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KOSCIUSZKO NATIONAL PARK WILD HORSE HERITAGE MANAGEMENT PLAN

Production of Documents: Order

The Hon. EMMA HURST (17:19): I seek leave to amend private members' business item No. 624 for today of which I have given notice by omitting "21 days" and inserting instead "42 days".

Leave granted.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Accordingly, I move:

That, under Standing Order 52, there be laid upon the table of the House within 42 days of the date of passing of this resolution the following documents created since 1 August 2023 in the possession, custody or control of the Department of Planning and Environment or the Minister for Climate Change, Minister for Energy, Minister for the Environment, and Minister for Heritage, relating to the proposed amendment to the Kosciuszko National Park Wild Horse Heritage Management Plan:

- (a) all submissions and survey responses received during the public exhibition of the proposed amendment to the wild horse heritage management plan between 8 August 2023 and 11 September 2023;
- (b) all documents regarding the findings or results from the submissions and survey responses received to the proposed amendment to the wild horse heritage management plan between 8 August 2023 and 11 September 2023;
- (c) all correspondence from the Department of Planning and Environment or the National Parks and Wildlife Service encouraging staff to make a submission or survey response during the public exhibition of the proposed amendment to the wild horse heritage management plan between 8 August 2023 and 11 September 2023; and
- (d) any legal or other advice regarding the scope or validity of this order of the House created as a result of this order of the House.

This call for papers seeks documents surrounding the recent consultation process undertaken by the New South Wales Government in relation to the amendment of the wild horse management plan to allow for aerial shooting. As members are aware, the decision of the Government to commence an aerial killing program against the brumbies in Kosciuszko National Park has been incredibly controversial and heartbreaking for those who care about those sentiment animals. We do not know exactly when the killing program will commence but we note that several parts of the park are currently closed for aerial shooting activity and that the increased helicopter activity has already led to numerous foals being separated from their mothers and ending up being taken in by brumby rehomers. I thank them for their swift action and for saving the lives of those young animals.

The Government's consultation process on the amendment to the wild horse management plan received over 11,000 submissions—an enormous amount of feedback on a single Government proposal. Yet despite the significant level of feedback, the Minister still managed to come to her decision on aerial shooting fairly swiftly after the consultation closed, and she also made the decision before the Animal Welfare Committee's inquiry into the issue had concluded. The Minister stated publicly, "Of the submissions that commented on aerial shooting, 82 per cent expressed support for aerial shooting being included in the plan as an approved control method."

I know that I, and many other members in this House, are interested to see the submissions and survey responses underlying that data, including the level of pro-forma or template submissions, so that we can better understand the stated results. We are also interested to explore any role played by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service in directing or encouraging submissions so the call for papers also seeks that correspondence. I acknowledge the diverse range of views on the Kosciuszko brumbies in this Chamber; however, I emphasise that it is not a substantive motion that seeks to take a view on the brumby issue. It is simply an exercise of the powers of the House to call for papers on a topic that is clearly important to many stakeholders and members of the community. I commend the motion to the House.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON (17:22): The recent public exhibition of the amendment to the wild horse heritage management plan received responses from 11,002 members of the community, which highlights the serious concerns that people have over the issue of the management of horses in the Kosciuszko National Park. It is a fact that 82 per cent of respondents expressed their support for including aerial shooting as a management method for invasive horses within the park. It is clear that the issue of invasive species, particularly horses, resonates strongly within the community and that the damage being done to the fragile and unique ecosystem is well recognised. It is, after all, now down to the thin edge—we are talking about the difference between extinction or not. The issue has been quantified over decades with best current estimates showing that 18,814 animals are likely to be in the park, with 95 per cent confidence that the number of horses is between 14,000 and 23,000. As a matter of comparison, there is a 90 per cent confidence interval in the accuracy of our models for the carbon cycle—the cycle that informs our understanding of climate change and the urgent need to reduce emissions.

Within that frame the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service is bound by legal obligations to reduce the invasive horse population to 3,000 across 32 per cent of the park. That necessitates a management scheme that is informed by the highest animal welfare standards and science-based management practices. The Greens have committed to a "towards zero" invasive species presence in our national parks. We firmly believe that those protected areas should be shielded from all threats, including invasive species, to ensure the flourishing of our unique flora and fauna. The welfare of native species that are intricately and intrinsically linked to the delicate ecology of the park is at stake. Recognising the paramount importance of public consultation, we commend the 11,002 individuals who took the time to contribute their perspectives. It is through such inclusive processes that we can collectively shape policies that reflect the diverse concerns and values of our community.

Public consultation stands as a cornerstone in fostering public engagement and ensuring that vital decisions are not made in isolation. The Greens are also staunch advocates for transparency in governance, and while we acknowledge the need for robust discussions on invasive species management, our commitment is also to ensure that necessary transparency occurs without violating privacy. As we navigate the complexities of managing invasive species in Kosciuszko, a revered national park, we must expect that the integrity of that unique and irreplaceable ecosystem is prioritised. We support the motion.

The Hon. WES FANG (17:25): I support the motion. I thank the Hon. Emma Hurst for bringing it to the House. The contribution from Ms Sue Higginson has just detailed the exact problem. She referenced the 11,002 submissions that were made to the call for feedback on the Minister's proposal to change the management plan for the horses and talked of the 82 per cent of respondents who were in favour of it. I am not sure how Ms Sue Higginson can speak about that with any certainty because, unless she has seen them, she would not know. That is part of the problem. I know that I do not know and I know that the Hon. Emma Hurst does not know either. It seems that the only people who have seen those submissions are the Minister, her office and perhaps those from the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service. That is the problem.

Ms Sue Higginson spoke about transparency in the process, and that is supported by all sides of the Chamber. But in reality that means that the Government has to be open and up-front about the evidence it is using to support its decisions. During budget estimates hearings we asked the Minister about the feedback and whether she would provide access to the submissions to allow us to interrogate them further. Ultimately, we all know in this place, having participated in any number of committees, there are submissions and then there are submissions. Certainly there is the odd occasion when a group of people might seek to overtake a submission process by having a pro-forma submission, a one-word submission or any number of ways of making a submission to a committee. It might even be that one person made 1,000 of the same submissions but we do not know because we have not seen the papers.

We asked for access to them so that we could determine for ourselves the veracity of the claims of the Minister that there were 11,002 submissions and whether they were 99 per cent the same submission and 1 per cent actual individuals making a proper submission with a considered opinion. Those calls fell on deaf ears. It is only through this process that we will be able to see those submissions and determine whether the Minister has used lies, damned lies and statistics—as I suspect has possibly happened—or whether there actually are 11,002 people who made a submission within a month to actually kill thousands of horses. [*Time expired.*]

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE (Minister for Climate Change, Minister for Energy, Minister for the Environment, and Minister for Heritage) (17:28): I indicate that the Government is happy to support the call for papers. There is absolutely nothing to hide. However, I take issue with the contribution from the Hon. Wes Fang. His contribution does a number of things. Most of all, it traduces the reputation and the professionalism of the staff of the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service. As the Hon. Wes Fang would know, he asked many questions during estimates. Sixteen staff worked through the 11,000 submissions that were made. That number of submissions is not unusual given how contentious the issue has been over a long time, as all members of this House are aware. But I caution the member against making allegations about very hardworking public servants who are doing the job that we asked them to do.

The Hon. Wes Fang: That is not what I did; do not put words in my mouth.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: You absolutely did do that.

The Hon. Wes Fang: Point of order: The Minister is now verballing me. That is not the position I took, and I am happy to clarify afterwards if required.

The ASSISTANT PRESIDENT (The Hon. Peter Primrose): There is no point of order.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Public servants do the job that the government of the day asks them to do. We had a consultation about that very important issue. We are happy to release the 11,000 submissions under the order for papers. But I place on record that the work was done very carefully by over 16 hardworking public servants, who processed all of the submissions and presented them to me. Not only did they produce a summary for me but they also provided me with all of the submissions. I went through many of them very carefully because I understand the complexity of the issue and that people have very strong views around it. We have to make some very tough decisions about it.

It is okay for members to seek the information that we are providing; it is not okay to constantly undermine the professionalism and the hard work of public servants who are doing nothing more than what we have asked them to do. They do not get to choose what they do; they have to provide the information as we request it. That is what they did in this case, and I utterly reject the suggestion that we have double-counted submissions or anything like that. I am very happy to provide the information. It is a difficult issue, but the reasons that I have made the decision to change the arrangements are well known. The important thing is that 12 threatened species in the national park will literally become extinct if we do not get the numbers down, and that is what we will do.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR (17:31): I support the motion of the Hon. Emma Hurst and thank her very much for her advocacy on the issue. She has been relentless and resolute, and she certainly is a champion for animals and particularly for the brumbies. I am pleased that we are doing this. I agree with the Minister that it is a very difficult issue, and it is very important to the community that I live in. I appreciate and acknowledge it is not easy; it is a difficult situation. But when members talk about the parks and which species they are saving, they should remember that those horses are very important to people, the same as an endangered species might be important to someone else. Please do not try to say that one side is more important than the other. It is all important, and that is why transparency—

Ms Sue Higginson: Oh, no. Don't.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I did not interrupt you, Sue, so you should give me the same courtesy. This is exactly the problem. The feeling of people working on the issue is that trust has been broken over a very long time. That is why it is really important that trust is rebuilt and that it is very transparent.

Point of order: I am trying to make a contribution. I feel strongly about it too. I have respected Ms Sue Higginson's right to speak, and she is constantly interjecting.

The ASSISTANT PRESIDENT (The Hon. Peter Primrose): I remind honourable members that all interjections are disorderly. This has been a very courteous debate, and I urge honourable members to respect that.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: I think it should stay that way, and that is why I took the point of order.

The ASSISTANT PRESIDENT (The Hon. Peter Primrose): That is the way we do things.

The Hon. BRONNIE TAYLOR: The Opposition supports the motion from the Hon. Emma Hurst.

The Hon. EMMA HURST (17:33): In reply: I thank all speakers and supporters of the motion: Ms Sue Higginson, the Hon. Wes Fang, the Hon. Penny Sharpe and the Hon. Bronnie Taylor. I thank them for their support and look forward to receiving the documents early next year.

The ASSISTANT PRESIDENT (The Hon. Peter Primrose): The question is that the motion be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.