure, but people in Queanbeyan read the paper. Advertising is something that the Government made a commitment to reduce across the board. I can't remember the percentage off the top of my head—I will take that on notice—but we made a commitment that we had to get that spend under control in the budget circumstances that we have got. I'm sure decisions about placing ads in that newspaper would have been made in line with the New South Wales community that read that newspaper. But I haven't made that decision. I'm happy to seek further information from the people who do.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: That would be great, because advertising in *The Canberra Times* isn't actually supporting New South Wales regional media. I've got other questions but, I think, Scott, you've got some too.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: But advertising is—

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Thank you, Minister—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —to communicate with the community.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Point of order: The member gave a throwaway line and now the Minister is seeking to respond. I think it's appropriate that the Minister be able to respond to the point that was just put to her. It's not commentary.

The CHAIR: Which I think she just did, as you were taking a point of order.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I'm happy to move on, Chair.

The CHAIR: I note that, yes, the throwaway lines aren't helpful.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: And advertising is about informing the community, wherever the community is receiving information.

The CHAIR: Which is exactly how you responded.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Minister, in response to the Natural Resources Commission's Invasive Species Management Review, you put out a release that said that, in line with the report recommendations, you are investing \$26 million into pig control programs. Minister, are you aware which recommendations those programs are in line with? If you don't know, take it on notice. That's absolutely fine.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No, I'm going to answer this question. It's important that I give some relevant context for this.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Point of order: The relevance here is clearly the recommendations in the NRC report.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I'm three words in.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: To the point of order: Provided the Minister is relevant—

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Directly relevant.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: —and I'm happy for your interpretation of that being directly relevant, then she should be able to proceed.

The CHAIR: She currently is at the moment, but I'll be listening.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Thank you. We have allocated that amount of money to the feral pest program with a particular focus on pigs, because pigs have been a particular issue over the last couple of years. It has been quite a successful program. The NRC report, which the Government asked the Natural Resources Commission to do, is a really important piece of work to give the Government advice on how to better deal with our overarching strategy for dealing with pests and weeds. We are continuing to deal with these problems as they occur, pigs being a relevant problem at the moment. But the advice from the NRC, which we have asked them to provide, is how we can broaden the support that we are providing to landholders, farmers and others for how these issues can be dealt with in a more holistic way across government to share resources between departments, rather than having to go through the process of fighting for money for each individual issue as it occurs. It's a very important piece of work.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Minister, you're not answering the question.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: You asked me about the NRC report—

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I asked about the recommendations. Can I just move on?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: —and I'm literally answering the question.

The Hon. WES FANG: You're not answering the question, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: We asked the NRC to provide this report and we will be taking their interim advice on board as we work through these plans for better resourcing across the board for how we deal with supporting people to manage pests and weeds. That's why we have got the biosecurity commissioner in place.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: That's nothing to do with the question.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: It's literally the question. I'm literally answering the question.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Looking at your disclosures, you had three meetings in the first five weeks of the reporting period. Is that a busy period for you, three meetings in five weeks?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: You'll have to be more specific. What period are you talking about?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: The first five weeks of the last reporting period. On top of that, while you are considering that, in that three-month period you met with just two councils and one JO. There are more than 90 councils in regional New South Wales. Is your plan to get through these at that rate, which will take about eight years to meet all regional councils?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: What is the question here? Am I meeting with councils? Yes, I meet with councils.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Are you doing anything?

The Hon. WES FANG: It's about your diary disclosures that were tabled.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Minister, from 17 October—

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Sorry, Chair, I'm going to answer the question.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I'm expanding the question because you didn't understand it.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: No, I haven't answered.

The CHAIR: To be fair, Minister, I think you were seeking clarification on what the actual question was. I, too, was struggling because there were about three questions in it. Mr Barrett?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: For the first five weeks of the last reporting period, you had three meetings. You met with two councils in that period. From 17 October to 7 November you had no meetings at all. Minister, what do we say to stakeholders that can't get a meeting with you? Are you too busy to meet with stakeholders because of this heavy workload?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: That is a different question, but I am happy to answer it. Perhaps you might want to get your question straight, but I'm happy to answer it. I do meet with councils. I don't know what happened during that period; perhaps Parliament was sitting. I'll have to check the dates. I'm not sure. I am very busy because there is a lot going on in this portfolio. I've covered a whole range of really fantastic initiatives that the Government is dealing with today. There are a number of problems that we need to continue to grapple with, so I meet with stakeholders all the time. I have met with a number of councils. Sometimes I will address—

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Two of them in three months.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: Sorry, I am answering the question. You have to let me answer the question.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: You haven't answered a question in three hours. Why would we expect an answer now?

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I don't need commentary from the sidelines. I'm trying to answer the question.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I'm done. Let the bell ring.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: You asked the question and I'm answering the question. That's how this works. Sometimes I meet with councils as a group. They have joint organisations. You just referred to one.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: No, you don't. It would be in the disclosures.

The Hon. WES FANG: You should be thoroughly embarrassed, Minister.

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I think I did the Central West group in Parliament when they visited late last year. Sometimes I meet with them in groups. Sometimes when I've been doing some consultation on, for example, the Regional Development Trust, we have a whole group of stakeholders together in one room so we can cover a topic with a range of councils at one time.

The Hon. WES FANG: The initiative!

The Hon. TARA MORIARTY: I try to make my time go as far as I possibly can. If stakeholders want to meet, the door is open.

The CHAIR: That has effectively taken us to 12.45 p.m. I'm looking at the Government for questions.

The Hon. WES FANG: Why would they ask questions? We can't get any answers.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: You ask them and then try to answer them.

The Hon. WES FANG: They are certainly better answers than the Minister gives.

The CHAIR: As there are no questions from the Government, thank you, Minister. We will return back with the remainder of the public servants, with some additions, at 2.00 p.m.

(The Minister withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

Ms KATE MEAGHER, Deputy Secretary, Delivery and Engagement Group, Premier's Department, affirmed and examined

Mr ROB KELLY, Executive Director, Regional Delivery, Local Land Services, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, on former oath

Dr LISA SZABO, Acting Executive Director, Biosecurity and Food Safety, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, on former affirmation

Dr KIM FILMER, Chief Animal Welfare Officer, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, on former affirmation

Dr JACQUELINE TRACEY, Executive Director, Policy, Local Land Services, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, before the Committee via videoconference, on former affirmation

Ms HARRIET WHYTE, Executive Director, Regional Programs and Partnerships, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, on former affirmation

The CHAIR: Welcome back to this afternoon's session of budget estimates 2024-2025. Ms Meagher, even though you did swear in before the Committee at a previous hearing, your position title has changed so we need to swear you in under that new position. I acknowledge that Dr Tracey is appearing today via videoconference. I ask Committee members to identify any questions addressed to Dr Tracey, and ask Dr Tracey to mute her microphone when not speaking and turn it back on when she is ready to speak. I will hand over to Ms Hurst to start off with crossbench questions.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I might go back to some of the questions I was asking before about Coffs Coast Wildlife Sanctuary and whether or not we've got any advice now in regard to the corrective actions and whether they were formal corrective action requests under the exhibited animals regime.

KIM FILMER: I haven't got any detail in terms of whether there was a formal PIN or what the action was, but they were certainly given instructions to not be doing what they'd been reported to be doing. If there are any further concerns about that, that should be reported back to the department, and it will certainly be investigated again to make sure that they are complying with the procedures that were put in place after the first investigation.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Could I get on notice whether there was any official corrective action request issued?

KIM FILMER: Of course, yes. We can take that on notice.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: And on notice, how many CARs were issued, and also whether they were minor, major or critical in their category.

KIM FILMER: Okay, yes. No problems at all.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: When we say that there was a ban on beverages, is that just in relation to seal interactions or dolphin interactions or across the whole facility in regard to alcoholic beverages?

KIM FILMER: The centre can serve alcohol on the premises. There's nothing stopping them from doing that. There's alcohol serving legislation that controls that. But I think your concern is around the proximity to the actual animals.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Yes.

KIM FILMER: Again, I can take that on notice to get the specific details about that.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I'm referring there to the letter I received from the Minister about ending the serving of beverages. I want to get an understanding of what were the limitations around that. If they're retaining their licence to be able to serve alcoholic beverages, what are the limitations that will be put into place?

KIM FILMER: No problems. I think we are best to take that on notice so we can give you an accurate answer.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I also wanted to ask you about the Animal Welfare Advisory Council. Do you know how many times the Animal Welfare Advisory Council met in 2023?

KIM FILMER: In 2023 there were no meetings of the Animal Welfare Advisory Council.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Do you know how many times they met in 2024?

KIM FILMER: They met once in 2024.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Are you able to explain why that committee has met so infrequently, particularly given the significant number of amendments to POCTAA and the Animal Research Act that were passed in the last 12 months?

KIM FILMER: The council is engaged where it needs to be engaged. There is a meeting coming up with them in March this year.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: How does that process work? Does the department ask them to meet and report back or is it something that they do independently?

KIM FILMER: Under POCTAA section 34A, AWAC—the animal welfare advisory committee—has the responsibility of reviewing and commenting on changes to new prescribed guidelines and codes of practice relating to the welfare of farm and companion animals. That's their role. There hasn't been a lot of need for that consultation in the time period that you've referred to.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: We've made quite a significant number of changes both to POCTAA and the Animal Research Act in the last two years, but they've only had one meeting. I'm assuming that there would have been multiple other pieces of legislation that they could have been consulted on. I'm trying to understand. You're saying that they weren't needed for anything more than one meeting, and there have been quite significant changes to the legislation. So they weren't consulted on any of those changes?

KIM FILMER: They were consulted on part of the banning puppy farming work that we've undertaken that you're aware of.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: So that was the one meeting they had?

KIM FILMER: That was in 2024.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: That was the one meeting they had in the last two years?

KIM FILMER: Yes.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: So all the other work that's been done they haven't been consulted on. Is that the situation?

KIM FILMER: As I said, their specific function is around codes and prescribed guidelines.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: How is it determined whether a meeting of AWAC should be called? Who makes that decision?

KIM FILMER: That decision would be determined by the department or the Minister, I guess, but particularly the department if the type of work that they're prescribed to undertake is being looked at within the department.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Is there an agenda circulated before every meeting?

KIM FILMER: Yes.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: How much notice of meetings are members given in order to consider the matters that are being raised at the meeting?

KIM FILMER: I'm not sure whether that's prescribed in the terms of reference. But we would always try and give at least a week's or two weeks notice for something like that so that any matters could be duly considered.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: How is AWAC's advice communicated to the Minister? Do they provide the minutes of that meeting to the department to then pass on to the Minister? How is that information funnelled back directly to the Minister?

KIM FILMER: Certainly there would be minutes available if the Minister wanted that information. But if there's anything of particular note that came out of those meetings, that would be channelled up through the normal channels to the Minister.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: So the Minister would have to seek out the minutes. There's nothing specifically provided to the Minister as a summary form or anything else from an AWAC meeting that occurs?

KIM FILMER: It depends. What I should probably do is check the terms of reference and get the actual process for you on notice.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Do you know if the Minister has ever directly met with AWAC?

KIM FILMER: Not that I'm aware of, no.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: What will AWAC's role be as we progress towards major reforms, such as the independent office—I understand there's legislation coming up very soon around that—and an overhaul of the POCTA Act? Will they be consulted and meet on those pieces of legislation as well?

KIM FILMER: As I said, they do have a specific legislated function. But if you'd like any detail on that, I think I would again take that on notice to get that right for you.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I also wanted to ask about the Research Animals Rehoming Grant Program. The Government recently distributed \$2.45 million as part of the Research Animals Rehoming Grant Program. The grant was originally announced for \$2.5 million. I'm wondering what happened to the other \$50,000.

KIM FILMER: That was used to administer the grant. As you would know, the requirement for grants has become a lot more stringent in terms of making sure that everything is done correctly. Some of that funding was used as part of the administration costs of that grant.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Can you explain to me what those administration costs would be? Would that be casual staff? What's involved in that \$50,000? How does that break down?

KIM FILMER: That would be staffing costs in terms of administering the grant.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: And that's casual staff?

RACHEL CONNELL: I might intervene there. Under the new New South Wales grants administration guidelines there's a really quite comprehensive process that needs to be undertaken in relation to establishing the grant process—articulating the rationale for the grant, the process around which applicants are asked to apply for grants. There's a requirement for probity in relation to the way the grant process is undertaken. A panel is generally convened to review the grant applications and assess them against the grant guidelines. So it's quite a robust process.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Is that panel made up of external people, or are they casually paid to come onto this panel? Some of these processes adds an extra burden on the department and I'm wondering where the costs come in.

RACHEL CONNELL: In administering that process, and we can—

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Is that to administer casual staff wages?

RACHEL CONNELL: It would be internal staff. We're also supported, in terms of the way that we run grants, from a central part of the department.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Could I get a cost breakdown of that \$50,000? I'm struggling to understand, if it's run internally, what the cost mechanisms were.

RACHEL CONNELL: We can take that on notice, Deputy Chair. It essentially goes to the administration of the grant process.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I just want to understand what administration means and where that money is being spent. If I could get a cost breakdown, that would be fantastic. Also, why was Beagle Freedom, who exclusively works on rehoming animals from research and do a significant amount of the rehoming in New South Wales, overlooked as part of that funding?

RACHEL CONNELL: We'd probably would take that one on notice given it was dealt with as part of the decision-making framework around that grant process. That's so we make sure we're not compromising any elements of the way that particular process was articulated under the new guidelines.

The CHAIR: I might start off by going to the study that has been in the media recently around the blue groper. Was that study specifically commissioned to assess blue groper stocks for policy decisions or was it a by-product of broader research?

SEAN SLOAN: Following the temporary closure for groper that was put in place last year, we implemented a piece of work to do a stock assessment for blue groper. As part of that work, there was an analysis of data on the abundance of groper from the baited remote underwater video survey work that we do, which is across 72 sites in New South Wales. Those BRUVS, as I call them, are part of assessing broader fish assemblages on our reefs across New South Wales. That data was analysed as well as the reef life surveys, which are timed dive surveys involving citizen scientists. Both those data streams involve over 10 years of data. They were

analysed as part of the work that we did on the stock assessment, which also included analysing recreational catch data, as well as the length frequency data in that catch survey that we do every two years of recreational fishes. So the publication came out as a result of that work, which was part of the work that we did to develop a stock assessment for the blue groper.

The CHAIR: The question that has been asked of me to ask you is about the use of pilchards in those underwater baiting programs. Pilchards aren't renowned for being blue groper diet, so why were pilchards used as part of these underwater surveys? What were you hoping to encourage to come if you were not using the natural diet of the fish?

SEAN SLOAN: Firstly, the diet of blue groper is predominantly crustaceans—crabs, sea urchins et cetera—so that's understood. The baited remote underwater video surveys that are done across all of those sites that I mention right across New South Wales are done to monitor reef fish assemblages. Those surveys of the broader reef fish assemblages are targeted at the whole fish assemblage. What we understand and know from those surveys—which have been done now for well over a decade and have been studied in a number of different ways—is that you will attract both scavenger fish as well as predator fish. Species like blue groper, which are very sensitive to sound and which are also very social and inquisitive fish, will come around those BRUV activities simply because there are lots of fish. So they are not targeted at blue groper, but the data is informative of their abundance. The surveys themselves are targeted at the broader reef fish assemblage.

The CHAIR: The study suggested that the blue groper numbers are actually stable in deeper waters but declining in shallow reefs. Does that perhaps indicate that depth refuges are naturally protecting these species without the need for legislative interventions?

SEAN SLOAN: The first thing to say is that the blue groper is a temperate cold water species, so the further north you head obviously the population ceases to exist. Around the Tweed, we wouldn't expect to see high numbers. As you head further south, you would expect numbers to increase. When you do a stock assessment of any species, you'd expect to see spatial variations from north to south but also in terms of depth. What this study essentially pulled out was that at two locations, which were in the Manning bioregion and the Hawkesbury bioregion, in the shallower depths there were reduced numbers of blue groper over that period of the two data streams that I mentioned, the BRUVS and the dive surveys. They showed reduced numbers. But out in the deeper water, for which we have those BRUV surveys going on as well, it showed very stable numbers of groper. It's very likely that the numbers of fish in the shallow waters—in the same latitude where the deeper water is, it is the same population of fish.

Overall, our assessment is that the numbers are in a stable condition when you look statewide, and overall our assessment is that the fishery is in a sustainable position. But there are those considerations around how climate is affecting all of our fish stocks, in particular the blue groper because of its sensitivity to temperature and also because of its biological traits. Blue gopers have a very complex population structure where all of the animals are born as females. As you know, Chair, once they get to a certain age, there'll be a male that emerges from that population and that male becomes a dominant male. They're the classic blue groper that our community has come to know and love. They are very site-attached, resident fish, so there are these wider community and social considerations when we're looking at the options to manage blue groper.

The CHAIR: Picking up on some of your comments, would expanding imaginary lines on a map necessarily address the issue of climatic conditions in the water and would blue groper numbers expanding in our marine parks necessarily have a positive impact on blue groper numbers at all?

SEAN SLOAN: It's difficult to give you a definitive answer to that question, Chair.

The CHAIR: I'll rephrase it. Are there more things that need to be considered than just expanding lines on a map when we look at this?

SEAN SLOAN: I think the answer is yes, Chair. Of course, the effects of climate is a serious concern for us right across the board. As part of our Marine Estate Management Strategy, it is one of the key focus areas. There's a program that involves close to \$20 million of investment over the 10-year life of the Marine Estate Management Strategy. What we're trying to do with that investment in the research is to look at the vulnerability of all of our marine ecosystems and the species that rely on them right across the marine estate, and the influence of warming waters is a consideration. Marine heatwaves that you probably heard us talk about previously is something that is becoming a phenomenon on the east coast as well.

The CHAIR: Just picking up on some of those environmental factors, as part of this study, was any consideration given to the fact that on the east coast between 2018 to 2022 we had back-to-back La Niña weather events? The year 2022 was Sydney's wettest year on record. That impacted on fish stocks in terms of changing the salinity of our coastal water, and groper liking salinity levels other than what was occurring on the east coast

at that time, pushing them further into those deeper refuges. Was any consideration given to those environmental factors as part of that research?

SEAN SLOAN: I can't speak specifically to those periods of flood that you mentioned for this study, but what I would say is that they undoubtedly have an influence on the distribution of fish. We know, for example, when those two large flood years occurred, coastal environments were impacted significantly. The mullet run that year when those big floods occurred was almost non-existent because those fish respond to those conditions. There's no question that those events have an impact and have an influence. With a species like groper, we know that the juveniles tend to stay in the shallower waters, and then they tend to exist in deeper water as they grow older. They have a very complex life history, as I mentioned, so they do require that careful management.

The CHAIR: I guess what sometimes gets overlooked with Fisheries by some people is that fish move around and they adapt as conditions change. You get different runs with different species at different times of the year. Sometimes it's a good year for a run and sometimes it's not. A lot of that gets lost in the discussion on Fisheries management. That might close off what I have on groper. I'll pass to the Opposition.

The Hon. WES FANG: Mr Orr, I'm going to revisit an issue that we discussed earlier this morning. Can you confirm how much money was allocated to the Dubbo sports hub?

STEVE ORR: The Dubbo sports club? Originally?

The Hon. WES FANG: Hub. The Minister indicated that she had an amount in the budget. Can you indicate how much that was?

STEVE ORR: In our department?

The Hon. WES FANG: Yes.

STEVE ORR: Thirty-three.

The Hon. WES FANG: Thirty-three—

STEVE ORR: It is 33.3 in our department.

The Hon. WES FANG: How much additional funding was added after March 2023 to that program?

STEVE ORR: I might ask Mr Bolton to answer that question.

JAMES BOLTON: None, Wes.

The Hon. WES FANG: That was quite easy. In relation to the advice that was written around the variations, Mr Bolton, did you sign a letter on 30 October 2024 around recommendations for the tender?

JAMES BOLTON: On 30 October I considered a tender recommendation from Public Works, yes.

The Hon. WES FANG: I've got that in front of me, and it basically says that there are insufficient funds for the project to proceed in the current form. But then it goes on to say that the client should review the operational requirements for a viable facility, revisit the project scoping and consider all available options, including alternate sites, to progress the project. That was part of the letter that was signed by you, correct?

JAMES BOLTON: Mr Fang, I'd love to have whatever you're looking at tabled so I can clarify the differences between that—

The CHAIR: I can table it.

Document tabled.

The Hon. WES FANG: It seems that the Chair is able to provide you a physical copy. We will do that now. I'll come back to the letter. I'm more keen to get a broader sense of where we are in relation to the project as it stands at the moment. Was the sports Minister advised about the project variations, the changes to what was on the table and the suggestion that we revisit the project, potentially at another site?

STEVE ORR: You'd need to direct that to the sports Minister.

The Hon. WES FANG: I will tomorrow, indeed. Did your department provide any advice to the Minister for Sport's department about these matters?

STEVE ORR: We've been working with the Office of Sport, but we don't work directly with the Minister for Sport.

The Hon. WES FANG: I appreciate that. Did you provide that department any advice around the variation advice that was signed off?

STEVE ORR: I'll ask Mr Bolton to comment.

JAMES BOLTON: There are two things being discussed here. What has just been tabled is an attachment to a brief that was recommended to me from Public Works. For clarity, Public Works was providing consultancy services to PCYC for the project. At a stage in the project—and I'm happy to walk through the timeline again—during the delivery phase, tenders have gone out for the project. Public Works are supporting PCYC with that. In my role as the deputy secretary, which includes Public Works' functions, I have received the recommendation, which this report that you have got is an attachment to. That recommendation to me is to not accept tenders and to inform the client to not accept tenders—so closing out that process. Concurrently, we are considering a variation or new proposal, as the Minister has described several times today. We're considering a new proposal from the Office of Sport.

The Hon. WES FANG: Given that you are considering a new proposal from the Office of Sport, there has been some communication between the office of regional and the Office of Sport about this project?

JAMES BOLTON: Yes.

The Hon. WES FANG: Was the Minister for Sport made aware of the cancellation of the project by the Minister for Regional New South Wales prior to the announcement?

STEVE ORR: Mr Fang, we can't comment on what the Minister of Sport was aware of.

The Hon. WES FANG: You can certainly comment as to whether your department provided advice to the Minister's department about the cancellation of the project prior to the announcement. Did that occur?

STEVE ORR: Which Minister?

The Hon. WES FANG: Mr Orr, please don't take up the habits of the Minister. I am referring to the Minister for Sport and whether you provided—

STEVE ORR: Mr Fang, it's not our job to advise the Minister for Sport. That's a matter for the Office of Sport.

The Hon. WES FANG: No, I'm asking did your department provide advice to the Office of Sport prior to the cancellation of the project?

STEVE ORR: There were discussions with the Office of Sport. What they then advised their Minister of, you will need to talk to them about that.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm sure we will tomorrow. I'm seeking clarity as to how these things have occurred. From that perspective, what discussions were had with PCYC prior to the announcement?

JAMES BOLTON: Is that for me, Mr Fang?

The Hon. WES FANG: Mr Orr seems to be providing—

STEVE ORR: I'm happy to refer it to Mr Bolton, if that makes it easier.

The Hon. WES FANG: Mr Bolton, can you provide some advice as to what advice was provided to PCYC prior to the cancellation of the project by the Minister?

JAMES BOLTON: It's quite a unique scenario, this funding arrangement. It is a tripartite agreement with the Office of Sport as the lead for the agreement. The key interface between the Government and PCYC was through the Office of Sport, and we were a funding partner.

The Hon. WES FANG: Effectively, the Office of Sport is coordinating. Is that a good way to say it? You've said it's a unique situation. Were they coordinating the project?

JAMES BOLTON: PCYC is responsible for the project.

The Hon. WES FANG: We have now got PCYC responsible for the project. We have got the Office of Sport playing a role in this. We know that Regional NSW is now part funding this project. One would expect that the police Minister, through her department, would have some buy-in, given that it is PCYC. Is that a fair assumption to make? Were there any discussions with the police Minister or her department around this decision prior to the cancellation?

STEVE ORR: Not specifically. Our dealings were with PCYC, as Mr Bolton has alluded to. Again, Mr Fang, you will need to talk to the police Minister.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm sure we will do that as well. We are going around in circles here. Everyone is saying we need to talk to somebody else. Ultimately, it was the Minister for Regional New South Wales who

cancelled the project and pulled the funding. I am also trying to work out who was aware of what and when, and there's not a lot of clarity coming out of this. In relation to the stakeholders themselves, have you or has anyone from your office been speaking with the Dubbo Netball Association or the Dubbo Basketball Association or any impacted sporting groups in relation to what the next stage is, or has that all been left to the PCYC?

JAMES BOLTON: Mr Fang, like I said before, the key relationship has been the Office of Sport and PCYC, and that includes engagement with the relevant sporting—

The Hon. WES FANG: Even though they're the relevant department, it's the Minister for Regional New South Wales who is controlling the funding. Is that correct?

JAMES BOLTON: Not necessarily. We were a contributor to the agreement, so had a funding contribution, but there were other parties that were funding providers in that arrangement as well.

The Hon. WES FANG: Were they advised prior to the cancellation, or were they made aware through the press release?

JAMES BOLTON: Mr Fang, for clarity, a request was made for us to consider an alternative proposal or a new proposal for the project.

The Hon. WES FANG: Did that occur?

JAMES BOLTON: That is what our Minister considered on a recommendation from the department.

The Hon. WES FANG: The result of that was that the project was, effectively, cancelled.

JAMES BOLTON: The result was that we did not support a new project.

The Hon. WES FANG: Where has that money gone now?

JAMES BOLTON: That money has been returned to the department.

The Hon. WES FANG: What the people of Dubbo really want to know is what's going to progress in place of the Dubbo sports hub at the moment. There is \$33.3 million sitting back with the department now, and the Minister has cancelled the project. The people of Dubbo want to know why. In fact, the mayor of Dubbo—the Labor candidate at the last election who said that the Minister is the least regional Minister he has ever seen—has said that he wants that money provided for a sporting facility. How are we moving forward here?

STEVE ORR: Mr Fang, in terms of the return money, that's really a matter for government.

The Hon. WES FANG: The Minister hasn't provided you with any guidance about having that money directed to the Dubbo community for a future sports hub?

STEVE ORR: The money has been returned to the department, Mr Fang.

The Hon. WES FANG: The mayor said he was advocating for that money to be provided to the Dubbo community for a sporting facility, but the Minister hasn't sought to do that and the money is sitting back with the department. Is that correct?

STEVE ORR: Which is what you'd expect.

The Hon. WES FANG: The Minister hasn't asked you to provide any additional funding to the Dubbo community for a sports hub? The Minister hasn't asked you to work on a forward plan about supporting a new project? The Minister hasn't asked for any preparatory work for a new tender?

STEVE ORR: Mr Fang, there are programs and there is funding available through particular programs. The Minister didn't say it this morning, but there is the Regional Development Trust. The question is, if Dubbo council or PCYC want to progress this, there are funding avenues available.

The Hon. WES FANG: Given the answer you've just provided—that, effectively, an entity, either PCYC or Dubbo council, would need to progress a proposal or make an application or seek funding for a specified project—from today, what would you expect the timeline to be to have that funding flow, if a project was presented by PCYC or council and if Dubbo were to get that money?

STEVE ORR: Putting aside the question of the \$33 million, which is another matter—and it is a matter, ultimately, for government to determine where that money is allocated—it will probably be through the forthcoming budget, Mr Fang. The Regional Development Trust round has just recently closed. That would have been an avenue for the PCYC to apply for funding. Whether they did that or not, I can't confirm, but that would have been an avenue for them.

The Hon. WES FANG: Mr Bolton, were they made aware that they should be applying through that round that has just recently closed? Was there communication from Regional NSW to PCYC or the council that this was the avenue for them to actually have funding flow back into Dubbo?

JAMES BOLTON: The PCYC, its CEO Ben Hobby and I have discussed this and several other programs that exist in government and the avenues for future consideration for government.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm not sure I'm any clearer to getting an answer for the people of Dubbo, but thank you very much for the answers you've provided.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I'd like to talk about the cattle tick management program. Who is that for?

RACHEL CONNELL: I'm happy to answer your question.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Is there a dollar amount attached to that program?

RACHEL CONNELL: I think funding for this financial year is about \$4.5 million.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Has that been fairly stable for a while?

RACHEL CONNELL: I think it's probably slightly more than previous years, but I'll take that on notice and confirm.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: My understanding is that if someone does get a tick in their cattle, the treatment is funded one-third by them and two-thirds by DPI. Is that correct?

RACHEL CONNELL: No, it is 75 per cent by the department and 25 per cent by the property holder, if the property holder decides to take up the service that we provide. It's obviously not mandatory.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: And that's just part of the program for as long as this program is in place?

RACHEL CONNELL: That's right.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Can you tell me the make-up of the advisory board?

RACHEL CONNELL: Are you talking about the ministerial council?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Yes.

RACHEL CONNELL: What I've managed to ascertain since you asked the question this morning is that the council probably ceased to exist at some point before 2021, so we are not aware that it has operated in any recent period of time.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Is there any producer feeding into the management program?

RACHEL CONNELL: My staff have a regular forum with the key stakeholders in the area, and I think Local Land Services also sits on that group. It meets regularly to deal with the issues in terms of the program.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Is there a dedicated tick management team?

RACHEL CONNELL: There is.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: And they deal solely with tick management?

RACHEL CONNELL: We have a team in our compliance division that is essentially specifically focused on tick management issues.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Have the numbers in that team remained stable? It has been put to me that some of those teams have been taken off, or some of their energies redirected into fire ants. Can you ensure that hasn't happened?

RACHEL CONNELL: I'd have to take that specifically on notice. We have had challenges recruiting to that program recently. The kind of work that's required is physical outdoor work with chemicals, so we have had some challenges. But we've been looking at different options to make sure we can deal with the program as it currently operates, and also a pilot we've had operating in terms of working with producers to enable them to undertake their own treatment programs.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Are you able to provide, on notice, a breakdown of how many people work on that team?

RACHEL CONNELL: We can take that on notice.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: How much of the team's work is proactive and going out on the farm, and how much of it is doing inspections at the saleyards?

RACHEL CONNELL: We'd probably have to take that one on notice. As you'd anticipate, it would vary from season to season, and there are particular issues in terms of the way the program is rolled out. They take a risk-based approach, so it will vary from season to season and month to month, depending on what's happening on the ground.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Did we have any particularly concerning southern outbreaks or detections over this summer?

RACHEL CONNELL: We've had a couple of detections in the Grafton region. In terms of the focus of the program and making sure we've got the effort assigned where it needs to be assigned, we've definitely shifted the focus to the Grafton region. We've got a couple of bigger properties in that region, so that's something we've been getting onto quite quickly.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I'm deliberately trying to not create fear about cattle tick breaking out in some areas. I appreciate that. Where is the Treasury review of the tick management program up to?

RACHEL CONNELL: I think you've been looking at our website. I've seen on the website that a GHD review was commissioned about three or four years ago. But I'll take on notice where that's up to. That was before my time. I haven't been briefed on it while I've been in the department, but happy to find out whether I can give you details of what happened with that program.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Thank you very much. Noting there's only a little bit of time and to save opening a whole new box, probably to Mr Sloan, is the Dutton Trout Hatchery at Ebor currently closed to the public?

SEAN SLOAN: No, it is not. It's not closed, Mr Barrett. It's open, fully operational. It has had a tourist facility. We've undertaken guided tours of the facility over time, and we've had one or two staff leave, and we haven't continued those tours because of those vacancies. But the trout hatchery produces, I think, over a million trout every year, and we've continued to do that. I can assure you that that trout hatchery is still open and is still fully operational.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Is the intent to reopen the tourist aspect of that, being a bit of a drawcard to the—

SEAN SLOAN: Hopefully, into the future, Mr Barrett, yes. Just working through that with the local staff and with the broader team. But, yes, that's an important facility, as it is up in the Snowy Mountains as well.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: So the intent is to reopen the tourism side of that.

SEAN SLOAN: That would be the intent, yes.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I just have one more question in regard to the research animal rehoming grants. Over what period of time will the organisations be spending that funding? Is it a one-year grant or do they have different proposals that go up to two, three years?

KIM FILMER: They're over a few years is the simple answer to that.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Do you know roughly what time frames that period will be?

KIM FILMER: Yes. I can probably give you a little bit more detail on that. Actually, I haven't got the exact details of that here, but I can possibly get those on notice if that's helpful.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you. Dr Filmer, can you update me on the work the department is doing to adopt the full Australian Poultry Standards, as they come through, in New South Wales?

KIM FILMER: I might hand that over to Rachel.

RACHEL CONNELL: Obviously, we took the first step. The POCTA Regulation was remade on 31 January. We're also undertaking other work to consult industry on the rest of the standards and how they are implemented, and working particularly with the turkey industry. I understand we've got a working group that's been convened. We're also involved in a Commonwealth process to look at harmonisation nationally as well.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Will there be work also on ducks and emus and geese? I know that they were also within the national poultry standards.

RACHEL CONNELL: I would have to take that one on notice.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you. I've just got a follow-up question around shark nets. Is that for you, Mr Sloan?

SEAN SLOAN: Yes.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: You might need to take this one on notice as well. I just wanted a breakdown of the money spent on each component of the New South Wales Shark Management Program for the last two financial years. I'm looking for a specific breakdown on cost spent on drones, on listening stations, SMART drum lines, shark nets, partnerships and community education.

SEAN SLOAN: The total annual budget is \$21.4 million.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Was that 2023-24?

SEAN SLOAN: And into 2024-25. The SMART drum line component of that, which involves over 300 SMART drum lines, is \$12.5 million. The nets, which are deployed at 51 beaches, is \$2.6 million. The drone surveillance, which covers 50 beaches, is \$3 million. The 37 tagged-shark listening stations is about \$400,000. We have \$500,000 in a partnership with Surfing NSW, and then we run the statewide SharkSmart community education awareness program, which is \$2.3 million.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Could I get the breakdown for 2022-23 in regard to those as well?

SEAN SLOAN: Same.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: So it's exactly the same previously as well.

SEAN SLOAN: Yes.

STEVE ORR: Yes, and that's the budget for 2025-26 as well.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you. That's really helpful. Mr Orr, I think these questions might be for you, but please refer on if they're not. I just wanted to ask some questions about the Native Game Bird Management Program. The number of native ducks killed in New South Wales has almost doubled from 2023 to 2024. According to the latest report, it's gone from 15,000 to around 30,000. Do you know why there's been such a significant increase in the number of native ducks that have been killed?

STEVE ORR: I might refer that to Mr Sloan.

SEAN SLOAN: Thank you for the question, Ms Hurst. I know, on the back of those big flood years, the numbers of ducks did increase, in terms of population numbers. So it's likely that's the reason for the increases that you're referring to, but I actually will need to just take on notice the question and come back to you with an answer. Can you just please just repeat the question specifically?

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Sure. I was just talking about the Native Game Bird Management Program. The number of native ducks killed in New South Wales doubled from 2023 to 2024, going from around 15,000 to around 30,000. So I just wanted to ask for an explanation as to why there's been such significant rise in the killing of native ducks.

SEAN SLOAN: I believe it was in response to the populations increasing, but I'll take it on notice, Ms Hurst, and come back to you.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Is the increase something the department has investigated, to make sure that there's not a whole lot of illegal recreational hunting going on there?

SEAN SLOAN: We do have a compliance program that we operate for our hunting sector, and that program monitors the activity of hunters across the State. So, if there was illegal activity occurring, we would pick that up. I don't think there's any indication that that's the case, Ms Hurst, but I'll clarify those figures for you, on the numbers.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: According to the report, along with an increase in killing, there's been a very drastic decrease in the population of ducks in the Riverina. I understand you're saying that the reason for the increase in killing is because there may be more ducks. But, obviously, in the Riverina, that's quite a different situation, given the population has decreased. According to the annual waterfowl quota report 2024-25, the population of eight duck species fell to 43 per cent of the previous year's population estimates. What's the explanation for this dramatic decrease, and what's the department doing to make sure that any of these native birds are not being killed in large numbers?

SEAN SLOAN: I'll take that on notice, Ms Hurst, and provide you with the right information.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Is it something that you've briefed the Minister on, particularly around these dramatic reductions in the number of ducks in the Riverina?

SEAN SLOAN: Not to my knowledge, Ms Hurst, but I'm happy to take that on notice and clarify that.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Just in regard to the general quotas in the report—and I guess this might be something just to clarify with the previous question you took on notice. For most of the native ducks that are listed here, the population seems to have decreased before the number of ducks that were killed increased. So I'm just trying to get clarification. I know you said that the explanation for the increase in killing was because the numbers were increasing, but the figures in the report here suggest the numbers were actually decreasing. So, if I could get some clarification around that on notice, as well, that would be helpful.

SEAN SLOAN: Yes.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: While I still have you, Mr Sloan, I want to ask you about *Cestrum nocturnum*. I know we have spoken about this weed previously. In the last estimates, you told me that *Cestrum nocturnum* is currently being assessed for inclusion in the schedule 3 ban from the sale list under the Biosecurity Act 2015. I was wondering if you could provide an update on that and where we are heading with that.

STEVE ORR: It's probably a question for Ms Connell, Ms Hurst.

RACHEL CONNELL: Yes, and I will take that one on notice and come back to you.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Fantastic. The Minister recently announced \$10 million of funding for weed management, through the Good Neighbours Program. Is it your understanding that any of that will be used to address the *Cestrum nocturnum* problem that we have?

STEVE ORR: That's probably a question for Ms Lorimer-Ward.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Sure. We're jumping everywhere.

STEVE ORR: Sorry, Ms Hurst.

KATE LORIMER-WARD: I'll have to take that on notice. I don't have the specific projects in front of me.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I do.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: You've got it?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Yes, and I think the answer is no.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: The answer might be no. Okay. Thank you.

The Hon. WES FANG: Team work! Isn't it great?

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Yes, it's good. I only have 30 seconds, so I'm not going to start asking, but in the next session I will be bringing Dr Filmer up again to ask more questions about the Coffs Coast. Thank you.

The CHAIR: I might stick with you, Mr Sloan. Can you clarify DPI's role in assisting councils with the development of their coastal management plans, particularly those councils that have ICOLLS in them? What role does DPI play in assisting councils in developing those plans, or do they assist at all?

SEAN SLOAN: I would need to take it on notice, Chair, and find out what we do. I know we interact with local councils on those coastal plans through our Marine Estate Management Strategy and also in various ways, but I'll need to take that on notice and find out. I think I've mentioned in previous sessions that we have a piece of work going on, particularly the approval processes, around how ICOLLS are managed, which is how we interact with local councils, and I think we are looking at those ICOLL by ICOLL. That piece of work is nearly complete but not fully complete at this point. If that's the line of questioning, I am happy to find out—

The CHAIR: Yes, perhaps take it on notice. Obviously I can't ask you how much this audit has cost, because you haven't finished it yet, so I will save that for another estimates. Specifically with Swan Lake, was MEMA's findings around Swan Lake significantly different from Advisen Proprietary Limited's report? If so, what were the key differences?

SEAN SLOAN: Sorry, Chair. Which report?

The CHAIR: Advisen Proprietary Limited. I believe there was a report by them done, and then also MEMA did a report on Swan Lake specifically. I just want to know whether there was any significant difference between those two reports and what that might say about one or the other.

SEAN SLOAN: I'm not aware of the specifics, but I'm happy to take that on notice, Chair, and come back with that information.

The CHAIR: Thank you. While you are taking things on notice, I know you said you would come back around the ranger boat. When you are looking at those days that that has been out, are you able to delineate between what it was doing when it was out there, how many days was it out there doing compliance work, how many days was it doing research with another department et cetera? Are you able to break that down for us at all?

SEAN SLOAN: Yes, happy to. During the break, I looked into that, Chair. I suspect you know the answer to this, but the solitary ranger has had engine troubles and has actually been up on the blocks in Coff's Harbour since the middle of last year, getting repair work done. She hasn't been out on patrol, doing any work of late. That's an issue we're obviously working on.

The CHAIR: Do you have an anticipated date as to when that's going to be fixed and back out on duty?

SEAN SLOAN: Not specifically, but as soon as possible.

The CHAIR: Can I go to a fairly tricky and complicated matter? I have asked questions about Mr Frank Connolly Jr in the past, on notice. I am aware that he sent the department a cease and desist letter regarding activities happening on his country, known as Jerrinja. The response that he received back from Mr Turnell was "We note that the matter of the applicant, on behalf of the South Coast people, versus the Attorney General of New South Wales is currently before the Federal Court of Australia in their native title claim. The South Coast people asked the Federal Court to determine that they hold native title in the area that includes the waters of Jervis Bay," and therefore you are not going to comment on the issues raised in the letter.

Does the department see Mr Frank Connolly Jr in a different light to the South Coast people? Mr Connolly Jr is very specific about how he sees him within the broader Aboriginal community. He sees himself as already recognised by the court as the native owner, and he sees that the South Coast people, or those who have signed on to the South Coast people, have actually rescinded the rights that they had and that he is now the only one that does have. Does the department see him differently or have you grouped Mr Connolly Jr in with the South Coast people?

STEVE ORR: I think, Mr Banasiak, given the matters are before the courts, it's quite difficult for the department to provide a commentary on it.

The CHAIR: Even as to whether you consider him as part of the South Coast people or you consider him as separate to that?

STEVE ORR: Yes. Respectfully, we are not managing that claim process. That's not something which the department is doing, so I don't think we're really in a position to comment on whether he is involved or whether he is not.

The CHAIR: He isn't involved, but it seems, by this letter, that you've lumped him into that category. I'm asking, on behalf of him, do you see him as something different or do you consider him to be part of the South Coast people? If you want to take that on notice and get advice as to whether you can provide any comment—

STEVE ORR: I think we'll need to take that on notice, given the sensitive legal situation, Mr Banasiak.

The CHAIR: Sure. Ms Lorimer-Ward, now that you're in control of LLS, can I ask you some questions? Feel free, Mr Orr, to jump in because some of this might stretch back to when you were—

STEVE ORR: Is this Moonlight?

The CHAIR: No, just more broadly. Do you have any experience, Ms Lorimer-Ward, in pest animals or pest management at all?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: As in personal experience?

The CHAIR: Or professional experience.

KATE LORIMER-WARD: Or professional? I am a landowner, which makes me a rate payer within Local Land Services. As a landowner, I understand my pest and weed management responsibilities.

The CHAIR: Good. Does any of your staff within LLS have membership or support for associations or clubs that have expressed anti-recreational hunting views?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: I would have to take that on notice. That's not something I have asked our staff.

The CHAIR: Have you or any of your staff met with the Invasive Species Council representatives in the past year?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: I have, and I will make the assumption that, yes, a number of my staff have as well.

The CHAIR: Have you provided the Invasive Species Council with any funding or advice in those meetings?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: I haven't, no.

The CHAIR: Have any of your staff provided any written material or advice to the Invasive Species Council?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: Not that I'm aware of, but I will take that on notice.

The CHAIR: How many of your pest animal strategies and plans and operations are actually based on sound science and research? If they are, where can the science methodology and data be obtained for each of those? What I'm looking for, I guess, is pest control operations, pre-operation surveys, operation results, post-operation surveys and results. Where can we, as the general public, find that in detail?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: I might ask Rob Kelly to come and assist.

The CHAIR: Sorry, that was the other person I should have acknowledged.

KATE LORIMER-WARD: In terms of the overarching piece around the regional pest and weed management strategies, part of that is actually being able to make sure we have got surveillance methodologies outlined in those plans. These are continuous improvement steps that we are responding to from the NRC review to make sure that these steps are much more obvious as part of our planning. The other part that we have been introducing is actually an annual operations plan, which provides a lot more clarity about where those efforts are per year.

The CHAIR: Do you have anything to add there, Mr Kelly, or I can fire off the next one?

ROB KELLY: I can add a couple of points to that. Everything that Ms Lorimer-Ward said is correct. As we mature in understanding our role in doing landscape-scale coordinated pest control, we will build those into the annual operations plans. That was a recommendation out of the NRC review. Historically, it would be on a project-by-project basis. There are projects that I am aware of—for example, the Western Riverina Pig Project—that had detailed surveys done pre, post and during. And there are other projects that we are involved in now that do that. To answer your question specifically, it's a project-by-project basis.

The CHAIR: To finish off this 30 seconds, does LLS subscribe to the notion or have a belief that recreational hunters are somehow competitors to the LLS in the pest management space, or do you see recreational hunters as a complementary or supplementary measure to the work that LLS does?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: Definitely all the conversations I have been privy to have been about an integrated approach where hunters—recreational and on private holdings, whether it's public or private holding—should all be playing a role as part of that integrated approach to pest management.

The CHAIR: That's pleasing to hear.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: I'm realising how quickly time passes when we are having fun. I will move briskly through a few things. If I might ask, coming back to the regional media fund, how much was rolled over from round one to round two?

JAMES BOLTON: Mrs Overall, approximately \$750,000 was rolled over from round one to round two.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: So that's not \$3,750,000. That has added to that total of \$3 million, so it's not really \$6 million for the two rounds. It is whatever that turns out to be—\$6,250,000.

JAMES BOLTON: No, it is—

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Sorry, \$5,250,000.

JAMES BOLTON: It's \$6 million for the two rounds, total: approximately \$3.75 million for round two and \$2.25 million for round one.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: I note that in the key information on the website it says that the status is that it's not open for application, but it states that it is supposed to close on 28 February at 5.00 p.m. Is there a reason why it's not open for application? Has it been oversubscribed?

JAMES BOLTON: No. I have Ms Harriet Whyte here, who might be able to assist. My interpretation of that would be that it's a closed program, meaning that it is closed for certain applications to apply for that funding by 28 February. Ms Whyte, is that a fair answer?

HARRIET WHYTE: Yes, that's entirely correct. The second round is closed and non-competitive. It's not open for general applications. But we are working with the applicants to provide them the link to apply.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: You have briefly mentioned that we didn't get the chance to talk with the Minister this morning about the Regional Development Trust Fund. Could I confirm that, after the March 2023 election, the amount remaining in the former Regional Growth Fund was \$600 million?

STEVE ORR: We'll take on notice what was actually remaining within that fund, Mrs Overall.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Are you aware of how much was allocated to the new Regional Development Trust Fund?

STEVE ORR: The current allocation into the trust fund is \$400 million.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: But was \$350 million actually allocated at first and then that was topped up?

STEVE ORR: Correct.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: And the remaining \$250 million?

STEVE ORR: What remaining \$250 million?

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Of the \$600 million, I'm sorry.

STEVE ORR: I'll take on notice the question about what happened in relation to, if you like, unspent RGF money. That happened a little while ago, Mrs Overall.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: We are at \$400 million, then. How much of that has been allocated to date?

STEVE ORR: My understanding is \$37 million. We have just had a round close. A round has just closed for REDCIP and there was a \$50 million allocation to that. We will now get into the process of assessing those applications.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: So potentially around \$87 million, depending on if they are all successful or not?

STEVE ORR: Correct.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: So \$37 million to \$57 million. The food and beverage manufacturing program is made up of loans. Are you able to tell me the anticipated financial return to the Government on the \$5 million investment as part of that?

STEVE ORR: The loans ultimately get repaid. The scheme is administered by the Rural Assistance Authority. I think there were seven successful applications, Mrs Overall. The program is now closed. In relation to your question of what is the return and who they were, I'll need to come back to you if you want that level of detail.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Perhaps you could just let me know the interest rate on the program.

STEVE ORR: I'll confirm that. It's closed, though.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Little Big Dairy in Dubbo was used as the case study when announcing the funding. Are you aware of how much of the \$5 million that business received?

STEVE ORR: I'll confirm that.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Finally, are you aware of what the loan rate is for farmers through the Drought Ready and Resilient Fund?

STEVE ORR: I think it depends on the term of the loan. I think it's either a five-year or a 10-year term. Obviously, I may need to clarify, given the RBA decision last week. But my understanding was that it was about 5.45 for five years and 5.95 for 10. But I can confirm that with you.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Very quickly, coming to Ms Lorimer-Ward, based on some of the Chair's questioning, I'm after a little bit more in-depth information, if I may. How many feral pigs have been culled by LLS over the last two years?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: Sorry, I'll just get my notes up. I'll have to come back to you. My notes have come off my screen.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: I have read a report—and this is why I am wanting to qualify if that is the case—that there is around 170,000 over the last two years. Would that sound about correct?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: Yes.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Are you aware of reports that one hunting organisation has reported culling nearly 10 times as many feral pigs in half that time? They are claiming almost 1.7 million pigs culled across New South Wales for 2024.

KATE LORIMER-WARD: Yes, I have heard that number. I thought it was over a four- or five-year period, though.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Again, I'm not suggesting that it's absolutely accurate, but it's suggesting here through 2024.

KATE LORIMER-WARD: Understood.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Touching on what the Chair has touched on as well, I note that the Invasive Species Council has criticised poor feral pig management, chasing numbers over results. With all of those things that you were talking about—the greater working together and collaboration et cetera—are we moving towards that model and resourcing that will ensure better management of what we know are skyrocketing numbers of feral pigs?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: We definitely are. The move towards much more targeted, integrated programs of control is something that we are focused on. It is about making sure that we have a range of activities occurring at the same time. Where we find programs or campaigns go in with a single approach, whether it's only baiting or only trapping, we don't have nearly the same success as if we go in with two or three methods at the same time. Our challenge continues to be making sure that we can optimise the number of landholders, whether they are public or private, that are in that region. Where we have a gap, or what we refer to as any white spaces in our maps, that will always be an area that continues to allow breeding of an invasive species to occur. Our focus really is around those coordinated programs and trying to make sure that we can get everyone part of that program.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Can I put this question to—rather than ask the question four or five times—department secretaries and everyone above? Have there been discussions at any level advising or requesting teams in your areas to look for jobs that could be removed or made redundant?

STEVE ORR: Who are you directing the question to, Mr Barrett?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I would like to hear an answer from all the department secretaries. Can I take your silence as a no and if it's a yes, speak up?

The Hon. WES FANG: Speak now or forever hold your peace.

STEVE ORR: Can you repeat the question so we're clear, Mr Barrett?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Sure. You can probably guess the tone of it. Have there been any discussions at any level advising or requesting teams to look for jobs that could be removed or made redundant? You might have two or three people you might need to get rid of. That's fine. But more than that?

STEVE ORR: I can give some broad answers, and if you wish to ask individuals then that's a matter for you. The staff numbers in the department go up and down. When it was the Department of Regional NSW in 2020, I think the staff numbers were about 4,400. Now it's about 5,000. A couple of years ago it was about 5,500. So our staff numbers move around. The main driver for the shift up and down, in recent times at least, has been our involvement in a range of disaster-related issues: floods, fires and COVID. In particular, that's related to let's call it the flexible workforce, and by that I mean casual, temp and contingent.

Proportionately over time the numbers of those staff have decreased. You were after a percentage before, the percentage of temps at the moment within the department is about 20 per cent in terms of temporary staff. Temporary staff come and go based on the nature of their contract and the nature of the work which they do. That's just something which happens within the department. It's fair to say the department has some challenges in terms of its budget position. Those challenges are largely inherited because, in certain parts, there was an

overspend issue, in other parts there were issues about putting people into ongoing roles where we only had temporary funding. We need to work through those issues as a department. But if your question is are we going through a big change plan process, in terms of which is the process by which you move employees out of the department, that's not happening at this point in time. I can't say it won't happen, Mr Barrett, but it's not happening at this point in time. If it were to happen, there's a sequence of steps which the department would need to go through to do that, if that's helpful.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: And those steps haven't started?

STEVE ORR: No.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Does anyone else want to add to that? Ms Lorimer-Ward, how many board vacancies are there currently across the 11 LLS regions?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: Across the 11 regions there are seven board vacancies in terms of government appointment, not elected memberships.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: All the elected positions are filled?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: All the elected positions have been filled. This year in the most recent election round there were 118 candidates for those positions. So they've all been filled. We do have at the moment seven current vacancies.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: To be clear, the seven vacancies are ministerial appointments that haven't been filled.

KATE LORIMER-WARD: Government appointment ones, yes.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: How long have they been vacant for?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: I would have to take that on notice, but we've been working through a recruitment process since I've been with the organisation.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: And that's 12 months?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: Six.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: How many applications did you get?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: For the elected?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Yes.

KATE LORIMER-WARD: There were 118.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: You might have to take this on notice. Can we look at how that's been tracking over the last five years, how many applications we're getting for those boards?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: Yes.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Are you able to tell me what programs have been funded in 2023-24 out of the special pest management rates?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: The specific projects that are under that I will have to take on notice, because it varies by each region. Each region gets to establish projects when the funds are allocated to the regions. For that level of detail I will have to take that on notice. There is a range, though, of things that that program will fund. It funds people undertaking training, capacity building and activities on ground.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: So that money is ring fenced around the area it comes from?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: Correct.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Can you or possibly someone else tell me if there are any programs underway targeted at cane toads?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: There's specifically a project on the North Coast which is really focused on that zone between where cane toads would now be considered endemic and where they currently aren't. There is a surveillance zone that the current project is focused on.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Fantastic. The Good Neighbours Program that Ms Hurst mentioned before—\$10 million over 21 programs over two years. So about half a million bucks—\$250,000 a year for 21 projects.

KATE LORIMER-WARD: Those projects are from round one. We do have funds which would go into a round two. That's not \$10 million of expenditure in those 21 projects.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: How much went on round one?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: I'll have to take that on notice.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: This is the \$10 million that I think the Minister announced in the budget in June. He then re-announced it this week as \$10 million. But these 21 projects are not \$10 million?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: That's my understanding, that there's a next round to be announced.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: So you can provide how much has been allocated to this program?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: Yes, I can.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: All but I think two of these programs seem to be conducted with or in national parks, forest corp or other Crown lands. For instance, are national parks contributing to that or is the DPI funding pest control programs in national parks?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: They are. The whole objective of the Good Neighbours Program was around that interaction and intersection between public land and private land. Quite rightly, a lot of the projects will be on public lands. The whole purpose of the program, though, was to bring those two sets of stakeholders together and to drive integrated pest and weed management programs right where they intersect. That was the primary objective of the program.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: This round for these projects, there's two years of funding for each program announced in that project the other day?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: Yes, that's right.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: I have one more question quickly that I should have added to my list. Mr Orr, can you share with us status of the department of regional youth and what forward planning the Minister has asked you to do in relation to regional youth?

STEVE ORR: You will need to direct that to the Minister for Youth, Mrs Overall. That's where that team reports into. It's part of the Youth portfolio.

The Hon. WES FANG: So regional youth doesn't exist anymore under Regional NSW at all?

STEVE ORR: No, that's not what I said. The Minister who is responsible for that team within the department is the Minister for Youth.

The Hon. WES FANG: But where does the team sit?

STEVE ORR: In the department.

The Hon. WES FANG: Of?

STEVE ORR: This department.

The Hon. WES FANG: Right.

STEVE ORR: And the Minister who's responsible is the Minister for Youth. If you want information on what that team is doing, you will need to direct it to the Minister for Youth. I'm not trying to be difficult, but that's the portfolio.

The Hon. WES FANG: How does that work? The team sits in your department. Are you reporting to the Minister for Youth on this matter?

STEVE ORR: No.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Point of order: The answer is that you ask in the other budget estimates, not this one. I think it's pretty clear.

The CHAIR: I don't think that's a valid point of order. I understand that you're trying to clarify Mr Orr's response, but I think—

The Hon. WES FANG: Well, no, I'm just—

The CHAIR: I'm talking to Ms Higginson. Mr Fang has a valid point. You're the head of the department. Do they report to you at all? I guess that is what Mr Fang is trying to get to.

STEVE ORR: If I can clarify: Within the department we have three Ministers. We have the Minister for resources, we have the Minister for Agriculture, and regional and western New South Wales, and the Minister for Youth. You're asking me a question about the Youth portfolio in this forum, which is about Minister Moriarty's. You'll need to direct it to the Minister for Youth.

The Hon. WES FANG: Can I then ask: Are you appearing with the Minister for Youth?

STEVE ORR: No.

The Hon. WES FANG: Then we have a quandary, don't we?

STEVE ORR: I've answered the question. There's nothing more I can say.

The Hon. WES FANG: Mr Orr, that's actually not for you to determine.

STEVE ORR: Sorry, I've given you my answer.

The Hon. WES FANG: Mr Orr, I'm asking you about the plans for regional youth. Has the Minister for Regional New South Wales asked you to do any work around the regional youth portfolio?

STEVE ORR: You're asking a question about another Minister's responsibility in Minister Moriarty's hearing. You'll need to address it to the Minister for Youth.

The Hon. WES FANG: You're not appearing at that estimates, are you?

STEVE ORR: But you can ask it to the Minister.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: And you can call him.

The Hon. WES FANG: Sue, I am sorry, you're a participating member. Your continual interjections are extremely rude.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Can I go to it.

The Hon. WES FANG: No.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Just calm down.

The Hon. WES FANG: Sue, you need to understand that—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: You'll be fine. Carry on. You'll be fine.

The CHAIR: Order! You're wasting your own time. Get the boxing gloves on later.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Who will be responsible for administering the \$160 million in grants that comes as a result of water buybacks?

STEVE ORR: That's in Mr Bolton's area.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Mr Bolton, \$16 million goes to your department as part of that?

JAMES BOLTON: As part of the Federal agreement with the department?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Yes.

JAMES BOLTON: Correct.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Is that 16 on top of the 160? It's on top of; I'm getting some nods. Can you outline, how are you going to spend \$16 million? Is that over a certain amount of time? Can you give me an idea. Is that going to mean more staff? What's that going to mean for your department?

JAMES BOLTON: It's going to involve the administration of it, which is the arrangement with the Federal Government, so the \$16 million contributes to that. Additional staff, program specialists, the time frames it takes us to deliver those programs—those sorts of things are considered in that arrangement with the Federal Government.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Is it going to be all spent in one year, or will that prop up a couple of years of the administration of this?

JAMES BOLTON: That'll cover the delivery of that funding, allocation and program.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Over how many years?

STEVE ORR: I think it's four.

JAMES BOLTON: I'll take that one on notice, but Harriet Whyte, who's sitting behind me—

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I'm happy for you to take that on notice.

JAMES BOLTON: That is correct, four years.

STEVE ORR: Mr Barrett, that's just what the Commonwealth provides. That's the deal.

JAMES BOLTON: Four years.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I have some questions for LLS, for either Dr Tracey or Mr Kelly. I have some questions about the 1080 program. This might need to be taken on notice: how many litres of 1080 concentrate or how many pre-manufactured 1080 baits has LLS purchased in the last two years?

ROB KELLY: I will have to take that on notice for the total amount.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I'd also like to know the cost of the amount of 1080 that was purchased in the last two years, if that's possible to get on notice, as well.

ROB KELLY: On notice, yes. We can get all that.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Do you know the brand or the manufacturer that 1080 product is purchased from?

ROB KELLY: No. We can take that on notice, but there'll be multiple because it will be pre-mixed as well as prepared baits.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Who in LLS is responsible for determining how much 1080 should be ordered? How is that decision made within LLS?

ROB KELLY: In terms of the total bulk that's ordered, each region that is involved in pest control programs that use 1080 products will go through their program each year and look at the stock they have in inventory and how much they've got. They'll have a predetermined amount for the amount of baits they're going to prepare, and then they will order the 1080 based on that.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: To date, has LLS deployed the use of any Felixer devices for use on cats that you're aware of?

ROB KELLY: I am aware of one project; there may be more. I can take that on notice. The one I am aware of they're working through at the moment is the malleefowl project in the—

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Which project, sorry?

ROB KELLY: The malleefowl project in the Riverina where there's an exclusion area in a sanctuary that's been set up to protect malleefowl and to eradicate all pests out of that, so they're using Felixer in that malleefowl project. There might others. I can take that on notice for the rest.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: On notice can you give a bit more information about that project as well?

ROB KELLY: Of course.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Is it on a trial basis at the moment or is it an actual project in full?

ROB KELLY: The malleefowl is an actual project. In terms of the Felixer, I'd have to check whether that's a trial or not. The malleefowl project has been running now I think for around four or five years, in total.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I'm assuming that wasn't with the Felixer?

ROB KELLY: No. It's only in the last 12 months, yes.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: This might need to be taken on notice, but are there any other trials that are occurring in New South Wales with the Felixer under LLS?

ROB KELLY: I can check for LLS, yes.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Is LLS currently investing in any research or trials for alternatives to the use of 1080 poison?

ROB KELLY: Not to my knowledge, but I'll check. I'll take that on notice.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Dr Filmer, I have more questions about Coffs Coast Wildlife Sanctuary. We get quite a lot of concerns come through to my office, in particular relating to the conditions the dolphins are held in and the dolphin swim experiences which have started back up at the facility. They've been granted a special

condition which allows the second dolphin pool to be significantly shallower and smaller than the standards. Are you able to advise when that special condition was first granted?

KIM FILMER: In 2014.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: So it's fairly recent.

KIM FILMER: Yes.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I understand they applied for their most recent permit with the special condition again in May 2024. On what basis did the department decide to grant the special condition?

KIM FILMER: The condition on granting the use of that small pool is that the larger lagoon pool that the dolphins would normally be in is accessible at all times. Even though they come into that smaller stadium pool, I think they call it, they at any point in time can decide to retreat back to their larger lagoon pool.

The CHAIR: Going back to what we were talking about, Ms Lorimer-Ward, around a more collaborative approach to pest management, why do your regional strategic pest management plans only mention recreational hunters twice—once in relation to the State forest system, which you have no control over, and the other in a negative light, where you talk about the popularity of recreational hunting posing a compliance-related issue? It seems like your positive comments earlier conflict with what has been put in your publications.

KATE LORIMER-WARD: I'd have to ask the team about that difference. I appreciate the commentary about some of the motivations for hunting and that the aim of the pest control programs is to significantly reduce numbers. There are portions of the community that don't necessarily share that desire and want to be able to continue their recreational activities for a long period.

The CHAIR: I dare say that's going to happen regardless of how many we hit.

KATE LORIMER-WARD: It is. But they're the challenges that we're trying to balance.

The CHAIR: Why does Local Land Services continue to assert in its publications and in dealings with landholders that deer pose a significant biosecurity risk when peer-reviewed research, such as the CSIRO study and a recent UTS study, say the opposite? First, are you aware of those studies? If you aren't, will you go away and look at them and perhaps consider updating your policies and publications to reflect that?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: I'm happy to go away and look at those studies. I understand the biosecurity risk, though, would largely be around FMD and those types of diseases.

The CHAIR: Those studies say that doesn't actually occur.

KATE LORIMER-WARD: I'm happy to look at those pieces.

The CHAIR: Mr Sloan, can I quickly go to some questions I'm looking for answers for on behalf of the South West Rocks Anglers? Can you explain to me and to them why haul netting and gill netting is still permitted in the Macleay River but banned in neighbouring river systems like the Hastings, Bellinger and Kalang? I'm happy for you to take it on notice if you need to.

SEAN SLOAN: Thanks for the question, Chair. I'm happy to go away and look into that. I note there is an historical context to those other closures. It may well be linked to arrangements from quite some time ago. I'm happy to look into those specific areas. As you know, there have been a number of areas closed to recreational fishing, which are now referred to as recreational fishing havens, across New South Wales. And then there has been a large reform of the commercial fishery. The idea with the reforms was to enable the remaining commercial fishers to operate across various parts of the State. It may be that what we come back with is to say that that's one of the areas that needs to remain open to commercial fishing. But I'm happy to take it on notice and look into it.

The CHAIR: Could you also come back to us on this notion of interstate beach hauling crews? These are people who come from interstate, haul off our beaches and then leave and return next season. There's an argument to say that they're not necessarily creating any community benefit by being there and we're not seeing the benefit of that in a commercial sense. Can you come back to us with information around the extent of that and how that fits into our commercial fishing and recreational mix?

SEAN SLOAN: I'll absolutely go away and look into that, Chair. What I can say without looking into it is that anybody who is fishing in New South Wales would need to be licensed in New South Wales. It may be that there are employees that those businesses are using and they could be from interstate, but they would have to be licensed in New South Wales.

The Hon. WES FANG: Point of order: Ms Higginson, who is a participating member of this inquiry, continues to make pejorative statements under her breath. She's constantly interjecting and constantly making

remarks, so much so that one of my colleagues has overheard some quite concerning comments from her during this inquiry. A participating member should not be conducting herself in such a way. There is a precedent set. I'd ask you to call her to order for the first time so that she has an understanding that it cannot continue.

The CHAIR: I can't speak to the comments that she may have made under her breath that were quite inflammatory, given that I didn't hear them. I have heard her muttering about things. I would say that doing that in an attempt to distract another member asking questions or to cast aspersions on the questions that somebody is asking is disorderly not just for a participating member but for any member. If any members are listening, I would advise them to cease and desist. Hopefully, that might not happen on our return from afternoon tea.

The Hon. WES FANG: That is wise counsel, Chair.

The CHAIR: With that in mind, we will return at 3.45 p.m.

(Short adjournment)

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the remainder of today's budget estimates session.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: May I ask how work is progressing at the Lightning Ridge opal museum? I like to come in out of left field to make my presence felt.

JAMES BOLTON: I'm going to have to take that one on notice, Mrs Overall.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Come on, James!

The Hon. WES FANG: You always know everything.

JAMES BOLTON: I know, but this one has got me.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: How would you like me to do this? I'll ask the questions anyway, but you'll take them on notice and get back to me about them?

JAMES BOLTON: Absolutely.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: What's the total value of the project?

JAMES BOLTON: We can take that on notice.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Are you aware of any issues in relation to the project?

The Hon. WES FANG: Variations.

JAMES BOLTON: I'll take that on notice.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Have all the relevant milestones been met in accordance with funding deeds? This is probably the one that is of most importance. If you're not aware, I understand if you take it on notice, but I would like to have it on record as well. To the best of your knowledge—and obviously not until we have a look at these things—have the contractors paid all of their subcontractors for material and services provided for this project?

JAMES BOLTON: We'll take that on notice.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: As part of that, are there any companies that have supplied labour or materials to the project that remain unpaid?

JAMES BOLTON: I'll take on notice. I apologise that I couldn't answer, Mrs Overall.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: That's okay. It is better you than me.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Mr Sloan, control and containment of tilapia—is that in your patch?

SEAN SLOAN: Mr Barrett, I've got a feeling it's a biosecurity question, but ask the question and if I can answer it I will.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Have we got any idea of what type you're getting into the Murray Darling Basin and what the impact of that would be financially?

SEAN SLOAN: First of all, I know that it's a non-native species found all over South-East Asia. It's an aquaculture species. We certainly wouldn't want it in the Murray Darling Basin. It would be a biosecurity issue, in much the same way that carp, as a noxious exotic species, would be. It's a very similar situation, I would suggest, but I'm not as familiar with the biology of tilapia to be able to speak to how invasive they are and how

the population would take hold et cetera. But if they are the sort of questions, I think we've got a plan of some description.

RACHEL CONNELL: That's right. In relation to impacts, we would generally draw on modelling or analysis done by the Commonwealth from a biosecurity point of view. We can take that on notice to see if there's any work that has been done nationally on it.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Maybe we don't have the right people on this, but I wonder what your views are on allowing tilapia to be eaten as a species. Currently it's a prohibited matter, so you can't handle it. Are there views in the department about what a change to be able to eat that would have?

RACHEL CONNELL: We'll take that one on notice.

SEAN SLOAN: Mr Barrett, what I can say is that a lot of it gets imported. A lot of the fish and chips you eat in fish and chip shops is tilapia, so it can be eaten. If there are challenges around any that are in a live situation in New South Wales, then they would be biosecurity matters for us.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: A lot of the fish in our fish and chip shops is imported tilapia?

SEAN SLOAN: Quite a lot of fish that you would eat in a fish and chip shop would be tilapia from South-East Asia.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Bumbalong Bridge—is this another one out of left field?

JAMES BOLTON: Mrs Overall, it is out of left field, but I am aware of it.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: A project that was previously funded by our Liberal-Nationals Government, which is managed by Regional NSW, has had various complications involving private land access, but it's critically important for the access of RFS vehicles during bushfire incidents. The project has been delayed due to the discovery of Aboriginal artefacts. I really want to know how much longer it will take. The delay has been quite extensive now. There have been numerous consultation stages. Have they concluded yet? Has it gone out to tender yet? What is the timeline? The initial budget was \$4 million. Is that still going to cover the cost of the now delayed project?

JAMES BOLTON: I've got Ms Whyte here. She will be able to assist with Bumbalong Bridge. Mrs Overall, we will take some of those questions on notice and get you the latest information. I received a briefing not too long ago that showed the progression of the project, and we were addressing those issues around Aboriginal heritage and access to the site. There has definitely been progression. Ms Whyte, do you have anything to add?

HARRIET WHYTE: I haven't got too much else to add on that one, and I don't want to mislead the Committee. I know that between the regional coordination staff and our own teams, we have been working to progress that, but we can take the specifics on notice for you.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Ms Lorimer-Ward, the local community advisory groups, which are required under section 33 of the Local Land Services Act—have we got them functioning in each region?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: I understand that each region has at least one of those. Regions have options to establish them for specific purposes or for a more general purpose. My understanding is that they do function in those regions, but I'm happy to take that on notice.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Could we get a breakdown of where they are functioning? I think you have to have terms of reference for them to come on board.

KATE LORIMER-WARD: Yes, and some of them are quite special interest versus more general.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I'll come back to some more apiary stuff in a little while, but regarding access to beekeeping sites—and I'm not sure who I'm directing this to—beekeepers pay \$250 to access Crown lands for their beekeeping sites. We're hearing some reports of that access being impassable. I've got photos and that sort of stuff to table. Is someone able to look into this for us and give us some sort of update about the works going on to ensure that apiarists do have access to their designated sites?

STEVE ORR: That's managed out of one spot.

RACHEL CONNELL: Yes, we can take that on notice for you, Mr Barrett.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Just to get some update on that.

RACHEL CONNELL: Yes.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Mr Chaudhary, I want to ask some questions about Forestry Corporation, following on from when I was discussing the biomaterial reports with the Minister. I am curious about the extent to which you think this was a major issue within Forestry Corporation and the fact that condition 6.4 of the IFOA requires that biomaterial reports accurately reflect actual logging yields and areas harvested. Could you please explain how we had errors for the three years previously? It looks also like there were errors in the reports for the three years prior to that, and Forestry Corporation rectified or revised its reports in October and again in January. As far as I am concerned, I can't find any actual genuine explanation as to how that has happened. I would love it if you could shed some light.

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: Ms Higginson, first of all I would like to acknowledge the fact that the public expects accurate reporting from Forestry Corporation. We are disappointed that this has occurred. I would also like to acknowledge the two stakeholders in particular who raised several questions to us. That made us look at our reports, and this particular report, more closely, and hence we discovered this particular error. And I will go on to say that this issue is specific to the biomaterials report. It doesn't extend to other reports, like our annual report or our financial statements. That's because the source data—our sales system and our finance system—are unaffected. They're actually correct. The way the error has occurred is in the extraction of the data and translating or formatting it to create this very specific report for the purposes of the coastal IFOA.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Can I just ask, if it's okay—

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: Sure.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I want you to answer. You say "the extraction of the data". From where?

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: The data's extracted from our sales system, but then it's actually formatted and recalculated to provide certain information that is required for the report. In this particular example, one of the errors was that the incorrect weight of certain product categories was taken. Instead of a net weight, a gross weight was taken. That affected those numbers. But the purpose of this report, which, I think, you're aware of, is to ensure that our harvesting volumes are within the harvesting limit. I'm pleased to inform the Committee that it is. That's the case. So, even with this error, we were below the levels, and after, of course, rectifying the issue, that is still the case.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Can you just explain to me, then, net weight and gross weight? The explanation that I've read in various places is that data was doubled; data from one year was replicated as two years and put in a place. Is that explanation not the correct explanation?

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: No. That was a different issue. That issue related to the display of data on our—what's called BI, business intelligence system. We were actually trying to enhance the reporting by making it more interactive for the user, and the display on the graph actually was showing two years combined. We've addressed that by changing the filter on the actual query of the BI report. The data wasn't wrong. It was just the display. It wasn't displaying the data correctly. That was one of the issues.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Clearly, there have been a number of issues.

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: Yes. As I said, when the two stakeholders in particular raised their queries, it made us look into this more closely. Hence we had to republish those reports. We're still working with the stakeholders, by the way. I understand there's more questions and we're going to be meeting with them.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Just in relation to that, I hear that you're claiming that there's no impact on the finance data or other data, but these reports appeared in the annual reports. For example, the biomaterial report is literally linked through the sustainability reports in your current annual report, that was tabled only in November last year.

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: That's not quite correct, Ms Higginson.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: But there are eight references—

The Hon. WES FANG: Point of order—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: There are eight references in the annual report—

The CHAIR: Sorry, Ms Higginson. I've just had a point of order called. I'm not too sure what it's about.

The Hon. WES FANG: Mr Chaudhary was trying to provide part of an answer, and Ms Higginson then continued to, I guess, put—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: To the point of order: I think we're just having a conversation.

The Hon. WES FANG: I haven't even finished my point of order, Ms Higginson. I'd like to be able to do that first. Mr Chaudhary was trying to provide an answer to the first part of the question that was asked, and then Ms Higginson talked over the top of him to try and include further questions. He should be allowed to answer the first part of the question before other parts are put to him.

The CHAIR: Did you want to get to that point of order? Or do you want to just let me rule?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I'm fine for you to rule, Chair.

The CHAIR: I was listening. I don't think it was overly aggressive towards Mr Chaudhary in any way. I think we've all done it in the past; we've thrown a question out and then added something at the end that we wanted clarified. So in this case I won't uphold the point of order.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you. All I was saying is my understanding is, in the annual report—and it's still there online—there are links, and there are eight references that say:

More detailed data is published in the Sustainability Report.

You click on that, and the biomaterial reports are actually right there in front of you. There are eight clear references throughout the annual report. So I'm just concerned about this notion that the biomaterial reports are not part of those other reports and therefore perhaps the error—

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: Sure. Can I just explain that?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Please do.

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: First of all, the annual report itself is the financial statements and the annual report under the annual reporting regulations that we've got. The sustainability report is separate to that. The sustainability report is a report that is on our website, that covers our forest management system. It covers our harvesting volumes and all sorts of things. The biomaterials report is only a reference in there. There's no data in the sustainability report. It's only a link. If you click on the link, it takes you to an area of our website where the biomaterials are found. There's no data in the report itself, if you know what I mean, which—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I think what I'm trying to say, though, is I don't think that—do you really think that that lessens the weight of the error, given, if I am looking at your annual report, along with many other people, if, when you get to page 17, it says, "For more detail, it's published in the sustainability report" and you click the link, and again on page 21, 25, 26, 27, on each occasion, you press on that link, you get to the sustainability report, and there is the biomaterial data, sitting there for you to see? For the period of time that it has been on websites over the last few years with that incorrect data, at every point in time, that has misled all of the people. The public and any other regulator, at large, has been misled about that data and those errors, and that perpetrates those errors. Would you agree?

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: I wouldn't say it lessens the importance of the issue, which is why we are working to rectify it, and we have done that. The sustainability report is not the same as the annual report. It's not part of the annual report. It doesn't get tabled in Parliament. I think that's an important distinction to make—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I understand that. That's why I'm saying—it's in the annual report, though. That's why I think it—the links are literally there, saying, "If you want more data, go and look at the sustainability reports."

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: Yes, in the sustainability report. And, in the sustainability report, we don't have the biomaterials data in the report. It just links it to a page on our website, which says, "For more information, here's the biomaterials report."

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: But I think the idea is, if that's what you're doing in your annual report and that's what you've done for years—imagine we didn't have links and interactive. These things would be annexed to those reports, would they not?

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: There's no requirement under the annual report to—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I know there's no requirement, but you did it.

The Hon. WES FANG: Point of order—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Forestry Corporation did that for the community to rely on that information, and it's there in those eight references.

The CHAIR: It's flowing all right.

The Hon. WES FANG: I know, but he was trying to answer, and she just cuts him off. It's so rude.

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: When we published the report, we also put a statement on our website, advising the users that that's what the case is.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Also, have you notified other authorities about this incorrect, misleading data for the last several years?

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: This report is required, as I was saying, under the coastal IFOA, which is regulated by the Environment Protection Authority. Yes, we have advised the EPA.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Can I ask one final question in such a short period of time. Given the change in data, there's now compartments in the south that now look like their only purpose of logging were for low-value products, which is also contrary to the IFOA. Does that concern you?

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: Ms Higginson, different forest types produce different types of products. Some forests produce more sawlogs, and others produce more pulp logs.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: But is it not a condition of the IFOA in the south that primary purposes for those low-value products is not lawful?

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: I'm not aware of that. As I said, we go into the forest to produce sawlogs. But different—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Would you be able to take that on notice, about whether that is a concern and something that you're looking at?

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: Yes. I'm happy to do that.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Sloan, just continuing on where we left off with the Macleay River issue—noting that we've had this discussion before around stock assessments being done at a State level, not a system level—how do we know that we're getting the balance right with recreational commercial fishing activities in that system, with stocks like whiting, bream, luderick, mullet, mulloway, when we aren't doing a system-level assessment?

SEAN SLOAN: First of all, coming back to the Macleay River, the Estuary General Fishery allows fishing in the Macleay River. That's, I guess, the first response to the question. It is part of the Estuary General Fishery, so commercial fishing is permitted. To your second question, all of those species you mentioned have a statewide distribution at a stock level—so at a New South Wales level. In terms of the fishing pressure that occurs in various parts of the State, it's very similar for a lot of our species. They're mobile, but there will be pressures in certain locations that need to be managed in different ways. That's something that we've often had the conversation with recreational fishing groups and commercial fishing groups, that if we could get to a point where we're co-managing the fisheries at a local level and stakeholders are involved, then you could actually tailor the arrangements to local levels. That's obviously an ambition that we have, but that's something that requires the stakeholders at that local level to come together in some form. Does that answer your question, Chair?

The CHAIR: I guess it kind of does. The only other thing I would ask is when we're looking at those system-specific stocks, do we still need to consider the localised genetics as part of the conversation and the work that we do?

SEAN SLOAN: For certain species—for example, abalone—we know that at a reef level they can be genetically discrete populations. But for a lot of our mobile fin fish species, like the ones that you mentioned, they're mobile. They would tend to be statewide biological stocks, so we manage them that way. Obviously there are local pressures on the fish in those areas, but the stocks are genetically either at a State level—and in some cases, interjurisdictional, spanning the east coast, with Queensland and Victoria.

The CHAIR: Can I go to the issue of recreation scuba divers and any compliance activities that Fisheries officers undertake with them and them potentially illegally harvesting marine life? We know during the blue groper saga—I'll call it that—there were concerns around the reason that blue groper are so passive is because they are handfed and almost hand reared, enticed to come in by scuba divers who will actually rip off sea urchins and break open marine life and, essentially, handfeed to the fish. From my understanding of the Act, that is actually illegal. What compliance work is being done in that space to deal with that discrete issue?

SEAN SLOAN: To make sure that I'm interpreting the fisheries Act correctly, Chair, I'll need to check the point you've made about whether that is an illegal act or not. I'm actually not sure. I know that it occurs. I will check that. Obviously it's not feasible to have Fisheries officers scuba diving and checking that sort of activity. I'm sure that's not what you're suggesting. I'll need to just have a bit of a think about how that issue plays out and talk to Fisheries officers about how they view that issue as well.

The CHAIR: Can I go to some more species-specific issues? The trout cod recovery plan, where are we at with that? I know there was a draft action plan, and that seems to be the last thing that I can find publicised on your website. Have we moved from a draft stage and into an actual action stage?

SEAN SLOAN: We have, Chair. The Minister, I think, alluded to this earlier today that we did the consultation with community on essentially redrafting an action plan for the trout cod, which was one of the election commitments of the Government. We have done that consultation. The team have prepared the plan, and I think there's an imminent release of the updated trout cod action plan. We have actually moved to a pond-breeding system out at Narrandera now, where we once were doing the breeding of trout cod in tanks. That was hormone induced. We're now doing it in the ponds, which is a more natural process. We have had excellent results with increased production of trout cod. That means that we can stock more trout cod. There is a range of strategies that are in the action plan. When the Minister finalises it and releases it, that will be then our plan for taking the recovery of trout cod forward.

The CHAIR: This is the second or third iteration of the recovery program or plan. Has there been any thought from the department in maybe switching it up a little bit and trying to treat trout cod like a sports fishery, like trout, knowing what we know about them, in terms of how they spawn et cetera, and just stocking them annually like we do with other species for the benefit of recreational fishing? Knowing what we know about them in terms of how they cope when we put them in the river, have we looked at going down that route, perhaps?

SEAN SLOAN: The short answer is yes. One of the actions in the plan is to actually get back to a point where we can have a recreational fishery, a targeted fishery, for trout cod. As you know, we do stock them into Talbingo Dam, and they're a species that can be targeted there. That's another option for us. At the moment, our focus is on trying to create more than just one naturally occurring and naturally replenishing stock. The restocking will be at locations in New South Wales so that we can create more naturally occurring stocks. Once we get through that, I think stocking other locations to do the type of fishing that you're referring would be something we could certainly do.

The CHAIR: Where we're trying to create these other distinct populations in the river, I'm assuming we're marrying our work that we're doing on river habitat restoration as well?

SEAN SLOAN: Yes, absolutely. One of the strategies in the new action plan is to improve habitat, because, clearly, if you have healthy habitat, you have healthy fish stocks.

The CHAIR: Yes, absolutely. Where are we at with Macquarie perch and river blackfish in terms of their recovery? You might want to take that on notice, perhaps.

SEAN SLOAN: Both of them have recovery strategies. I'll need to take it on notice as to exactly where we're at with those, Chair.

The CHAIR: Has your department done any work in the space of the fish screening devices that have been put on irrigation pumps? What may have to happen if WaterNSW, in their costing exercises, decide that they're not going to fund those fish screening devices? There is debate currently at the moment with WaterNSW and a rate rise for regional water users, and some of the talk is around pulling back on some of those additional costs that get passed onto water users, one of them being the fish screening.

SEAN SLOAN: To date, over \$40 million has been spent on improving or installing fish screens in New South Wales, and that's a combination of State funding as well as Commonwealth funding. The Commonwealth has been a significant contributor to that program. Essentially, the outcomes are that, by having modern fish screens on irrigation pumps, we can reduce the number of fish, larvae and eggs that get sucked up into the pumps. Irrigators benefit because they don't get debris stuck in the pumps, and they're more efficient.

The CHAIR: I think the benefit is there. It's just a concern of who will pay if WaterNSW pulls back.

SEAN SLOAN: My understanding is that we have forward contracts with the Commonwealth, but I will look into that and take on notice the specific question, Chair.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Still on that theme, have we been able to quantify just how much fish we are losing through irrigation pumps?

SEAN SLOAN: We have. I'll need to check the figures. By 2026 at least 50 pump sites are expected to be screened in New South Wales. That is estimated to, essentially, protect two million fish annually. That's not taking into account the impacts on eggs and larvae. That's covering about 6,000 millilitres of water annually as well. They are quite significant numbers. When you factor in the variation in fish stocks annually with periods of drought and flood and so on, they can be quite impactful.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: My question is: Are we putting in more than we are taking out? Are we putting more fish stocks into our waterways than we are losing through predominantly irrigation pumps?

SEAN SLOAN: Certainly that's one of the reasons why we are focusing on this strategy. There is a whole raft of factors and initiatives that come together to improve the outcomes for our native fish, and fish screening on the irrigation pumps is one of them; putting fish passageways in place to reconnect the river is another one; obviously, our restocking programs and our habitat rehabilitation programs; and, generally, water management, as you know. All of those things come together, but the fish screening is quite a critical part of that.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Returning to trout cod, specifically on the Murray, I understand there is a full fishing closure of certain stretches of the Murray because of trout cod.

SEAN SLOAN: There is one particular stretch that is the last remaining self-replenishing stock of trout cod. In their annual spawning period, they are particularly susceptible. They will be easy to catch and they are also quite a sensitive fish. They can be damaged easily in that catching process. We have had a closure in place in that stretch of the river to protect the fish during that time. As part of the action plan that I was speaking to earlier, that remains. But our ambition is to get to a point where we create other naturally self-sustaining stocks of trout cod so that those closures aren't as critical to the recovery of the population going forward. At the moment, that one is, because it is the last remnant population of trout cod.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: We have got evidence of greater fish stock numbers there as opposed to other parts of the river?

SEAN SLOAN: Correct.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: That evidence exists?

SEAN SLOAN: Yes.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: In 2019, I think, \$37.5 million was put aside to fill a 32-kilometre gap in the dog fence. I am just wondering where we are up to with filling that gap.

JAMES BOLTON: I can answer that, Mr Barrett. The 32-kilometre priority section of the fence is in construction at the moment. As of the last report I received, which is last week, about 21 kilometres have been completed of actual fence construction and signed off by the New South Wales dog board. There are about 10 kilometres of clay capping that have been completed ahead of the remaining works for the 32 kilometres.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: As in getting ready to put the fence in?

JAMES BOLTON: Yes. A critical hurdle with the project was the need for clay capping, which was underestimated at the start of the project and has been one of the challenging elements of it.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Is that a process specific for dog fences?

JAMES BOLTON: It is. Due to the way that the fence is designed, you have to dig out a certain section of depth to bury some of the fence structure and then, obviously, clay capping is there to improve the structural integrity of the fence.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Will this come in under the \$37.5 million that was allocated for this?

JAMES BOLTON: Yes, definitely.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Any idea when that will be completed?

JAMES BOLTON: The 32-kilometre priority section we are looking to complete in the next month.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Very good.

JAMES BOLTON: The anticipated completion date at the moment is in March.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: You mentioned the 32-kilometre priority part. Are there other parts that need closing?

JAMES BOLTON: That critical 32-kilometre section of the fence is—there is a hole between the South Australian section and the New South Wales section. That has been prioritised as our first area for completion. There are other sections of the fence that are maintained for further consideration to government once we take the learnings from the 32-kilometre section of fence.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Who can provide an update on where we are with the development of an FMD vaccine?

LISA SZABO: I am able to provide that one for you. Here in New South Wales we have taken a strong interest in mRNA as a vaccine technology. Many members of the public would be aware of that during COVID-19 as the platform that helped us get through that pandemic. Where we are up to with those trials is that we have got a number of partners around the world. Here we have developed mRNA vaccines for both lumpy skin disease and foot-and-mouth disease. We have tested those vaccines in animals and got a serological response, which was a positive. Because we don't have those diseases in Australia, we are relying on our partners to do the next phase of testing, and that is to take those vaccines and test them in animals with the actual live virus. We anticipate those studies will be completed in the first half of this year.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: The difference with this means that we will be able to export these animals because they won't come up as being infected with FND, which would be the case with a live vaccine?

LISA SZABO: That is the potential. We still have some way to go. First, if those trials turn out to be successful and we get that immunity that we desire, we then need to go through the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority to get the approval for their use and, yes, the way that they could be manufactured would enable us to distinguish between a vaccinated animal and an animal that has been exposed to the actual virus.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: What is your hope on how you would answer that question if it was 2030? Where are we going to be in five years time with that?

RACHEL CONNELL: I don't think it's fair to put hypothetical questions.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: So what sort of time frame are we working to? What milestones have you got coming up on that?

LISA SZABO: Again, the next step is to show that we can demonstrate that you can actually get that immunity in animals. The foot-and-mouth disease is going to be tested in Germany and the lumpy skin disease will be tested in Canada with our research partners there.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: My next question is about carp, probably to you again, Mr Sloan, and the status of the National Carp Control Plan. Is there any particular New South Wales engagement with this program?

SEAN SLOAN: I think you are speaking to the release of the virus?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Yes.

SEAN SLOAN: There has been, through the interjurisdictional processes for managing carp, an agreement to put together a trial project to release the virus in an enclosed body of water in Victoria. There is a working group between all of the jurisdictions currently working towards that. There have been no approvals put in place to essentially kick that off, but there is a working group working on that. Victoria is leading it and New South Wales is supporting it. There is a whole series of approvals that have to go through the Commonwealth process to get to a point where the trial would go ahead. Obviously there are a lot of risks that need to be managed. But the risk of carp populations increasing over time is obviously also a big risk that everybody is aware of. We are supporting that trial and have our staff involved in it. I don't know if Ms Connell wants to add anything.

RACHEL CONNELL: No, I think they are the key things. The working group has been convened under the auspices of the agricultural Ministers' forum and the senior officers' forum that reports through to ag Ministers. The Commonwealth made funding available, I think, last year to support the work of the working group.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: What other carp control programs are DPI involved with? I am thinking specifically if we are still involved in daughterless carp research.

SEAN SLOAN: No, that research was, as I recall, led by the CSIRO and supported by other jurisdictions. That technology is available, but I think the emphasis has been placed on the carp herpes virus in more recent times because of its efficiency in dealing with the carp issue. In addition to those, there's still a commercial fishery for carp in New South Wales, as there is in other jurisdictions. That's another mechanism. We're continuing to support those activities. But, in all reality, they just touch the edges of the issue of the challenges that we have with carp because of how invasive they are. The virus is viewed widely as the best solution. But the risks that need to be completely covered off as far as impacts on our native species, but also water quality impacts if we have a mass kill of carp, obviously require a lot of consideration as well. All of those things are going to be looked at as part of this trial, which is in an enclosed body of water that's away from the Murray-Darling Basin so that it limits the risk of any release of the virus into the basin itself.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Is someone able to provide a status update of the varroa mite destruction plan?

RACHEL CONNELL: I'm happy to do that.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Where are we up to? How much is left in the kitty? What's next?

RACHEL CONNELL: You're probably aware that the Government allocated about \$12.5 million over a two-year period. That commenced about a year ago now, so we've got about a year to go. Obviously, as we've moved into management, the focus is on training and extension. About 70 per cent of that budget is basically being allocated for us to fund a range of staff and initiatives, working with beekeepers to assist them with the transition to management and educating them about best practice, use of chemicals and how to manage hive issues. We've got a range of development officers in our team. We've convened about 41 workshops to date. I think we've managed to interface with about 2,500 beekeepers. We've got eight workshops planned for this year. We're also working with AgriFutures on what might be options going forward, especially around genetic research and other measures to make sure we've got pollination services available for our producers into the future.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Presuming that program is running hand in glove with the DPI compliance officers, which I hope it is, how many proactive audits have been conducted against the Australian Honey Bee Industry Biosecurity Code of Practice?

RACHEL CONNELL: The controls in relation to varroa were removed once we moved into management. That's part of the transition arrangement. The focus is very much on working with industry to help them deal with management under the new framework. We don't currently have any biosecurity controllers in place anymore.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: But the honey bee code of practice is still in place?

RACHEL CONNELL: That's right. But our focus is very much on education. If you think about the regulatory triangle, the pointy end is prosecutions and you've got penalty infringement notices in the middle, but education is the foundation piece, and that's very much our focus at the moment. We obviously have a hotline. So if anybody has any concerns about compliance issues, there's always the opportunity to report those and they will be triaged by our compliance team.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: How much proactive work is going into inspecting the biosecurity compliance of beekeepers?

RACHEL CONNELL: I would have to take that on notice. We take a risk-based approach in terms of the compliance that we do across the various pieces of legislation that we're responsible for. I will have to take on notice if there has been any particular focus in relation to the bee industry. But, as I said, the key regulatory mechanism in relation to varroa was removed when we transitioned to management.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Could you perhaps also take notice how many PINs have been issued in relation to bees?

RACHEL CONNELL: Yes, I can take that on notice for you.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: In relation to the research stations, can someone tell me when the department received the O'Kane report?

STEVE ORR: The interim report?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Yes.

STEVE ORR: I think it was just before Christmas, Mr Barrett, in terms of the final report. As you'd be aware, the Minister announced the review with the Premier up in Tamworth in August. The review was fairly broad reaching to look at the alignment between the research activities of the department and broader needs within the community, industry and government. The interim report I believe was finalised just before Christmas. As the Minister said earlier today, she'll be releasing that shortly.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: The process is it comes to the department, you go through it, prepare a brief and send it up to the Minister?

STEVE ORR: The department has been providing the secretariat for Professor O'Kane, Mr Quinlivan, Dr Nick Austin and Dr James Findlay. We've been providing the secretariat to enable them to prepare their report. That's the way in which it's been working. As part of the work which that panel did, they consulted widely with industry and also with the staff, and that included a survey of the staff within the department. So that's the process. There's to be a final report in a few months time, let's say, but the interim report will be released shortly.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: How far down that track are we? Are we preparing media releases for that yet? Has a media release been prepared?

STEVE ORR: I think I can go on what the Minister said earlier today, Mr Barrett, and that is that it will be released shortly.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: This might be a bit hard to answer, but are there concerns in the department about what might be in this report, for those that don't know? I'm not asking you to unveil State secrets, but is this causing issues in the department, having this hanging over their head?

STEVE ORR: I guess individuals will see it in different lights, Mr Barrett. As the Minister said earlier today, this function within the department is an important function. I don't think there's any debate about that. But the function hasn't been given a good look at for a good period of time. People may find that a bit unsettling, and that's understandable. Equally, we need to ensure that the department's activities are appropriately aligned with the interests of industry, the community and government.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: What was the outcome of the functional review that we heard so much of that took up so much time in the last budget estimates?

STEVE ORR: The functional review itself—the document itself—is a Cabinet document. I will make that as a general comment. I can run through what's happened within the department, if that's helpful.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: More broadly—and I think this fed into that review—there was a goal of a 15 per cent reduction of senior executive levels. How are we tracking towards that?

STEVE ORR: We're at 162; we need to hit 157.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Will that be just natural attrition or are we looking for people to move on?

STEVE ORR: I guess the first comment I would make is we've got until June 2026, so there's no rush to deal with this. Ms Connell, Mr Bolton and Mr Sloan have also been looking at their executive structures, so that may lead to that. There are also other parts of the department as well where people have been looking at their executive structures, but we're not far from the target.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Has there been a freeze, or at the very least a cooling, on the filling of vacancies?

STEVE ORR: I think everyone is looking closely in terms of the need for roles. I think that's a natural thing. All leadership should be looking closely at the need for roles. But if you are asking whether there is there a freeze on recruitment, there isn't.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Dr Filmer, continuing on with my questions around Coffs Coast Wildlife Sanctuary, you mentioned when I was asking questions before that part of the special condition was reliant on the fact that dolphins would have access at all times to the other pool. In that regard, is that part of the conditions themselves, or would that be a concern to you if the dolphins were being held just in one of the pools for long periods of time?

KIM FILMER: My understanding from the compliance unit is that the smaller pool is not locked off. It adjoins onto the larger lagoon pool. At any given point in time, if a dolphin wants to, it can retreat back into the lagoon pool. It's effectively one bigger pool. Even though it's in two sections, they're joined together, is my understanding.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: My understanding is the facility often blocks access; it adds some sort of block between the two pools so that the dolphins can't access both pools. My concern is we're looking at it as they have access to these two pools, and therefore there's this special condition because they've got this extra space, but I don't know how often they're given access to both pools. I've heard a lot of evidence that they're often split into groups. There might be one dolphin on their own in one pool and something is blocked off to keep them separated, or they're held intentionally in one pool for long periods of time. I'm assuming it's not a part of the condition that they have to continually, or most of the time, have access to both pools?

KIM FILMER: If they're in the larger pool, they wouldn't need to have access to the smaller pool because the larger pool can accommodate up to six dolphins. If they're being locked in the larger pool, I wouldn't have any concerns about that at all.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: And if they're locked in the smaller pool?

KIM FILMER: If they're locked in the smaller pool, then I think that's something I'd need to take on notice and refer to the compliance team.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: If I've got evidence of that—I've certainly heard about it, but I'll see what evidence we've received of that and pass that on.

KIM FILMER: It would depend on which pool they're locked in.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Yes, and depending on what evidence has come to my office about it. Was there an animal welfare assessment or advice obtained from the department around the granting of that special condition, given there doesn't seem to be any requirement that the dolphins must have access to the larger pool?

KIM FILMER: My understanding is they do have access to that larger pool.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: But that they don't have to—when they block it off, is my question. I understand you're saying that they do have access, but once the facility blocks off that access—when I look at the special condition, it doesn't require access to the larger pool, is my reading of it.

KIM FILMER: Again, I'll have to take that on notice. You got right down to the detail there.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Regarding my original question about animal welfare assessment or advice obtained regarding that special condition, can I ask who that came from?

KIM FILMER: I'll need to take that on notice.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: And whether or not there was any formal advice in writing as well.

KIM FILMER: If it's a condition of their licence, then there would be—

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Sorry, in the advice, not on the licence.

KIM FILMER: I'll take that on notice.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: In the past five years, two dolphins have died at Coffs Coast Wildlife Sanctuary, leaving just three dolphins in their care. As you would be aware, section 2.4.2 of the standards doesn't allow a single dolphin to be housed. Are there any plans in place as to what will happen when, inevitably, two more dolphins pass away? What sort of work is being done for whichever dolphin ends up being the last remaining dolphin?

RACHEL CONNELL: Deputy Chair, that question involves a level of conjecture; it's a hypothetical scenario. We can provide you with information about the current licence conditions and arrangements, in terms of what's been issued from our compliance area, and take anything else on notice around the way the licence operates and the way it's—

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I'm not really asking about the licence, and I am not talking about a hypothetical situation. Obviously animals die eventually, whether of old age or anything else. There are three dolphins. The standards say that one single dolphin can't be housed alone. Eventually two other dolphins will die. I'm not putting a hypothetical situation. This is something that will inevitably happen.

RACHEL CONNELL: The standard would obviously continue to apply and our compliance area, in terms of the work that it undertakes—

The Hon. EMMA HURST: So the department hasn't met with the sanctuary and asked them what their plans are or what will happen with that final dolphin? That's just left up to the facility itself?

KIM FILMER: No. Hopefully that's a long way off. But the department required the facility to pay the \$60,000 bond when they were issued with their licence, and that's to cover any future potential care of the dolphins that may be required.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: So the department doesn't have any position as to whether that dolphin would be sent somewhere else, to another State, or whether that animal would be euthanised?

RACHEL CONNELL: I think it's probably best if we take that one on notice given that issue is managed out of our compliance area on the basis of advice from the Chief Animal Welfare Officer.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: How many complaints has the department received about Coffs Coast Wildlife Sanctuary in the past 12 months?

RACHEL CONNELL: We'll probably have to take that one on notice too.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: And could you find out for me if any of those complaints have been investigated and, if so, what the outcomes were?

RACHEL CONNELL: We'll take that on notice as part of that question.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: How many times has the Coffs Coast Wildlife Sanctuary been inspected in the past five years?

KIM FILMER: I can't give you the full five-year data, but I have data here since 2023. They had one audited inspection in 2023 and two in 2024.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I don't need to take the other years on notice. That's fine, thank you. In respect to those three inspections over the past two years, what audit result did they receive?

KIM FILMER: They received an A-rating, acceptable outcome.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Were they issued with any corrective action requests?

KIM FILMER: None that I've got noted here.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: At the beginning of the day I asked the Minister, because she'd sent me a letter talking about corrective action to the facility. You were going to find out for me whether that was a corrective action request specifically. Have we got that information now?

KIM FILMER: That hasn't come back to me, sorry. We'll provide that on notice.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Has any funding been provided to the Coffs Coast Wildlife Sanctuary from the department in the last two years?

KIM FILMER: Not that I am aware of.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Could you take that on notice just to confirm?

KIM FILMER: Yes.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: In regards to general exhibited animals, how many inspections and audits of exhibited animal facilities did the department undertake in the last 12 months?

KIM FILMER: We have those stats here. I've got the financial year; that's probably what we're after?

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Yes, that's fine.

KIM FILMER: For the exhibited animals program, there were 110 audits in the 2023-24 financial year. There were 77 inspections.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Of those inspections and audits, how many facilities received a C, D or E rating?

KIM FILMER: I don't have that detail here, sorry. I'd have to take that on notice.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Can you also provide on notice any details of why each facility received that result as well?

KIM FILMER: Okay.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: In the last 12 months, did the department issue any major or critical corrective action requests. If so, how many?

KIM FILMER: For the 2023—

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Sorry, for the last financial year.

KIM FILMER: We have issued four warning letters, two directions or orders, and 15 penalty notices.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: What were those facilities?

KIM FILMER: I don't have those details, sorry. I'd have to take that on notice.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: In 2022 we passed an amendment to the exhibited animals Act that provided that a holder of an exhibited animal authority must not knowingly cause or permit a person convicted or charged of animal cruelty to work with or care for an exhibited animal. Are you able to provide an update on how the department is ensuring exhibited animal facilities are complying with that new requirement?

KIM FILMER: Yes, I can do that. The department requires exhibitors to ask their staff if they've had any penalties or any issues against them that they'd have to declare. That then becomes part of the licensing program. The onus is on the exhibitor to maintain a record of that sort of thing with their staff.

The CHAIR: Can I go back to you, Mr Sloan? I have been made aware of an issue that was occurring with the fishing fee receipt payment system, where it was incorrectly displaying that the payment was being made to the Recreational Fishing Alliance and not to the department. Can you confirm the exact date that this issue began and how long it lasted?

SEAN SLOAN: I'm aware of the issue, Chair. I will need to check some notes to give you an accurate answer on it. We have rectified it. It was a service provider issue, which we have dealt with. If I can have a bit of time, I'll be able to clarify that for you.

The CHAIR: All of the questions that I have for you are around that issue. Maybe I can put them to you and if you take them on notice, I can throw to someone else for the remainder. Were there any internal audits or reports to show how many people were affected?

SEAN SLOAN: I'd need to take that on notice, Chair.

The CHAIR: Have you attempted to notify all those who were impacted of the mistake?

SEAN SLOAN: I understand we have.

The CHAIR: Have you issued any public statements regarding this issue, clarifying that the RFA didn't actually receive the funds?

SEAN SLOAN: We have.

The CHAIR: Was that a public statement or was it just to the individual anglers?

SEAN SLOAN: I'll need to check that, but I can confirm that. I think it was an issue that was identified in May 2024.

The CHAIR: Does the department have any contractual or operational oversight over Experian's role in processing these payments? If so, what is it?

SEAN SLOAN: I'll get the specifics, but as a contracting authority, we would have some oversight.

The CHAIR: Did Experian actually explain to the department how it occurred and how they have resolved it?

SEAN SLOAN: I understand that it was an administrative error, but I'll confirm that.

The CHAIR: Have they provided assurances that those errors won't happen in the future?

SEAN SLOAN: I believe so.

The CHAIR: Is there any review process in place to monitor third-party financial processing for the department?

SEAN SLOAN: I understand that since that was identified, we have kept an eye on that. As an administrative error, those things occasionally occur and they were rectified.

The CHAIR: Is the fishing fee receipt the only area where you have a third party processing the financial payment? Do you do it for other fees and licences within DPIRD, where you use Experian or another third party to do this? That may be a question to Mr Orr. I'm talking about across the whole department.

STEVE ORR: In terms of the way in which it works for us, it's not actually done by the department. It's done by another department that does it for multiple departments. From time to time, some of these issues happen and we work hard to resolve those quickly.

The CHAIR: So if I wanted to delve into this further, who would be the relevant Minister? Given that you say the third party is done across multiple departments, would I have to go to each individual Minister to find out whether this has happened in others? Would you advise that I go to the Premier's Department or the Cabinet Office? Who would be the best person to find out?

STEVE ORR: It depends on the issue that you're looking to uncover or seek some further information on.

The CHAIR: Across your department, DPIRD, does Experian do this for other licences and fees? Would they do it for the game licensing fee?

STEVE ORR: That would be my understanding. All of the invoices and fees would be through the one system and the one process, tied to the one SAP system. That would be my understanding, unless Mr Sloan has a different understanding. That's the way in which it would work. I'm not aware of any other issues, like the issue which Mr Sloan has alluded to.

The CHAIR: How would you become aware of the issue if there was another issue? Would it just be waiting for a person to check their bank statement or is there something in the system that may trigger this?

STEVE ORR: Local Land Services, for instance, issues 150,000 rates notices, so there may be an issue there, or there may be an issue in relation to Mr Sloan's world. They generally get raised through the corporate team within the department, and then the corporate team would work with the service provider to resolve the issue.

The CHAIR: Ms Higginson, would you like the last four minutes?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Yes, I would. Thank you. I'm curious, Mr Chaudhary, if you could inform the Committee if logging operations within the Great Koala National Park area have now decreased or we're exiting that area.

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: Are you referring to the assessment area under the Great Koala National Park and how they're harvesting?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Yes.

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: The harvesting operations in the Great Koala National Park assessment area are lower than what they have been. We've done some analysis on that, and the average monthly volume of timber harvested in the assessment area from March 2023 to November 2024—we did the analysis in November 2024—is 15 per cent lower than the average monthly volume harvested over the previous 10 years.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I think there are different views about how we're assessing that.

The Hon. WES FANG: Is that a statement or a question?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I was referring to from now, given that we're told the announcement around the park is quite imminent. Could you inform the Committee about operations as of the last month or so? In planning operations, have they diverted away from that area?

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: We are aware that the Government is considering the Great Koala National Park. We're still operating within the Coastal IFOA. Our objectives, as you know, are to balance out both timber supply with environmental outcomes.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Is it fair, then, to say that you're currently logging as you would be whether or not there was an announcement pending about the Great Koala National Park?

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: As I said, our records show that we're harvesting at a lower volume than we previously had in the assessment area.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: That's not quite the question. Are you continuing your operations at this point in time parallel or in the abstract of a possible Great Koala National Park decision?

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: The whole area is still part of the North East Regional Forest Agreement and it's available for supply. As you know, our planning processes can take a lot of time because of the searches and surveys we conduct. Those things are still ongoing.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Is the IFOA under review at the moment? Are you aware? Is there a review happening?

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: I'm not aware, no.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Has the NRC contacted Forestry Corporation about any review of the CIFOA?

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: To the best of my knowledge, I don't believe so. It has met our forest policies, so the department may have some views on that.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I'm aware that there are still three criminal prosecutions at the moment in the Land and Environment Court, carrying maximum penalties of \$12 million. Obviously, Forestry Corporation does not get issued the maximum penalties. Have you planned for that financial factor?

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: Specifically, do you mean the outcomes of the penalties in our financial forecast?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Yes.

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: We make an assessment when we prepare our financial statements on any potential impact of a whole range of things. Litigation is part of that as well.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: How did Forestry Corporation accidentally clear-fell 14,500 square kilometres of a national park in 2019?

The Hon. WES FANG: Point of order: This is a point of order that has been taken against me in previous hearings. This is budget estimates for the year 2024-25. The member is asking about—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: To the point of order—

The Hon. WES FANG: I haven't finished my point of order.

The CHAIR: I know what the point of order is.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: The money came out of this budget.

The CHAIR: Budget estimates has a wide latitude. We've all asked about things in the past.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm aware of that, Chair, but the Hon. Jeremy Buckingham made a ruling.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Don't cavil with the Chair.

The Hon. WES FANG: There is precedence here.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: To the point of order: The money for the offence in 2019 came out of this year's budget. It's absolutely in these estimates.

The CHAIR: Even if it wasn't in this year's budget, I don't care what Mr Buckingham may or may not have done in another committee.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm just saying that the precedence is there in the rulings.

The CHAIR: It's not the case that it has been ruled by me as Chair of this Committee, and it's not a precedent that has been set by chairs of committees as a way to rule. I won't uphold that point of order, Wes, but I applaud your attempt.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Could Mr Chaudhary answer the question?

The CHAIR: Mr Chaudhary, do you want to answer that question before we go to the Opposition?

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: Yes. I think you're referring to Orara East State Forest and Bindarri National Park. The context here is that this part of the national park was previously State forest and plantation forest as well. Back in the late 1990s it was converted to national park, and in the gazettals the description of the boundary was natural geographic features. In this case, it was drainage lines. In 2018, when our team were doing the application of that gazetted boundary, the drainage lines were not that visible. I think you'd appreciate that in 2018 we had a few years of drought leading up to that point. As a result of that, and given that it was all plantation trees, it was really difficult. There was not an obvious demarcation, if you like. Inadvertently, 1.44 hectares of Bindarri National Park was harvested. When we came to know about it, we informed National Parks and subsequently we went into an agreement to rehabilitate and compensate for that as well.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Ms Lorimer-Ward, back to the pig control programs. The Minister was unable to do this, but are you able to refer to which recommendations of the NRC review those programs are in line with?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: In terms of the overall review?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Yes. The press release welcoming the review stated that "in line with the report recommendations, the Government has invested in a pig control program". I wonder which recommendation this was in line with?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: I'll have to take on notice the specific numbers, but it was the general turnaround. Those were the recommendations around integrated programs and the need for these to be coordinated and to look at multiple approaches, not just a single approach. I'll get back to you about the specific recommendations.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: It's odd because the report refers to that pig program as "a recent and large-scale example of ineffective government resource allocation".

KATE LORIMER-WARD: We've modified the program this year so it is much more integrated and multi-species. Their review was based on the program when it was single species. This year it's much more

integrated, with the preference being a primary and secondary management approach, and one that is multi-species.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: So the scope of the program has expanded?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: Yes.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Is the additional \$100,000 to cover the additional scope of that program?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: I would have to take that on notice.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Because it was \$13 million in 2024-25 and \$13.1 million with that expanded scope. I know the update on it talks about deer control.

KATE LORIMER-WARD: It does include deer now.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: So a helicopter going up is shooting deer and pigs at the same time. Is that common?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: And any other identified invasive species that they might see as part of that aerial campaign.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: It is hard not to see this as a reduction in funding in pig control when that money is also being diverted into the control of other species.

KATE LORIMER-WARD: It is still primarily a pig control program; it is just that we undertake other activities while we are in the air. That cost is the same when the aircraft is in the air.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: And that didn't happen before? In the 2023-24 program, if deer were spotted in a helicopter shoot, were they left?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: I would have to take that on notice. I wasn't part of the program.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: We have heard a couple of times about the ebb and flow of staff, including the spikes during biosecurity outbreaks. How many additional staff were put on for the RIFA response?

RACHEL CONNELL: The red imported fire ants response?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Yes.

RACHEL CONNELL: RIFA is obviously one of our key critical issues that we are focusing on at the moment. We've got a multi-pronged approach. We are focused on education as a key component and working with relevant communities and stakeholders in the affected zone. We've obviously taken prosecutorial action recently, which involves legal advice and legal teams. We essentially draw on staff resources across quite a broad section of my group, and also from the enabling services group. When we had the most recent outbreak, we deployed some of our entomologists, I understand, from the Grafton office. Given the magnitude of the issue and the magnitude of our approach, we would be deploying teams across the department on an "as needs" basis, depending on the focus of any particular period of time.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: When the Minister and others spoke about the ebb and flow and also the spike in staff due to biosecurity outbreaks, what additional staff have we put on to address biosecurity outbreaks?

RACHEL CONNELL: That's a pretty broad question. It depends on the particular outbreak, the particular issues and the nature of our response, our interventions, what we need to do from an education point of view and what we need to do in terms of regulatory controls. Often we will deploy our diagnostic teams, and laboratories are often obviously involved in responses.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Would you be able to take on notice what additional staff were put on in 2023-24 to deal with biosecurity issues? I think Mr Orr alluded to them in a couple of answers.

STEVE ORR: Are you referring to 2023-24 or 2024-25? The current financial year?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Both, just to see what they are going towards. I presume the same would have happened with varroa mite, but they were funded by the national action plan, not from within DPI.

RACHEL CONNELL: That's right.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: In a response to a question from me recently in question time, the Minister spoke of \$135,000 that was allocated towards Harrisia cactus control. Ms Lorimer-Ward, are you able to provide a breakdown of what that was spent on?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: No, I would have to take that on notice. I haven't got that specific data.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I believe there is currently a Harrisia cactus engagement officer. Do they work alongside the Hudson pear engagement officers?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: There is. The north-west LLS region has ended up pulling together basically a cactus team, so we have dedicated specialists working on those weeds.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Will that program continue beyond June this year?

KATE LORIMER-WARD: Ours does, in terms of our team, which is employed within the LLS. It continues until 2028, I think.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Ms Connell, there are currently 125.2 full-time equivalent staff working in the biosecurity and food safety compliance team. Does that sound right?

RACHEL CONNELL: Yes, I think that's included in a parliamentary question.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: That's what was provided the other day.

RACHEL CONNELL: You're right.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Are these 125.2 staff all on the same award?

RACHEL CONNELL: I would have to take that one on notice.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Are they all required to do the same duties?

RACHEL CONNELL: They are authorised under different pieces of legislation. In that respect, there is a variety of duties. It includes the cattle tick team and obviously we've got us in that area. It's a broad range of skill sets, as you'd expect in any contemporary compliance function.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Within that function, there are staff that deal solely with cattle tick and there are staff that work across biosecurity, food safety and animal welfare. Are there staff that touch all three of those areas?

RACHEL CONNELL: I think I'd refer you back to the parliamentary question. From memory, that included information about which officers were authorised under which pieces of legislation.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Yes. There's 33 staff solely under the Biosecurity Act, but I'm just wondering are there staff who have responsibilities across food safety, biosecurity and animal welfare.

RACHEL CONNELL: Are there staff that are authorised under each of that—

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Yes.

RACHEL CONNELL: Under each piece of legislation collectively?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Yes.

RACHEL CONNELL: I think we do.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I'm getting nods. I think I'm happy with what I've got. Thank you very much. I also, thanks to these responses, believe there's been 1,627 biosecurity directions issued in 2024. Would I be able to get a breakdown of those directions, per biosecurity matter?

RACHEL CONNELL: I might just get you to clarify what you mean by "biosecurity matter".

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: By which biosecurity matter those directions are referring to: blackberries, nightshade et cetera.

RACHEL CONNELL: Yes.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Would I be able to also have the same for the PINs issued in that year?

RACHEL CONNELL: I'd have to take that one on notice, obviously.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Yes. And I presume that's the progression. Right? You get a biosecurity direction and, if that's not dealt with correctly, it then moves on to a penalty infringement notice.

RACHEL CONNELL: Yes. That's right. That's the cascade in the regulatory scheme. As I said before, we usually start with an approach which is based on education. And then, subject to, obviously, the available evidence, the top of the regulatory triangle is a prosecution.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: If I can get a breakdown of those things, I'd be happy. Thank you. I'll just pass on to Mr Fang.

The Hon. WES FANG: Mr Chaudhary, I just wanted to ask some questions quickly about the impacts on Forestry Corp workers. The Minister, in a contribution to debate in the Chamber the week before last, indicated that the constant attacks that Forestry Corp receives from members of Parliament is having a detrimental impact on the mental health and the welfare of workers. Can you just provide a little bit of insight as to how your hardworking members in Forest Corp find it difficult when they are attacked by members of Parliament in such a public way?

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: Yes. Thank you, Mr Fang. I do want to say that the workers at Forestry Corporation in particular and the broader industry—I think they're doing a wonderful job in a very challenging time, especially in native forestry.

The Hon. WES FANG: I agree.

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: I really believe we have highly skilled employees and they're really passionate about what they do. So, first and foremost, they care about the environment and forest health, and fully appreciate that groups have different views about native forestry, but sometimes those things can end up into a little bit of an assertive or aggressive situation. My view always has been to create a safe workplace. Our staff are doing it tough at the moment. There is, obviously, some concern about the future of the industry, and I met with staff recently in Coffs Harbour when I was up there. They are concerned about all of the things going on, but they're very resilient at the same time. They try to do an honest job and comply with the regulations on foot and implement government policy.

The Hon. WES FANG: Can you just outline a little bit about the impact that illegal protestors who try to disrupt these hardworking, genuine people—how that impacts not only on their ability to work but also the mental health and their happiness in the job? We spoke about the People Matter survey, and we know that within Forestry those numbers are down. Is that in part because of the attacks that people in Parliament may have around Forest Corp and the illegal protest activity that makes their job even harder?

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: Yes. We're very concerned about that. We're concerned about the psychological impact it has on staff. We have undertaken a number of training, psychological support type training for them, as well. It is taking a toll. I'll be very honest with you. I think, to an extent—we have lost some staff members, as well. They have left the organisation. So it is quite a challenging environment. As I said earlier, they're trying to implement government policy and do an honest job but, at the same time, understand that there are different opinions out there.

The Hon. WES FANG: Do you find it difficult that there are sometimes exaggerated and over-hyped claims that are made against Forest Corp, that are ultimately not represented by the data and the evidence that's on the table, in effect?

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: I appreciate that native forestry is a contested space at the moment and stakeholders have a right to have opinion on it. I don't have any issues there. But I think the point also is that Forestry Corporation and its predecessors have been managing the forest for over 100 years and have been doing so sustainably. We have, I believe, one of the most robust set of regulatory framework in the world, and we have very competent people working in the industry.

The Hon. WES FANG: I asked the Minister earlier about a guarantee that we wouldn't be stopping native forestry in New South Wales. The Minister wasn't exactly forthcoming with what I would say was overwhelming support, and I didn't feel as if there's not perhaps an agenda from this Government to maybe shut it down at some point. But, certainly, publicly the Minister has been positive about the future of native forestry in New South Wales. Could you outline what it would mean for New South Wales if we were to have the unthinkable happen and close down native forestry? Where would we receive the hardwood that we so need to be able to build the things such as houses, furniture, floorboards, all those sustainable, renewable building products that both hardwood and softwoods can provide New South Wales?

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: Mr Fang, we can see what's happened in some of the other jurisdictions there, such as WA and Victoria. Where native forestry has shut down, you either substitute the product through other things or you import it, and the imports may be from areas that don't have the same level of robust regulatory framework that we have in this State. I'm a firm believer of the fact that timber is the ultimate renewable resource.

It sequesters carbon from the atmosphere. Once it is harvested, it continues to store that carbon. And, in its space, more trees are grown. That's not just me saying it. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has made that statement. Again I go back to our operations. We have been going for 100-plus years, and we go back to the same forest over and over again. We don't go to old growth or rainforest or new areas. It's the same regrowth, which shows how sustainable the industry is.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'll pass over to my colleague, but I just wanted to thank you very much on behalf of the New South Wales Parliament for the hard work that you and Forest Corp does for New South Wales.

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: Thank you.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: How long is the lease left on the Ian Armstrong Building in Orange?

STEVE ORR: Which building?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: The Ian Armstrong Building, the DPI headquarters in Orange.

STEVE ORR: The lease is not with us. The lease is between Property NSW and the owner of the building. We're just, I guess, a tenant within the building. But the head lease is held between Property NSW and the owner of the building.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Thank you. Can someone probably on record tell me how many times has the Minister visited the Ian Armstrong Building in Orange.

STEVE ORR: I think you'll need to ask the Minister, Mr Barrett.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: How many times have you hosted the Minister at the DPI building in Orange?

STEVE ORR: I'll take that on notice, but I can recall at least one.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: In 2024.

STEVE ORR: I'll take that on notice.

The Hon. WES FANG: At least one. That's great.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: I might just touch on, very quickly, the Sustainable Communities Program and total amount, \$300 million. Murray electorate's been allocated \$160 million of that funding. The Federal funding agreement was signed by Tanya Plibersek and Tara Moriarty on 1 October 2024. Are you able to let us know when the guidelines for the program will be made available to impacted communities? Sorry, I should ask as well—\$16 million will be provided by the department as part of that program, will it, to deliver it? Is that correct?

JAMES BOLTON: The \$16 million is essentially an allocation to the administration of the \$160 million program. Similar to the question from Mr Barrett earlier in the day, the intention for us is to use that over the four years to administer the program, get as much of that funding into community as we possibly can. Any funds that we don't use through the \$16 million through the administration we will endeavour to get into the program. That is generally the principle that we apply for all our programs.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: My apologies, Mr Bolton. I didn't realise that Mr Barrett had already asked that. I'll swap that over to bushfire preparedness in State forests—as part of the Forestry Act, obviously. Forestry Corporation had its own fleet of pumpers and tankers for bushfires. Is that still the case?

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: Yes, that's right. We do. We partner with the RFS when it comes to major fires, though. We are one of the four firefighting authorities. We have got our own firefighting fleet as well as our trained firefighters, and we do both community firefighting and protecting the forest. But we partner quite closely with the RFS on that.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: You've been working with the mosquito fleet as well in the trial stage of that in areas such as Manna and Weelah?

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: The mosquito fleet?

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: That's the farmers and their vehicles for firefighting services.

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: I am not aware of that, I'm sorry. I would have to check that.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: Right, so that's necessarily working with Forestry Corporation in that. Have there been any prescribed burns in the last two years? Are you able to answer to that?

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: Yes, we do undertake prescribed burns and undertake hazard reduction burns when the window of opportunity arises, with the right weather conditions.

The Hon. NICHOLE OVERALL: And the next that are planned? So you base it on the weather conditions and the available—

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: Correct. Our fire national hazards team, together with our operational teams, would plan what the right options are across the State to carry out those prescribed burns.

The CHAIR: That takes us to the end of today, obviously assuming that there aren't any Government questions.

The Hon. WES FANG: Come on, Greg. Mop up. Clean up for the Minister.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: In that last tranche there were questions from Mr Fang to Mr Sloan about the visitation of the Minister to a building. There was a rolling set of questions.

The Hon. WES FANG: I appreciate that you gave it to me, but it actually wasn't—

The CHAIR: Order! The Government has the time now.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: You said "visits" and then "hosting an event". You took it on notice, but it's important that the witness has clarity over what exactly he is taking on notice, because wrapped up was about two or three questions in one. That's the only point that I wish to raise, in fairness to the witness.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I'm happy to address that.

The CHAIR: Mr Barrett, do you want to clarify what exactly you were asking?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I think it was a fair enough response from Mr Orr to say that he couldn't answer how many times the Minister had visited a certain building. Hence, I reworded the question on how many times they had hosted the Minister in the building. I think that's fair enough to ask the department—who and when they have hosted people in the building.

The Hon. WES FANG: I think zero is always zero, isn't it?

STEVE ORR: We have a few matters that we can clean up on.

The CHAIR: Yes, that's exactly what I was going to throw out to you. Get rid of your homework early.

STEVE ORR: Always good to do, Chair.

The CHAIR: It is.

STEVE ORR: I might start with Mr Sloan.

SEAN SLOAN: Chair, in relation to that question you were asking about the fish screens, just to clarify, WaterNSW don't fund the fish screens, and that's because the requirement for the fish screens is not in regulation. It's a policy initiative that we have been running with. The funding comes from the Commonwealth and from the State. That's the earlier answer that I gave you. In relation to the question you were asking about proper being fed by scuba divers, scuba divers can't take fish, and I think that was the point you were making, but they can take urchins. So it is legal for a scuba diver to take urchins. No reason why they can't feed them to a proper, unless they were doing that in a marine park sanctuary zone, which would mean it would not be legal to take it. That was the answer to that one.

In relation to the question that Ms Hurst asked me about the waterfowl program, just to clarify that one, our vertebrate pest unit estimates the waterfowl population across the Riverina each year. In 2023 the number was 4,294,658 waterfowl. That dropped, as I think Ms Hurst was indicating, substantially in 2024 by about 56 per cent to 1,888,014. The quotas are set conservatively at 10 per cent, and the quota for 2024-25 was set at 188,801 across the eight native game species. The harvest to date is 29,195. So it's well below the quota. That's it.

KATE LORIMER-WARD: I've got some. In relation to your question, Chair, about whether people had held any memberships that might have been deemed to have a conflict with their work, a search of our conflict of interest register doesn't identify anyone with declarations in that category, and associations is a declaration requirement. Ms Hurst, I've got two back for you. In terms of the question about the second-generation anticoagulants, Local Land Services doesn't use and nor do we provide any second-generation anticoagulants. The other one around the Good Neighbours Program and about funding for the *Cestrum nocturnum* program, no, it doesn't, but it does have a program for red *Cestrum* at the moment.

Mr Barrett, in response to your questions, the value of round one under the Good Neighbours Program, I understand to be \$3.4 million. So there are funds there for round two, for a subsequent round. In terms of the vacancies for the government-appointed positions, the vacancy length for those ranges from two to seven months. So they didn't all occur at a particular point. I understand that all the vacancies have arisen due to personal reasons. Then the final one, you asked about the additional \$100,000 on top of the \$13 million. That was provided for capital to acquire additional assets to support the implementation of the program, not into opex.

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: Can I do one as well? This was Ms Higginson's question.

The Hon. WES FANG: She doesn't stick around to listen, unfortunately.

ANSHUL CHAUDHARY: The question was about the coastal IFOA and the types of logs we produce, particularly down in the South Coast. The answer is that the primary purpose of all native forest timber harvesting in State forests is to produce sawlogs for structural timber. In every operation of the trees we harvest, we try and utilise them as much as possible so there is minimal waste. Lower grade timber goes to making products like fencing, firewood and pulp for paper and packaging. In the South Coast, particularly in the Eden management area, our focus is always on generating as much sawlog as possible. However, the proportion of sawlogs generated in an operation is impacted by the forest type. There are more pulp logs produced in that part of the world. However, every operation is still undertaken with sawlogs as the primary purpose.

The CHAIR: Mr Bolton?

JAMES BOLTON: I have two for you, Mrs Overall, relating to the Lightning Ridge opal centre. There is a \$34.2 million total project value—combination of New South Wales Government and Commonwealth funding and funding from the applicant or recipient. The current project end date is 30 June 2025. This was validated recently and is reasonable. To the questions around supply issues or lack of funding, we have worked with the applicant to resolve some of those issues that were referenced late last year. They are continually providing updates. That project is tracking for midyear completion. Regarding the Bumbalong bridge, there is a good update on that one as well. The project has a budget of \$5.5 million. The heritage approvals or the review of environmental factors and the Aboriginal heritage considerations have been completed. The project is in delivery at the moment. The project remains on track within the approved budget. It's about 25 per cent complete and it is on track for completion by 30 June 2025. The council—Snowy Monaro, which I'm sure you understand—was updated last week on it. A deed of agreement exists to transfer asset ownership to council upon completion.

STEVE ORR: Ms Connell?

RACHEL CONNELL: In relation to Mr Barrett's question about beekeeping compliance, our bee surveillance program in 2024-25 has so far issued one direction or notice. In the 2023-24 period before that, 24 penalty notices were issued and one seizure notice. In terms of compliance activity, we are currently targeting testing at pollination events, mainly almond and blueberry pollination events, and obviously complaint investigations. In relation to a couple of questions asked by Ms Hurst, the time frame for the rehoming grants is up to two years. In relation to *Cestrum nocturnum*, it didn't meet the criteria to ban it from sale under the Biosecurity Act. But I do note that it's not sold by major retailers and the nursery industry discourages its sale as well.

In relation to the Coffs Coast Wildlife Sanctuary, an inspection was conducted on 20 December 2024 to investigate the events that took place on 22 November. In terms of the evidence that we were provided, at the point of inspection there were no immediate risks found. But the investigation raised advisory findings, so no correction action requests were raised. The facility took correction actions to act on the advisory findings. They included new policy on glass exhibits, updated seal interaction rules, banning beverages, limiting photo opportunities to stationary positions and banning beverages, related to banning glass and alcohol around places where guests may interact with animals.

STEVE ORR: Mr Sloan has one more.

SEAN SLOAN: Yes, just one quick one, sorry. For the recreational licence invoicing matter that you raised, Chair, we haven't notified the individuals or made any public statements as yet. It seems there has been some difficulty identifying the individuals involved. What I would say is we will put out a public statement. I think it's the right thing to do. I'll make that undertaking that we will get a message out to recreational fishing licence holders, probably through our newscast.

STEVE ORR: Quickly to Ms Connell.

RACHEL CONNELL: Yes, sorry, I missed one. Mr Barrett, about your question about authorised officers, staff are authorised under the biosecurity, food safety and animal welfare Acts and they are employed on different awards.

STEVE ORR: Mrs Overall, a couple of quick things from me. For the Engine and Emerging Industries Loan Pilot, you asked about the interest rate and it was 2.5 per cent. You also asked about a specific applicant, and we can't give details about what the loan amount was for that particular applicant. And then for the Drought Ready and Resilient Fund, I got my interest rates wrong. It is 4.92 over five years and 5.38 over 10 years. That's it, Chair.

The CHAIR: Notwithstanding any other questions that you took on notice, the secretariat will be in touch with you in terms of getting them back to us. Thank you for your time this afternoon and also this morning. Thank you for your work. We will see you next time.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee proceeded to deliberate.