

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE No. 5

INQUIRY INTO PUBLIC LAND MANAGEMENT

At Sydney on Wednesday 5 December 2012

The Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

PRESENT

The Hon. R. L. Brown (Chair)

The Hon. R. H. Colless

The Hon. C. Faehrmann

The Hon. L. Foley

The Hon. C. Lynn

The Hon. Dr P. R. Phelps

The Hon. P. T. Primrose

CHAIR: Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the last public hearing of the inquiry into the management of public lands. The inquiry is examining the operational, economic, social and environmental impacts of converting Crown land, State forest and agricultural land in the national parks estate, and other matters pertaining to the management of public land. Before we commence I acknowledge the Gadigal clan of the Eora nation, who are the traditional custodians of this land. I also pay respect to elders past and present of the Eora nation and extend that respect to other Aboriginal people present.

Today we will hear from representatives of the Snowy Mountains Bush Users Group and South East Forest Rescue via teleconference. We will also hear from Mr Peter Smith from Access for All and Mr Andrew Hestelow, a local Sydney resident. Mr Mark Matchett, Acting General Manager, Crown Lands, Catchment and Lands, Department of Primary Industries and Mr Nick Roberts from Forests NSW are returning to give further evidence. Mr Bob Conroy, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Ms Melinda Murray, Office of Environment and Heritage, and Ms Sally Barnes Chief Executive Officer, Office of Environment and Heritage will also be appearing to give further evidence.

Before we commence hearing evidence I will explain the procedures for today's hearing. Copies of the Committee's broadcasting guidelines are available from the Committee staff. Under these guidelines, while members of the media may film or record Committee members or witnesses, people in the public gallery should not be the primary focus of any filming or photography. Witnesses are advised that any messages should be delivered to Committee members through Committee staff. That obviously does not apply to people who are 600 miles away. A full transcript of proceedings will be prepared by our Hansard reporters. The transcript will be available on the Committee's website in the next few days. Finally, I ask everyone to turn off their mobile phones.

CLIVE THOMAS EDWARDS, Vice President, Snowy Mountains Bush Users Group, sworn and examined via teleconference:

CHAIR: Good morning, is that Mr Clive Edwards?

Mr EDWARDS: Yes, speaking.

CHAIR: Robert Brown is my name. I am the chairman of the public lands inquiry and you will be appearing today before the Committee via teleconference. Before we begin there are a few things I need to do. I need to get some details for the *Hansard* record and I will need to swear you in. Firstly, could you give us your full name please?

Mr EDWARDS: Clive Thomas Edwards.

CHAIR: Are you representing an organisation or are you appearing as an individual?

Mr EDWARDS: I am representing an organisation.

CHAIR: What is the name of that organisation?

Mr EDWARDS: Snowy Mountains Bush Users Group.

CHAIR: I notice Mr Cochran is not with you. We had disturbing news he is not well. Is everything okay?

Mr EDWARDS: Yes, he had a heart attack a couple of weeks ago and he had two stents put in and they have just put a third one in. He is recovering well.

CHAIR: We will proceed with your evidence. Prior to the Committee asking you questions would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr EDWARDS: No.

CHAIR: We acknowledge your group's submission number 282 and we thank you for agreeing to appear before us today. I will pass on to questions. Mr Rick Colless will start. Mr Edwards, because there is only one of you there you do not have to restate your name at the start of each statement.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Good morning, Mr Edwards. Can you tell the Committee what the purpose of the Snowy Mountains Bush Users Group is?

Mr EDWARDS: We were established in 2003 as a result of a draft plan of management that came out for the Kosciuszko National Park. We are made up of concerned citizens that live predominantly within a 250-kilometre radius of Kosciuszko National Park. Our motto is "protecting our mountain heritage" and we felt that the way the park was being managed was causing our heritage, and to some extent the land management of the park, to evaporate.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: I note from your submission that you believe in both the preservation of Aboriginal and European cultural heritage. Can you give the Committee an idea about what the park looked like before European settlement and what sort of heritage issues the Aboriginal people imposed upon that area?

Mr EDWARDS: As we know, Aboriginals visited the high country for meetings and to consume the bogong moth, which was good for their diet. They have been coming into the high country for millennia, I guess. The early European settlers, history tells us, started following the Aboriginal walking tracks as they opened up the high country for grazing and the original Aboriginal walking tracks became bridle tracks, stock routes, or whatever. The Aboriginal heritage includes some burial sites and some sacred grounds on top of some of the mountains but as far as buildings, of course, there are none.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: What changes occurred once the European people started to utilise that area and what sort of cultural facilities remain to this day as a result of that European occupation?

Mr EDWARDS: Certainly as the graziers started coming in during the 1820s huts were established for stockman to camp in for the summer grazing as they were up there for four or five months. They had huts and homesteads, and there were obviously stock routes, wagon tracks and bridle tracks. That was tied up with pastoralism, for want of a better word. Then gold was discovered at Kiandra, where there are miner's huts. There were 10,000 people in Kiandra for a short period. That lasted for eight to twelve months in the 1850s. Then there was logging and so on. That is the European involvement in the high country. As I say, grazing was carried out until about 1962, when it was removed. The high country was fenced when the grazing leases were granted in the late 1880s and 1890s. There was significant involvement of Europeans in the high country.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: We have taken quite a bit of evidence in respect of fire danger in timbered areas particularly in relation to fuel loads in those areas below the timber line.

Mr EDWARDS: Yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: What sorts of fuel loads exist—I will split this question into two parts—in the area that was burnt in 2003 and then in areas that were not burnt in 2003?

Mr EDWARDS: I am not sure that I have the knowledge to answer that question. There is comment from our membership that the fuel load prior to the 2003 fires was about four times what it should have been. I think the acceptable fuel load—off the top of my head—is four tonnes to the hectare. They were suggesting it was up around 20 tonnes, or more, to the hectare in 2003. The concern is now that as a result of the 2003 fires you have thousands of hectares of standing and falling dead timber, particularly the mountain ash. In our view the fuel load at this particular point in time would be higher than in 2003.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Can you tell me the fire susceptibility of mountain ash? It is not resistant to fire like most other eucalypts, is that correct?

Mr EDWARDS: That is my understanding.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: That fire would have killed the mountain ash trees and as a result you have the standing dead timber?

Mr EDWARDS: Correct. The ordinary eucalypt is burnt, shoots and sprouts and comes back, but the mountain ash requires the seed to fall to the ground and it has to have the right conditions for those seeds to germinate and new mountain ash to grow. When you look at that countryside today, as a result of the 2003 fires, it is grey dead timber, some standing and a lot now has fallen to the ground.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: My last question to you is: What sort of management practices would you like to see imposed upon Kosciuszko National Park in order to meet the expectations of your group?

Mr EDWARDS: There are a number. If we just stick with the fire issue, there certainly ought to be more controlled burning, firebreaks and reducing fuel load. Fuel load, in our view, can be reduced in two ways: either by slow, cool burns or by controlled grazing. The key is to reduce fuel load—that is in relation to the fire—and then to make sure that fire trails are open and readily accessible. I mean we ride through up there and there is fallen timber across fire trails. So how you would get a fire truck in there—in many cases it is impossible.

They seem to be relying on helicopters more than putting people on the ground and trucks in on the fire trails. That is one aspect of the land management. The other side of the coin is the predator ferals that are up there, particularly the wild dogs. We have got foxes, cats, pigs and they are all impacting on the biodiversity. They are all carnivores and they are predators. There needs to be more action on the wild dog issue. People who are neighbours to the Kosciuszko National Park see Kosciuszko National Park as a neighbour from hell—not only have they got fires coming out of the park; they have got predator ferals coming out of the park.

The other side, of course, is the weeds. The place now is full of—that is an exaggeration, I was about to say full of blackberry. Blackberry is out of control in Kosciuszko National Park. Anyone who has had any dealings with blackberry knows that its growth is prolific. There is now St John's wort up there in abundance. You have got nodding thistles, Paterson's curse and whatever. The plain area in front of Currango Homestead, which used to be sort of the premier grazing area, is now full of needle bush or bits of hakea. All this sort of

stuff was controlled with grazing and they do not seem to be able to control it with chemical spraying. It is out of control.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: In relation to the Currango Plain and the needle bush problem that you just mentioned—I do not expect that your memory goes back this far but no doubt a lot of information has been handed down up there about it—what were those areas like prior to European settlement? Were they free of needle bush or was that sort of species there?

Mr EDWARDS: I cannot answer that question. I am not aware of it. I know the likes of people like Ted Taylor, who was born at Currango Homestead—his parents were Tom and Molly Taylor, who are legendary—and who is now in his late 70s. He cannot recall needle bush when he was a child. Whether it was there I am not sure but the slow, cool burn of the Aboriginals I would assume would have helped to control it.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: The Committee has to make some recommendations to the Government at the end of its inquiry. Am I correct in suggesting that you would like the Committee to recommend that grazing be permitted within parts of the Kosciuszko National Park?

Mr EDWARDS: Yes, we believe that grazing—we are not talking open slather—is a tool that could be used to reduce fuel loads and to control some of these weed situations, particularly the needle bush and the blackberry. My understanding is that sheep will eat blackberry plant when it is sort of one or two inches above the ground. So if it is burnt, it regerminates and starts to grow again then that is when the sheep could then control blackberry. The National Parks and Wildlife Service seem to be waiting for tests apparently somewhere in the world with a beetle that may eat blackberry. To my knowledge it has not been introduced or brought to Australia at this point in time. That is my understanding. Yes, controlled grazing in certain parts. We are not talking the main range management unit or anything above the tree line; we are talking below the tree line where there used to be the grazing leases. I can see no reason why controlled grazing, controlled numbers of stock could not be utilised to help restore the state of the park.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Is it not the case that the original creation of the national park in 1944, or State park as it was termed then, was justified by the then government principally on the grounds of the significant erosion that had resulted from more than a century of grazing?

Mr EDWARDS: That is a moot point. That is the way it was sold but the locals and our members and sort of what has been spoken about widely by people in the area is that it was more about clean water for the Snowy hydro scheme. I mean I cannot give a view but there was certainly the mention of erosion. The old timers tell me that with a lot of the erosion that occurred they were talking way up in the main range management unit. There was never any grass there, as a result of glacial activity billions of years ago. What are the actual facts? I believe the erosion was overstated to justify the actions of the day.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: I have tried to read up on this myself. My understanding is that the then Premier—later Governor-General—Bill McKell actually travelled across that landscape for 10 days. The Premier of the State camped out and even travelled on horseback for several days with the Director of the Soil Conservation Service and others. He returned to Parliament House after witnessing with his own eyes what he saw as the results of grazing. The Committee takes your view and that of your group and thanks you for it.

Mr EDWARDS: May I just add something?

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Please do.

Mr EDWARDS: Just about that period, or just prior, there was an enormous rabbit plague in the high country. The view of the old timers—we have got members who are now into their late 80s, nearly 90s, people who actually took stock up there—is that the whole situation in relation to erosion was grossly exaggerated. All I can give you is the view of our members—it was before my time.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Thank you. I doubt the Committee can revisit a decision that was made in 1944. Have you followed the skirmish between the Victorian Government and the Federal Government regarding cattle in the high country on the Victorian side of the border?

Mr EDWARDS: Yes, we have been watching that.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Given the Victorian events, would it not be the case that if the New South Wales Government at this time were to permit grazing in part of the Kosciuszko National Park that it would almost certainly open up a conflict with the Federal Government?

Mr EDWARDS: I would assume so.

CHAIR: Recently the Office of Environment and Heritage, as it is now called, has agreed to a number of limited horseriding trials in national parks. I understand that Mr Cochran was one of instigators of that. Is your group satisfied that the Government is cooperating and that those trials will take place?

Mr EDWARDS: Yes. If we look at Kosciuszko, there is already horseriding permitted in Kosciuszko. What the trial is about is access back into wilderness. So it is restoring the access that horseriders had prior to wilderness declaration. Just about 50 per cent or a tad over 50 per cent of Kosciuszko National Park is declared wilderness, which excludes horseriding. Basically the only people who can go into wilderness are walkers. So this is a trial to assess any alleged impacts of horseriding into wilderness but horseriding into wilderness will be restricted to management trails, fire trails or bridle tracks, whatever, whatever. It is a two-year trial and I was involved personally on that consultative committee with Peter Cochran and other horseriding participants. I am confident that the trial will take place. There is a sort of process going on now to work out particular routes to trial.

CHAIR: Is that the type of methodology that you or your group would suggest for assessing whether grazing has a role—limiting it to certain areas and certain periods of time?

Mr EDWARDS: Yes. I think it should be trialled and assessed. I have no problem with that. Let me say that promoting grazing back into national park is not our primary goal. We do not see any problem with grazing being trialled in a national park if it is correctly managed. We are not anti-grazing is what I am trying to say.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: You mentioned that one of the methods of controlling the environment in the park was by the use of chemicals. Will you give the Committee a little more information about the environmental impacts from the use of chemicals in the park?

Mr EDWARDS: I am not sure I can answer that question. What I was suggesting is that they have contractors—this is the National Parks and Wildlife Service—to spray St John's wort. Mainly that is what they seem to be spraying. They only seem to spray the length of their arm outside the window of the utility they are driving. They do not venture off the road very far. They are trying to control, for example, St John's wort from what you could see from the road but they do not venture 300, 400 or 500 metres off the road into the bush to spray St John's wort, for example. As far as the chemical impact, I spray St John's wort at home on my property. I cannot see what impact it has on biodiversity or anything like that, so I do not see that as an issue. It is just that in my view they are not spending enough time getting rid of these noxious weeds.

CHAIR: Thank you for agreeing to give us your views and thank you to your group for sending us your submission. Be assured that the Committee will take due consideration of your recommendations. The Committee may have questions it might like to address to you in writing. Would you be happy to try to answer any questions that may be put to you that way?

Mr EDWARDS: Most certainly.

CHAIR: We had proposed that any replies should get to us by about 18 January but with holidays coming up and people having to work for a living we understand that it may take a little longer. That is not a hard and fast deadline. If the Committee does write to you, we would appreciate any additional advice you could give us.

Mr EDWARDS: Not a problem.

(End of teleconference)

PETER CHRISTIE SMITH, Access for All, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: Are you representing an organisation or appearing as an individual?

Mr SMITH: I am representing an organisation.

CHAIR: What is the name of the organisation?

Mr SMITH: Access for All.

CHAIR: Thank you for agreeing to appear today. Before we proceed to questions from the Committee would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr SMITH: Yes. Just in opening I would like to explain a little bit about Access for All. Access for All is a community-based organisation that was formed in 1999, and it was basically formed as a result of community meetings where local people were alarmed about the proposed extension of wilderness in the area that Access for All is based in, which is basically the southern tablelands, centred on Braidwood and down to the coast from Ulladulla to Bega, with places such as Batemans Bay, Moruya and Narooma included in that area. As a result of that, there were many demonstrations and protests organised by local people and Access for All participated in those various things until the declaration of wilderness which meant that 50 per cent of the area of the national parks in the area became wilderness. Since that time Access for All has been active and maintained its membership, which is about 500 members, and we have been campaigning and hoping for the day when somebody would start listening to us again.

CHAIR: You will have your opportunity today. The old public users alliance had "access for all" as its catch-cry back in the beginning of the 1990s.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Thank you for appearing today and thank you to your organisation for making a submission. I guess this inquiry essentially is faced with two competing views of what our national park estate should be about. There is one view from environmentalists: that the overriding or sole purpose should be to conserve native plants and animals. Then there is a competing view from groups such as your: that public use is as important a criterion for the management of the State's national parks. Could you outline to us what activities you would like to see permitted in the State's national park estate that are either restricted or not allowed at present?

Mr SMITH: As opposed to restrictions in wilderness or national parks in general?

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Deal with either or both.

Mr SMITH: We obviously believe that there is a place for both and we think that there should be access to more community use in national parks. We see vast areas of land that have become national parks that do not provide many facilities for visitors and encourage people to use them. We see this as a great asset to the State and we would like to see more facilities provided, perhaps camping, better access to national parks. What we have seen is there have been restrictions into a lot of areas of national park and what it is doing is funnelling an increased usage in certain areas. I draw a particular example here where in our area, where I come from, a national park called Bendethera national park, which is located just up the river from where I live. It is a magnificent place but, because there are so few places that four-wheel drive people can go to and so few places where they can go and camp and have these beautiful experiences, it is being overused. I am not saying that that area should be restricted as much as other areas should be open so that more people can enjoy their national parks.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Are there State forests in the vicinity?

Mr SMITH: Yes, quite a few State forests.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: And of course they are multi-use and four-wheel drive access would be unrestricted there, would it not?

Mr SMITH: They seem to be well used. There are great State forests that are used regularly by people. But probably the most picturesque places along rivers and things like that are in national parks rather than State forests.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Is it the case that many or indeed most of the national parks in this State are obliged to come up with plans of management that regulate what activities are allowed and where? Do you or any representatives or members of Access for All participate in the development of those plans of management for particular national parks?

Mr SMITH: We have regular meetings with the local national parks people and we work with them and provide volunteer labour to do certain things like clearing bridle tracks. We obviously have regular discussions with them about our aims of what we would like to see, such as the sort of things I am talking about today. But we often find it very frustrating because they are bound by head office regulation and we get to the point where they say they hear us but they cannot do anything to help us. But we are actively involved. One of our committee members in Access for All is on the national parks local advisory committee as well.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: So there is at least some engagement at the local level where your members can put their views and argue the case for the access that you are seeking.

Mr SMITH: Certainly. We have regular contact and good communication and in fact good relations with the local national park people but it always seems to get back to the fact that they do not have the funds, which is probably the biggest obstacle. They always come up with the fact that they take things on board and they generally agree with what we are saying because most of what we are saying is quite reasonable. It is often about preservation of heritage objects within the national parks but they always seem to be underfunded. The other thing is that if we talk about things like access through wilderness, of course they always say it is out of their hands and they cannot help us with that one.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: So you have a particular difficulty with land reserved under the Wilderness Act. That of course is a much smaller parcel of land, if I can put it that way, than the seven million hectare reserve estate. Is your particular difficulty with wilderness areas?

Mr SMITH: Yes. The declarations that have had the most negative impact on what Access for All is about is the declaration of wilderness. The biggest concern that we currently have is that these declarations were declared over heritage bridle tracks. Some go back to bridle tracks that were built by convicts. The bridle tracks are all well documented in a sense, maybe not publicly in book form but well documented privately, particularly by myself. I consider myself a historian. These tracks go back—one particular track goes back to 1829. Other tracks go back to the 1860s and provided alternative routes to the goldfields at Araluen from the port at Nelligen. Some were constructed with government funds and they are absolutely magnificent historic items. When the proposed wilderness came into discussion we put forward many objections to losing our historic bridle tracks. Of course, the objections seems to be ignored and our worst fears were realised when the wilderness was declared over some of them.

The point that is most concerning here in a way is that there is a whole network of tracks and if you use the tracks you could ride from the Clyde River to Cobargo on the South Coast, which is quite a long distance through three different shires. With the wilderness declarations there are little parts of tracks that are covered by wilderness, which means that the network is damaged. It is not just a case of one track is lost; as a result of that the whole network is damaged. The point about this is that you cannot just have a network of tracks or something like that, something that is historic and something that is important to heritage and not use it. It is like having an old building and saying, "This building is very precious so we're going to put a big fence around it and nobody is allowed to go in." What happens is the building falls down. The National Trust would support that argument because they like to see buildings being used. What we are saying is that if these bridle tracks are not used they will disappear. They will disappear faster than a building will fall down because they will just overgrow.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: So in summary is it fair to say that the policy problem that you have in terms of not being allowed access to particular areas largely relates to wilderness declarations? In areas of the national park estate outside wilderness areas often the difficulties are to do with lack of funding?

Mr SMITH: Yes.

CHAIR: I do not know whether you were in the room when we had the teleconference with the previous witness but you may have heard me ask him about trials that his group is involved with in getting horseriding access to wilderness areas. Has your group been involved or have you considered getting in touch with the Office of Environment and Heritage to see if the wilderness tracks, particularly bridle tracks, that have been cut could be included in those trials in your area?

Mr SMITH: Yes we have, and we have been successful in parts. Some of these tracks I have been speaking about will be included in the wilderness horse riding trials. We are very pleased about that, of course, and that is a step forward for us. We just want to go back to where we were before the wilderness was declared over the top of our tracks.

CHAIR: Many national parks require payment to access. Legislation is about to be rolled out to allow hunting in about 79 of the 800 national parks. This State's hunters pay in a licensing system and undertake some accreditation. Do you believe that your members would be amenable to a permit system whereby those who were to access those areas had to demonstrate that they were part of a group that, shall I say, had some corporate interest in maintaining standards amongst its members et cetera? What do you feel about permit systems for access into some of those areas?

Mr SMITH: I believe that our members would support it. I think you would get some initial resistance because people do not like paying for things.

CHAIR: No, they do not.

Mr SMITH: Especially when they think it is public. It is like a lot of things these days—fishing licences and shooting licences et cetera—they become a fact of life and they provide controls and provide people with education to use things in the correct manner. Even though Australia's history has a great record of people being able to live free and fancy and have use of all these things, I think the time has come when we have to have better education for allowing people to use certain things, such as these tracks, shooting in public areas and that sort of thing. I think our members would support that.

CHAIR: Provided the revenue from those permits was not shoved somewhere into consolidated revenue, I guess that may go a little way towards solving some of the problems of the maintenance costs of keeping those tracks open?

Mr SMITH: Of course, everybody would agree with that, I think. The problem always is that we do not know until after the event how that revenue is necessarily allocated. We also see a lot of inefficiencies in departments. I draw particular attention to the difficulties with the understanding of the firearms laws. I hear all the time about honest, law-abiding citizens being confused about whether they are allowed to do certain things. I see that particular area as very confusing and I see that there are a lot of wasted funds there. We certainly would not want to go into a situation that caused something like that. However, provided that the funds were used for the purpose of looking after the tracks, or if it was horses, in national parks, I think our members would support that.

CHAIR: Would you have any objection to mountain bike riders—the pushbike people—also using those trails?

Mr SMITH: All users like to look after their own particular area. If you are a horse rider, many people do not like motorbikes but, in all fairness, the access should be available for a range of different activities and Access for All does support that.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: When were the vast majority of these wilderness areas declared?

Mr SMITH: I cannot give you the exact year, but I think it would be somewhere around 2001 to 2003.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: When they were declared were you invited to make submissions? Were those submissions, if they were provided, given any weight, in your opinion?

Mr SMITH: We did certainly provide submissions. I would have to say, in my opinion, our submissions seemed to go nowhere and it seemed like a predetermined outcome and that whatever we said did not seem to have a lot of bearing. There were a few instances in a personal case of mine where part of my land

was nominated for wilderness, which included my stockyards and a cleared area around the house, which we objected to, of course. We were successful in getting that taken off the consideration. There were other specific areas like that, but with the big picture items, like our bridle tracks, for example, we felt that we did not get anywhere with that at all.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: You have answered most of my question regarding funding, but do you have any other funding solutions for national park areas?

Mr SMITH: I am sorry, I will be a bit short on solutions, but I believe that the answer is either to increase the funding and that may be at the expense of other community demands, or to decrease the costs by having fewer national parks or subcontracting management in some way. But I do not have a specific plan on how that management subcontracting would work.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: Earlier you alluded to the fact that often you have a very good relationship with local National Parks people, but that they say the people up above—which I assume are the people here in Sydney—have a different view?

Mr SMITH: Yes.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: Is part of your solution to devolve more of the power and decision-making down to the local level?

Mr SMITH: I certainly would think that would be an excellent way to go. One of the problems in rural areas is the mistrust of the directions that come from head office, which is Sydney. A lot of the wilderness nominations in the first place came from people who were completely unfamiliar with the area and who, in fact, still have probably never been into the area and make assertions about pristine wilderness when we have areas that have stock yards on them and this sort of thing. It would certainly be a help.

CHAIR: One solution might be to shift the head office from Hurstville to Braidwood?

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: Yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: I gather that your cattle yards were not really that wild: they were more domesticated than what some might have thought?

Mr SMITH: This is how I first got involved with Access for All: the local National Parks had an information day in Braidwood. So we decided to attend to see what this wilderness business was about. I walked straight into the hall and saw a map on the wall that included my freehold land, to a large extent. When I spoke to the head of the local National Parks he just brushed it off and said, "Oh, no. That's freehold land. They can't take that." The point is, it should not have been up there in the first place. This is the problem: It causes mistrust with local people and you get to the point where you think, "If I'm not careful here, I'm going to lose something that's been in the family for many years." You get to the point where if you are not prepared to put in the effort to keep writing submissions you are going to lose out. Most of the people on Access for All are just working people. Most of them are property owners and work long hours. They are not letter writers. They do not put in submissions. This is where we find very often these well-written, well-educated nominations and people from the city put these things in and you have a bloke who does fencing during the day and is supposed to be able to match that with literacy skills. It is a real problem and it causes mistrust.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: You mentioned before that many of the bridle tracks were constructed with government assistance and so on?

Mr SMITH: Yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: What sort of construction are they? Do they have cuttings, bridges and that sort of thing constructed on them?

Mr SMITH: Yes. The one that comes to mind is a track called the Shoebridge Track. It was constructed in the 1860s as an alternative dry weather route from Araluen, which was an old gold field, to Nelligen. The track was constructed as a pack track. In other words, it was not for vehicles. It is six feet wide, which was the standard pack track, the same as what they call the Six Foot Track in the Blue Mountains. It is

basically built on the cut-and-fill principle. It does not go up over the mountains; it follows the ridges. It is a very gentle slope all the way through and has passing bays, I think, every 300 metres. The way they would use that is they would have teams of pack horses, which could perhaps be a dozen horses, in line connected head to tail and they would drive along there and carry all the goods in and out. The other track that had government funding is the track that goes up the Deua River, which is where I live. The people who owned the property before me were paid by the local council to maintain that track, and various other settlers along the way were also paid to maintain the track.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Do maps of those bridle tracks still exist?

Mr SMITH: We are putting maps together. There are some maps. Some of them are certainly well mapped. I do have maps of the tracks as we know them, yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Are they shown on the 1:25,000 cadastral maps?

Mr SMITH: No, they are not.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: How much use would those tracks get if they were fully opened as you would like to see?

Mr SMITH: They still would not get a lot of use. It is probably like the Bicentennial Trail: it is there and it is a great thing to have. I would say they may gradually increase in use as people become more aware of them and people from outside the district use them as well, but there certainly would not be heavy traffic for any time that I can see in the future.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: One reason I suspect for closing them would be potential erosion damage. What sort of condition are they in? If they were opened, and I suggest that they would have increased use if they were reopened fully, what sort of damage likely occur? What sort of traffic would they get and as a result of that, what sort of damage would occur?

Mr SMITH: Like anything, they need to be maintained. You cannot just have the tracks there and not do maintenance. They are more likely to cause erosion when they are not maintained when they are not being used. The people who use the tracks will look after the tracks. If there is fallen timber on the tracks, they will clear them. If there is erosion from, say, a subsidence, they would fix it. So I cannot see a problem with the use of the tracks as far as erosion. I can see more of a problem if they are not used.

CHAIR: Are you aware of Meroo Lake on the South Coast? Do you know where that is?

Mr SMITH: I am not fully aware of it.

CHAIR: That is okay. I will leave that. Recently I attended a rally held by fossickers. They experience pretty much the same problems as your organisation, that is, access to areas to do what they do. They managed to make some commercial arrangement with a fellow who does what you would almost call professional tour guides. This chap has produced guides for Victoria and I understand he is about to produce them for New South Wales. Most of the rural towns and their chambers of commerce in these areas where these facilities are provided have underwritten or sponsored them. Do you believe it would be advantageous to your campaign to have the information a bit more widely and formally presented to actually encourage tourism or would your members prefer that perhaps it be kept quiet?

Mr SMITH: Being local people, of course, they are probably happy that it is kept quiet. The problem is that we see people coming from well outside our area and overusing the facilities that are there because they have nowhere else to go.

CHAIR: Correct.

Mr SMITH: I think we would be prepared to reach some sort of compromise on that.

CHAIR: Does your group have any formal conversing with local councils, Tourism NSW or any other body that perhaps you could go to for some help?

Mr SMITH: Not really.

CHAIR: That may not be a bad idea, given that most rural areas, such as Braidwood, are not immune to economic hardship. Perhaps that is an avenue your organisation might take. If you were to make a recommendation for this Committee to take to the State Government concerning those tracks, I take it that that would be to open up the tracks, including those areas across the wilderness patches, and that they be maintained. Is that correct?

Mr SMITH: Yes.

CHAIR: Mr Smith, thank you for agreeing to come and see us. We appreciate hearing from people who at least come forward with suggestions for solution, so we thank you and your group for putting that forward. If Committee members wish to ask questions on notice is your group happy to receive them?

Mr SMITH: Yes.

CHAIR: If we can get those questions out to you before Christmas, we would be looking at mid-January to late January for answers. Could you please pass on our best wishes to Peter Cochran?

Mr SMITH: I will. Thank you.

(The witness withdrew)

(Short adjournment)

LISA DOROTHY STONE, South East Forest Rescue, affirmed and examined via teleconference:

CHAIR: Good morning, Ms Stone. It is Robert Brown speaking.

Ms STONE: Good morning, Mr Brown.

CHAIR: I will get full details from you and then have you either swear an oath or take an affirmation. Are you representing an organisation or appearing as an individual?

Ms STONE: I am representing South East Forest Rescue.

CHAIR: We are in receipt of your organisation's submission, submission No. 271 in our records. Prior to questions from the Committee would you like to make an opening statement?

Ms STONE: Our submission is quite comprehensive, and I do not think I need to at this stage.

CHAIR: I will hand you over to Mr Peter Primrose for the first question, Ms Stone.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Ms Stone, thank you for speaking to us on line this morning. Could you elaborate on which specific recommendations you regard as the highest priority?

Ms STONE: There are so many. However, I think the highest priority at this stage on the South Coast would be to cease native forest logging and bring that estate into national parks.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: What specific recommendations would you be seeking that the Committee would make to the Government?

Ms STONE: Given the amount of money that Forests NSW is currently losing, and has lost since 2001, there would be considerable money saved from ceasing logging. Given what we know now about climate change and that Australia has to meet the Kyoto protocols, that would be the recommendation. From the Auditor-General's reports it seems quite clear that Forests NSW has been losing millions and millions of dollars every year. Last year Forests NSW lost \$232 million before tax; and \$14 million was the loss figure, I think. I am just talking about the native forest sector. The plantations, it seems, are making money. Given the very small number of workers in the area now, particularly with the closure of Batemans Bay sawmill and retrenchment of the second shift at the chip mill, actual on-ground figures are now a little bit different to those in the report; on-ground figures are 76 logging workers in the area and I think another 100-something informal. The benefits seem to outweigh the losses at this stage.

CHAIR: Ms Stone, I will now hand you over to Ms Faehrmann.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Hi, Ms Stone, and thank you for giving evidence to the Committee by telephone and for your detailed submission. Much of the evidence and a lot of what we have seen in various regional areas during this inquiry has related to areas of State forest that have logged as well as some areas that have been converted to national park. There have been questions or assertions by some witnesses that we could swap some areas of national park to log some of those areas of national park, and convert some State forests to national park, because of a problem with wood supply and access to good logs. What is your organisation's view on that if that were to happen in the south-east forests?

Ms STONE: In the south-east it may be slightly different to other areas. About 95 per cent of the logs from here go straight to the chip mill. They pay Forests NSW \$6.90 a tonne for those in some areas. Although we have not seen the wood supply agreements yet—hopefully we shall at some stage because there was a court action on that under a Government Information (Public Access) Act request and through freedom of information—obviously we will see the wood supply agreements at some stage. However, having not yet seen the wood supply agreements, I would still state that the original Forest Resource Assessment and Management Evaluation System computer program run was based on illegitimate data: they used national park hectare figures in with the State forest areas. So, as a flow-on effect the wood supply agreements figures and volume figures were wrong from the start.

Since about 1998, or at least since 2001 in the south-east, State forests have been overcut because of those illegitimate volume figures; and, yes, there is definitely a lack of wood supply because of that. However, with what we know about climate change, and with deforestation being one of the biggest drivers of climate change, the trees are worth more in the ground. To open up national parks to logging would be to destroy those areas. In the south-east, and in many other areas from what I have seen on-ground, the type of logging that happens here may be a little different, I suppose, to other areas where they clear-fall areas; even though that is unlawful, they do that, and patch clear-fell in other areas. To do that to an area that is protected is wrong, given what we need to do now under the Kyoto protocol and given the targets that we need to achieve and with land conversion rates. Does that answer your question?

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Thank you. Ms Stone, in the beginning of your response to my question you said that the owners of the chip mill are paying Forests NSW \$6.90 a tonne. Is that per tonne for the final wood chips the chip mill receives?

Ms STONE: No; that is for the whole logs that go into the chip mill.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: So is that operating at a loss?

Ms STONE: Forests NSW is operating at a loss of \$14 million or \$15 million, or whatever. The chip mill, because of subsidies, operates at a profit. But that is only through what I would call a subsidy from Forests NSW. If the royalty rates were raised to a proper rate—I don't know what would be a proper rate, but say \$30 to \$40 a tonne—the chip mill would cease to make any kind of profit at all. However, in the last year or so the chip mill profit has declined. I do not know whether people are aware of this, but the chip mill is wholly owned by a Japanese conglomerate, Nippon Paper Group; therefore any profit goes straight offshore. The Nippon Paper Group has stated that this year it will make zero profit. So it is really hard to tell. I do not think Nippon Paper Group is making a loss, but certainly Forests NSW is.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: I have one other question about the Regional Forest Agreement process. I am not sure whether you have been involved in any of that. We have heard from a representative of the North East Forest Alliance that conservationists were shut out of negotiations and the final agreement was something between the State Government and the industry. Has that happened in the south as well, or are you unable to comment on that?

Ms STONE: That is my understanding of what happens in the south-east as well. It would seem that that legislation was designed to continue business as usual. I know that it was supposed to be a negotiation process somewhat like what has just happened in Tasmania; however, the scientists that were involved in that were edged out. There are a couple of really important documents from that era on the law and on what happened. Brendan Mackey has one called "Regional Forest Agreements—Business as Usual". I think I might have foot-noted that in the submission.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: You have.

Ms STONE: That is my understanding of what happened. In the submission there is a section on regional forest agreements, and our understanding of what happened is in that section. It seems that although it was designed to end conflict, or at least minimise conflict, because the legislation was merely an overlay and did not really address the issues it did not end the conflict.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: I would like your views on some recent changes in government policy that impact some forests down there. I do not know whether you have addressed those impacts in your submission; so if you do not have a response, that is fine. The changes were in relation to horse riding and shooting in national parks. Has South East Forest Rescue a view on those issues?

Ms STONE: Yes, we do. We are opposed to shooting in national parks. I have quite a number of years of experience of seeing shooters in State forests and other areas. This type of shooting tends to attract the not so responsible shooters, if you understand what I mean. We had an incident in the South East National Park just after this legislation was put in place. Four male individuals went into the South East National Park and shot a number of kangaroos, say 50 or 100, which may or may not have been an issue had people not been camping right there in the national park and had the shooting not taken place around them. That was in Deua National Park, which is just around the corner from me. If the issue was feral animal control, South East Forest Rescue would support that. However, there is already legislation in place through the national parks and wildlife and the

game control and feral animals Acts to do that anyway. I really did not see the point in opening up. It seemed like, obviously, straight after the legislation was in place, this vandalism happened. Well, it was assault, basically. It is very confusing as to why the legislation was in place. If it could be guaranteed that the people that were doing the shooting were absolutely responsible there may not be an issue. But in this area that is not necessarily the case, as we have seen.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Grazing? Sorry—what did I say? Horseriding? Where do you stop? Horseriding, does that happen down there?

Ms STONE: Horseriding? Yes. Everyone has horses down here. People ride on roads and if there were very environmentally sensitive areas, such as montane peat land, which really cannot have a hard hoof on it, I would suggest that that would not be something that South East Forest Rescue [SEFR] could support. However, horseriding is horseriding, really, in so many ways. I guess, because of the logging issues, we are a little ambivalent towards horseriding, if you know what I mean.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Yes.

Ms STONE: It is the lesser of two evils. We are seeing hundred of hectares being patch clear-felled, and someone wants to ride a horse there? Well, you know: I do not know. I just do not know. We do get horseriders complaining to us about the logging. They used to ride through these beautiful areas, and now they cannot because of the huge mess. I do not know if you understand this, but in a logging area something like 150 tonnes per hectare are left on the ground after a logging operation. They do not use waste at all. The waste that you and I would understand as being waste—the limbs, the trees, the branches and the roots and everything—that is actually just left in the forest. They only use whole logs. That is left, and people cannot ride their horses through. They have been doing that for hundreds of years, and then suddenly they cannot. I do not know how we sit really with horseriding.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Stone. I will now pass questioning to Mr Colless.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Thank you, Ms Stone, and thank you for giving evidence today by this link.

Ms STONE: Thank you.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Can I just go back to your comments regarding the incident of kangaroos being shot in the park down there.

Ms STONE: Yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Correct me if I am wrong, but I understand that you said that happened as a result of the shooting in national parks legislation that recently went through Parliament. Is that the case?

Ms STONE: That is my understanding, yes. Well, I think it was, you know. Whether they read the legislation or not, I do not know, but obviously it enabled them to do that, yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Are you aware that that legislation has not yet been enacted?

Ms STONE: I thought it had been enacted.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: It has been through Parliament, but it is not yet enacted, and it will not be enacted until, I think, 27 December.

Ms STONE: Oh, okay.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: The other thing is: Are you aware under that legislation that it will only permit shooting of feral animals, not native animals?

Ms STONE: Right. I was not aware of that.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Well, that is the case, so I can suggest to you that the shooters that were responsible for shooting those kangaroos were doing so illegally.

Ms STONE: Yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: And they would have been acting illegally, even if that new Act had been enacted.

Ms STONE: Well, that is really good news. Yes, thank you.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Thank you for that. Can I also ask you about a couple of questions on your comments regarding the Indigenous ownership of public native forests?

Ms STONE: Yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: You are recommending that all native forest areas be handed over to Indigenous ownership. You also then call for a complete stop on logging of endangered communities, transfer of wood product reliance to plantation timbers, and so on. If those Indigenous groups were to take control of those public native forest areas how would you feel about that native forestry industry continuing, if those Indigenous groups in fact wanted to continue that forest harvesting program?

Ms STONE: Well, obviously we at South East Forest Rescue cannot support industrial logging of any kind. I do not know if you have seen how logging operations work, but there are usually two or three very large harvesting machines and then there are two log loaders and dozers. It is very industrial. South East Forest Rescue cannot support that kind of industrial logging. However, if the land was handed over to the Indigenous people it would be co-ownership between—as far as we can see, after talking with a lot of traditional owners—the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the traditional owners. That is happening already here with Gulaga National Park and Mumbulla-Biamanga National Park. That is how those parks are run currently. It would seem that not many or that it is very, very rare for traditional owners to want to log. However, that would be a matter for them. They are the traditional owners of the land and it would be co-managed with the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Given that national parks currently cannot be logged, it would seem a moot point.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: But you do make the point about Indigenous ownership of all public native forests. If that was the case it would not be national park then, would it?

Ms STONE: Yes, it would. They are national parks. How Mumbulla and Gulaga work is that they are co-managed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the traditional owners. They are equal members on the board and they have equal voting rights, and some such.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: But that is a different issue to retaining it as public native forest, I would put to you. That is in fact converting it all to national park, is it not?

Ms STONE: Yes. That is what we are requiring.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Okay. In that case can I ask you if you believe that New South Wales should have a native forest industry?

Ms STONE: No, absolutely not.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Okay. Thank you. They are all the questions I have.

CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Stone. I will now pass questioning to Dr Phelps.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Thank you, Ms Stone, for giving evidence and for your submission. You say you do not support industrial logging practices. How does that fit in with your desire to have an Australian timber industry which does not rely upon imported timber from countries which have far less environmental safeguards and far more degraded forest areas?

Ms STONE: Can I answer that this way: That, to me, feels like a two-part question. The first part is that there are enough plantations now online to meet all of Australia's wood needs. There are also other alternatives. There is no issue in meeting Australia's own wood needs. The second part of that question I am not sure I agree with. There are countries that have very little regulation and obviously there are unlawful logging activities in those countries. However, your question seems to connote that that is not happening here.

In fact, what is happening is on-ground. I have not seen a compartment yet that has not been in breach of either regulations or legislation. I would state that most compartments that I have seen—I cannot think of one that I have not seen—have been in breach of the law, and thus have been an unlawful operation. Further, the regional forest agreements [RFAs] have not had their reviews, and they were due to have their reviews in 2003 and 2005. That in itself makes all the operations in New South Wales or on the South Coast unlawful.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Thanks. Ms Stone, just in relation to self-sufficiency—and you can take this on notice, if you want to.

Ms STONE: Yes.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Do you have any evidence to suggest that we have an adequate hardwood, not softwood, plantation stock in Australia to meet Australia's needs?

Ms STONE: Judith Ajani has done quite a lot of work on plantation levels. I am not able to give you figures at this stage, but I could take that on notice and get back to you on that.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: That would be great. I accept we do have softwood to suit our needs. It is the hardwood which is the real issue. Everything we have been told so far indicates that plantation hardwood cannot be sourced to the level needed by Australia, hence the need for either foreign imports or native timber.

Ms STONE: Yes. I do know that there are quite a few hardwood plantations, but they are being woodchipped. So there are quite a few native forests, blue gum plantations, still in Western Australia. There are quite a lot of hardwood plantations. I do not have the figures, but I do know through Judith Ajani's work that there are enough hardwood plantations.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: That is fine. If you would take that question on notice that would be great.

Ms STONE: Yes. I think there would be. It is pretty easy to transition to softwood anyway. It is already happening anyway.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Do you believe that current Forests NSW areas should all be converted to national parks?

Ms STONE: Yes.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Bar things like radiata plantations and things of that nature.

Ms STONE: Oh, no, no, no. Plantation is making money for Forests NSW and the Government. It is the only thing that is, in forestry.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Yes. So you believe that everything other than plantation should be converted into national park as soon as possible.

Ms STONE: Yes, I do.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Given your support for co-ownership with Indigenous communities, if Indigenous communities were to recommend frequent burning practices in those national parks, would you be supportive of that proposal as part of their traditional land management techniques?

Ms STONE: There may be a little confusion on that and some stereotyping, so I will tell you a little bit about myself. I am from Darwin and grew up under very traditional land practice management techniques. I also

have spent quite a lot of time here on the coast. The traditional burning land practice management is very, very different to what we imagine it to be. It is very low to the ground. It creeps. It is done a bit at a time. It is almost gentle, in a way, I suppose.

What we see here in burning practices is the absolute antithesis of that, I guess because there is so much logging slash on the ground. They burn after logging, and what happens is that there are 150 tonnes on the ground. They are huge hot fires. We do not support huge hot fires. Even the Rural Fire Service [RFS] or people in the National Parks and Wildlife Service at this stage are a little confused on those practices. There is some scientific work that is being done on that and has shown that Aboriginal land practice was not that, in fact. So I do not know if I footnoted that. That is one part.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: I will move on to something else. What are the primary types of timber which are being taken out of areas you have greatest concern about?

Ms STONE: Oh, all of it.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: What specific varieties?

Ms STONE: On the South Coast we have a huge variety—really bio-diverse forests, really bio-diverse.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Are you saying that de facto clear-felling is being applied in all of those instances?

Ms STONE: Yes, absolutely.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: What I am trying to get at is this: There are some species of tree that actually prefer germination with large amounts of sunlight and hence, in that instance, having seed trees with large areas of open space around them in fact actively promotes germination and regrowth.

Ms STONE: Oh, well—

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: I am just wondering whether that might be the logging practice.

Ms STONE: Sorry to interrupt you, but it is not quite right. There is one species, silver top ash, which the woodchip mill loves because it is soft-ish wood and works quite well for them—and it is blond and they like that—which grows like that; that particular species. However, most other species do not. There has been some quite good scientific work on that, which I am sure I footnoted in the submission. If not, I can send that to the Committee. They are species like spotted gum, and lots of other species do not grow and do not need that sunlight and regrowth.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Okay. That is fine.

Ms STONE: That is a bit of stereotyping that is being pushed by the industry. In fact, there has been no regeneration survey done on the South Coast—no credible regeneration survey done. At this stage we would state that Forests NSW is actually operating in the dark on that and they are not listening to the science.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: I just want to put to you a statement by the Minister, and this is in relation to Forests NSW and forestry companies. He says, "Allegations of systematic damage are overstated. The majority of the alleged breaches in question are minor in nature with little to no impact on the environment." Would you agree with that?

Ms STONE: No. I cannot agree with that, number one. Number two: if it is true then that is a cumulative impact—death by a thousand cuts. However, I cannot agree with that statement. I just witnessed last week damage on a huge scale which if a normal person—a private person or, say, yourself, or anyone—if anyone had committed that kind of environmental damage they would be up for hundreds of thousands of dollars. The actual breach itself is two years imprisonment or a \$220,000 fine, and there were four of them in the same compartment. Because we, as third parties, cannot bring Forests NSW or their contractors to court for those breaches then they seem to get swept under the carpet pretty quickly and easily, and that was particularly the case with the Labor Government.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: In fact, that quote comes from the previous Minister for Primary Industries, the Hon. Steve Whan.

CHAIR: Ms Stone, we are unfortunately out of time. Thank you very much for agreeing to talk to us via this audio link. It is very much appreciated. Also, thank you very much for providing the Committee with a very extensive submission. It looks like it has taken a lot of work to put that together. If any of the Committee members wish to put some further questions to you on notice are you happy to take those questions?

Ms STONE: Absolutely. I note that you will be talking or interviewing Forests NSW so maybe some questions will come up through them. I suppose my main questions would be that forestry are continually operating in the dark and they do not provide data.

CHAIR: If we do send questions to you we propose that answers be returned by 18 January. We understand that obviously it is Christmas time and a lot of people have got work commitments and holiday commitments, so if we sent you some questions probably the end of January would be reasonable. Would you be able to answer those questions by the end of January if you receive any?

Ms STONE: Absolutely, no problem.

CHAIR: The other documents that you noted you could supply to the Committee, we will send a note to you from the Committee just detailing those documents and if you could provide them too.

Ms STONE: Yes, no problem.

CHAIR: Once again, thank you very much for agreeing to talk to us.

(End of teleconference)

MARK MATCHETT, Acting General Manager Crown Lands, Catchment and Land, Department of Primary Industries, and

RENATA BROOKS, Acting Director General, Catchment and Land, Department of Primary Industries, on former oath:

CHAIR: Thank you for agreeing to come back and talk to us. Both of you have given evidence before and were sworn so I remind you that you do not need to be sworn again as you have already been sworn as witnesses to this inquiry. You may or may not wish to take this opportunity but before we start with some further questions is there anything that you would like to add to your previous testimony?

Ms BROOKS: No, I do not think so. We will just take questions.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Could I ask about the Sydney Catchment Authority. Is that in your bailiwick or not?

Ms BROOKS: No, it is not.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: I am sorry, Mr Chairman, this could be very brief.

CHAIR: I will lead off with some questions until the Committee members get their heads around what they would like to ask you. Ms Brooks, would you be able to provide the Committee, if you have not already done so, a current organisation chart of the organisation under your particular area of control?

Ms BROOKS: Yes, I can certainly do that.

CHAIR: Could you give us approximate staff numbers and locations when you do that please? Just approximate—we do not need exact science.

Ms BROOKS: I can certainly get back to you with that one.

CHAIR: I understand you may need to get permission to do that. We have had evidence from a lot of community members regarding their experiences with many tenures of land. Are you responsible for lands under the Western Lands leases?

Ms BROOKS: Yes.

CHAIR: We have had it put to us, and we have had differing views on this, that the Western Lands lease has outlived its usefulness and that all the Western Lands leases should be freehold. We have had other evidence to suggest that environmental controls that are inherent in the Western Lands leases themselves are valuable to all Western Lands leaseholders, including neighbours of other Western Lands leaseholders, and therefore that either the Western Lands leases should stay in their current form or, if freeholding were to take place, perhaps the Native Vegetation Act would then need to be amended to allow for the fact that the Western Lands lease commissioner would no longer be responsible for auditing the condition of the western lease land. I am not asking you to put a government policy view there but would you care to comment on the general principle that the Western Lands lease and its structure and the commissioner do provide environmental guardianship of the Western Lands leases?

Ms BROOKS: I might ask Mark to fill in the detail, but certainly current arrangements for managing Western Lands leases and managing that part of the State do involve some attention to environmental issues, so they are covered. Mark, can you provide any more detail on how that works?

Mr MATCHETT: To the extent that there are quite detailed lease conditions that control the stocking rates and the condition of the Western Lands leases, that is built into the document itself, so there is some control through that process. There is obviously regulatory control by Western Lands staff of the Crown Lands Division, rangeland officers and so forth, and there is obviously a monitoring process through their activities. That is not to say that that could not be done through some other mechanism or through other legislation. At the moment it is done through the Western Lands Act, and it is working quite well.

Ms BROOKS: And I perhaps draw your attention to some information we provided in our original submission back in August—which is a long time ago now—where we talk about things like the Rangeland Condition Assessment Program, which is being undertaken at selected properties across the division to monitor the condition of the leasehold land. So certainly we do have some activities going on there to look at environmental conditions.

CHAIR: Yesterday we had evidence given by the Volunteer Fire Fighters Association and I think they may have been a little bit confused by some of the terminologies. Can you tell me how do the Western Lands lease administrators fit in with the overall responsibility for local fire management and fire control and what sort of staff you have available to consult with the other major land management organisations that may be involved in that, like National Parks and Wildlife, State Forests or, indeed, even LHPAs and local government? Is there a standard formal arrangement within the Department of Lands that handles the aspect of bushfire management?

Ms BROOKS: Yes, there is a formal arrangement—not in terms of bushfire management: Crown lands is not a bushfire fighting authority, but certainly there is involvement in, for example, maintaining fire trails and other preventative activities. I can perhaps ask Mark if he can provide any more detail on that. Again, I think we do provide some information in our original submission.

Mr MATCHETT: I think there are quite a few statistics in there so I will not go into that in too much detail, but I guess just to say that we are funded for fire maintenance, fire management. As Renata said, we do not actually do the firefighting ourselves; we rely on other specialist firefighting organisations to do the hazard reduction work and fighting fires on Crown land. But there is an ongoing liaison role with those agencies in terms of establishing what the hazard reduction program will be for any given period of time.

CHAIR: From your previous evidence I understand—forgive me if I cannot find it—that you manage something like 30 to 40 million hectares of Crown land. Can I take it then that the primary fire management responsibility lies with the leaseholder? Would that be correct?

Ms BROOKS: That is correct. The areas where Crown Lands gets involved in terms of bushfire preparation or hazard reduction, et cetera, is on land that is directly managed by Crown Lands as opposed to land that is managed under a trust or a tenure arrangement. So, in the case of the Western Division, that is, essentially, a perpetual lease.

CHAIR: Are you able to tell me, just roughly, how many leaseholders there are in the Western Division?

Mr MATCHETT: About 700 springs to mind, but do not quote me on that.

CHAIR: That is okay. So you have 700 leaseholders and obviously there is staff that would probably constitute most of the Rural Fire Service volunteers anyway in any region out there. As part of your regular audit of properties—I am not sure whether you are implying, Ms Brooks, that the audit is only done like you select two or three properties and use those as your base data—

Ms BROOKS: There are a number of different approaches, and I probably cannot cover them all comprehensively now. For example, when there is a change in ownership of the perpetual lease or a change in leaseholder an inspection is done at that point. So that is an active process that depends on the timing of that transaction happening. But there is also this broader monitoring program, which has identified indicative properties around the Western Division as a way of tracking overall condition. There are a number of different approaches.

CHAIR: Would your auditors then be involved in auditing for fire management and/or making recommendations, or do you rely on the Rural Fire Service to provide the information to, for example, a new leaseholder?

Ms BROOKS: Do you know the answer to that question, Mark?

Mr MATCHETT: No, I do not.

CHAIR: Could you take that on notice for us?

Ms BROOKS: We might need to take that one on notice, yes.

CHAIR: Does the Department of Crown Lands make any either in-kind or monetary contribution towards the Rural Fire Service or other fire managers? I am talking not necessarily on your own managed Crown land in very urban areas but we are talking more about the Western Division here.

Ms BROOKS: No, we do not fund fire managers. We certainly do not fund the RFS.

CHAIR: We have had representations from Western Lands leaseholders who have extended problems with the National Parks and Wildlife Service as their neighbour over fence lines and issues like that. Under the conditions of the lease is that entirely their responsibility or do you, as the landlord, have any interaction or any say in the fire regimes or the land management regimes of public land adjacent to the land that is under your control?

Ms BROOKS: It depends on the specific situation. Certainly, if you are looking at programs like wild dog management across tenures there are processes in place. I think you would have got some information from Bruce Christie, when he appeared before the Committee, about some of the cooperative programs that we have running to manage those issues across tenures. It depends on the issue. There is certainly regular communication between Crown Lands as a landholder and other land management authorities like the National Parks and Wildlife Service. There are also local discussions on issues that come up that are creating problems. I would need to provide a specific answer in a specific circumstance if there is a particular issue that has arisen.

CHAIR: Pages 40 and 41 of the whole-of-government report talk of hazard reduction targets. In the table of contents on page 41 it says "Agreed agency properties protected targets". It could not be the number of properties; it must be the area of the properties. Where it says "Crown Lands Division" I take it that refers to Crown Lands owned and managed properties, does it?

Ms BROOKS: Yes.

CHAIR: Not the Western Lands lease?

Ms BROOKS: I believe so.

CHAIR: Do you keep any separate data on the Western Lands lease areas as to what areas are hazard reduced?

Ms BROOKS: I do not know.

CHAIR: Could you take that on notice?

Ms BROOKS: Yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Welcome back, Ms Brooks and Mr Matchett. Could I ask you some questions regarding the Toorale sale? We did have a considerable discussion about this earlier. Can I ask what Crown Lands' involvement in that process was? Who was it that made the first contact and where was the first contact made? Was there any discussion between Crown Lands and National Parks prior to any agreement made with Clyde Agriculture?

Ms BROOKS: I am not aware of any of that history.

Mr MATCHETT: I am not aware of any contact between agencies. There was some interest by Crown Lands at the time that Toorale was available for purchase. Beyond expressing perhaps an interest there was nothing further than that.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Would it be your understanding that National Parks would have initially contacted Clyde Agricultural in relation to that sale or was it done through the Commonwealth? The Commonwealth put some money into it too.

Mr MATCHETT: I have no knowledge of that. You would have to ask National Parks that question.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: From the Crown Lands perspective there were no initial discussions with Clyde about the sale of Toorale?

Mr MATCHETT: Not that I am aware of.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Thank you both for appearing again. Yesterday we heard from some landowners in Armidale largely concerning the severe wild dog problem that they face there. They thought the wild dog strategy was a good strategy but were concerned about its rollout and the available resources to do that. Could you give an update on the progress of the wild dog strategy and the resources that the Government is throwing into that strategy?

Ms BROOKS: The wild dog strategy specifically, and the control of invasive animals generally, is led by the Biosecurity Division within the Department of Primary Industries. I am not the right person to answer the question in terms of overall resourcing of the strategy. The involvement of Crown Lands is as a land manager where there may at times be a problem and as a cooperator within a broader initiative to undertake control initiatives. The areas of Crown land involved in those situations tend to be smaller parcels. It is not as big an issue as it is sometimes with Forests and National Parks, which tend to manage larger contiguous parcels of land.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: The biosecurity people are not here.

CHAIR: It looks like you have stopped us in our tracks. If you are allowed could you provide that information to the Committee? It would be useful for the secretariat, in doing the report, to have an idea of the infrastructure, so far as people and places are concerned, of the various departments. Where is the head office, here in Sydney or somewhere else?

Ms BROOKS: I am based in Orange.

CHAIR: Crown Lands is now located with Department of Primary Industries in Orange?

Ms BROOKS: Yes. The Director General of the Department of Primary Industries is based in Sydney and other divisional heads are in various locations—I am in Orange. The head office of Crown Lands is in Newcastle.

CHAIR: This crosses over a little into budget estimates but could you, if that information has not been provided, give us a broadbrush breakdown of the department of lands budget within the Department of Primary Industries? What sorts of resources, budget-wise, are applied to management of Western Lands leases versus all the rest? Is it a large part of your budget or a tiny part of your budget?

Ms BROOKS: I would obviously need to get back to you on that one.

CHAIR: If you are able to supply those other documents the Committee would be grateful. Thank you for agreeing to come in. Even that brief update will help us. Any other questions will be by department and we would like any responses by 18 January 2013.

(The witnesses withdrew)

(Luncheon adjournment)

NICHOLAS JOHN VAUGHAN ROBERTS, Chief Executive Officer, Forests NSW, and

RAHMAT KHAAMI, Executive Officer, Government and Community Relations, Forests NSW, on former oath:

CHAIR: Mr Roberts and Mr Khaiami, as you have both already been sworn during this hearing it is unnecessary for you to do so again. Since the commencement of this hearing a lot of evidence has been received. The Committee considered it pertinent to ask the main players to return so that they could be asked further questions on the evidence that has been generated and for comment on any evidence requiring further clarification. Before we begin with questions would either of you like to make an opening statement?

Mr ROBERTS: Not on this occasion, no. I think I did that last time.

CHAIR: Are you aware of a group called the NSW Forests Taskforce?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes, I am a member of that task force.

CHAIR: Is that task force going to shortly present some findings to the State Government?

Mr ROBERTS: There a number of themes of work that the task force is undertaking. They will be prepared into reports which will be presented to the Minister and they will be on the public record as I understand it.

CHAIR: Do we know when?

Mr ROBERTS: I think there will be a progression but some of those papers will come forward probably early in the New Year, some of them will take longer to complete.

CHAIR: Can I ask you as the head of the agency for the area of responsibility with which the task force is dealing to take on notice that you or your Minister will provide the Committee with whatever documentation is available from the task force as and when it comes to hand?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes.

CHAIR: So rather than being on the public record it can be on the record of this hearing.

Mr ROBERTS: I can also take that up with the Parliamentary Secretary for Natural Resources to make sure that we can try to facilitate that.

CHAIR: He is seated in the room.

Mr ROBERTS: Yes.

CHAIR: If you could get back to the Committee with a yes or no answer, and when, it would be very much appreciated.

Mr ROBERTS: Will do.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: I am about to ask you a question that I asked you when you previously appeared before the Committee. Since that time the Committee has received a lot of evidence. We have also visited forests and spoken with Forests NSW staff, industry and conservationists. Mr Roberts, is there any truth in the assertions of many from all sides that Forests NSW is logging at an unsustainable yield?

Mr ROBERTS: I will try not to answer the same way but given the way that the forests have been set up for harvesting I guess to some extent I probably will. It depends on your definition of sustainability to some extent and how broad that definition is. I would argue that the harvesting rate is sustainable in terms of the ecological processes and environmental processes that are going on within the forest. If you had asked if the volume is being harvested at an even-flow rate then I would say no. So what is the nature of the question? Is it about sustainability? Is the forest going to be sustainable into the future? I believe it is, but as we are harvesting

the forest at the moment we have wood supply projections, which are on the public record and which we have talked to various stakeholders about. Given the area of resource that we have available for production forestry consequent of the 2003 decisions, the harvest rate is running at about 270,000 cubic metres of high quality sawlog a year and when we get to the end of the contracts there is a drop-off in that volume available. The logs will become smaller and the current processing plants will find it more difficult to process that smaller resource.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: What is your definition of sustainable yield?

Mr ROBERTS: If you talk about sustainable yield I guess a lot of foresters like to think about even flow.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Is that your definition?

Mr ROBERTS: I think you can manage forests in lots of different ways. So even flow is one concept in terms of the production of volume from the forests but given the way that particularly native forests grow—they take a long time to grow and mature—I can accept as a forester that there are periods of time where you can log an older group of compartments and then have a succession of younger compartments coming on after them.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Have you received any complaints or have you heard any concerns from timber industry operators and Forests NSW staff that the forests are being logged at a rate that is unsustainable now?

Mr ROBERTS: There is anecdotal comment that people are concerned about how the forest is being managed, yes.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: That is anecdotal comment but no formal correspondence by timber industry operators or staff to you that that is in fact the situation?

Mr ROBERTS: Formal in the sense of something written?

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: That is one question, yes.

Mr ROBERTS: I could not say categorically no but I am trying to think whether I can recall a letter where that particular issue has been raised with me formally or not and I cannot recall anything at this juncture.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Will you take it on notice to undertake a search within your department to ascertain whether or not there have been concerns? Concerns were certainly being raised. In fact, at a Committee hearing at Coonabarabran Ted Hayman from the Baradine District Progress Association said, "The situation today is that the volume of small log has had to increase as a percentage of total supply in an attempt to maintain quota as there are insufficient larger logs to achieve a profitable balance." The Committee saw some of the sizes at some of the local sawmills there. We also heard from many operators that they were quite distressed at the way they were logging the forests now, as well as the size of the trees they were taking because of not enough supply.

Mr ROBERTS: In terms of the cypress that is an issue I am aware of in terms of the concerns about small logs. The contract provisions in terms of specification—which I think I can talk about notwithstanding the contracts are confidential but I think I can talk about the specifications—require a minimum piece size of 0.15 cubic metres per log. That is the minimum we are able to supply at. Depending on the nature of competition—and one of the issues at the moment is that there is significant competition in forest products markets in Australia—a lot of cypress in the past has been cut into what we would call a commodity framing product: a 90 x 35 framing product for house construction.

There is a lot of competition with imports from offshore, which is making it very hard for domestic mills that cut that kind of product to continue to do so. As a way of diversifying their markets, I am aware that some of the mills are chasing four inch by four inch, or 100 millimetres by 100 millimetres product. That is a highly desirable product on the Australian market and sells for a price premium. That requires a larger sawlog in order to cut those products effectively. What we are doing as an organisation to assist these organisations through this particular passage, we are trying to find and have planned blocks that contain a larger size of log—I think our average is running at between 0.17 and 0.19 cubic metres piece size—and that is keeping this

particular customer happy at the moment. There is a broader issue I guess about the cypress in the longer term as to what happens to it.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: The Committee also heard from some Forests NSW staff and we saw some of the logging operations near—remind me if it was Grafton or Port Macquarie?

CHAIR: Port Macquarie.

Mr ROBERTS: You did visit our staff at Port Macquarie, yes.

CHAIR: Queens Lake.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Yes, thank you. They also said that they would prefer not to have to log the forests so intensively, again because of a lack of supply. What are your views on how the forests of the North Coast are being logged? This came from the Committee's site visits, not during the hearings.

Mr ROBERTS: The way that the reserves were established and the area of native forests available for harvesting has been established and the contract commitments require that we have to log at a particular rate. We are harvesting at that rate and that does imply that we run along to 2023 at about 270,000 cubic metres and then we have a drop-off to a much lower volume of close to 220,000, 200,000 to 220,000 cubic metres of high quality sawlog.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Is not 220,000 cubic metres almost at the sustainable yield that was identified that many years ago? Was it not 218,000 cubic metres or something?

Mr ROBERTS: I believe there have been a number of different resource studies carried out over time and, generally speaking, if you look at even flow volumes into the future they are around about that level. That is correct, yes.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: What is your opinion as to whether there is that amount of timber left in the current reserves so that by 2023 the timber supply can be maintained at 220,000 cubic metres?

Mr ROBERTS: I think you can do either of those two things. You talked about reserve. In State Forests the most recent work that we have done would suggest, as previous exercises have demonstrated, that the wood is there. There is enough wood to meet our contractual commitments to 2023. But in so doing we have a drop-off at the end of 2023.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Is the wood there in current areas that are open to logging? Are you talking about special management zones or forest management zones?

Mr ROBERTS: No.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Why then are industry, timber mill operators and staff telling us that they are logging the forests unsustainably now to meet the agreements and not being able to meet their larger sawmill quotas?

Mr ROBERTS: If you interpret sustainability as being even flow, then we are not cutting at an even flow rate. That is on record: that is the case. If you interpret that from a classic forester's view, a classic forester would like to see an even flow harvest into the future. What we have been dealt in terms of the operating environment that we have to work in is a system where the log harvest rates are determined by the contracts and the area that we have to harvest. The other complexity I think in terms of where industry is coming from at the moment is a general concern about the market, and the other issue that we have to contend with is a preference for highly desirable species like spotted gum and blackbutt and a lot of pressure on those particular species, and similar issues to the total volume. The volume of blackbutt will need to decline over time. People are very concerned about that.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: In terms of the market, to which you just alluded, are they preparing for a reduction in supply by 2023? Will you have a market that is expecting a continued supply of what it is receiving now by 2023 and all hell will break loose because it is not being supplied, or is government working with them and trying at least to reduce some of the demand at the end?

Mr ROBERTS: I think there are multiple concerns, given the circumstances at the moment, and people are clearly under significant profit pressure, which tends to crystallise some of the concerns about the future. Most sawmills depreciate over 10 years—a capital investment would be depreciated over 10 years. As we get to 2013, with 10 years left in the contracts, there is an issue in terms of whether people will continue investing. I think our Minister is on record as having convened a so-called 2023 steering committee chaired by Dr John Kenary, which is having a look at the issues on the North Coast and trying to come up with some recommendations for the Government.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Did you call that the 2023 committee?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Just for that area?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes, just for the North Coast.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Is there a 2023 committee for any other area?

Mr ROBERTS: No, 2023 is just because it coincides with the termination date of the North Coast contracts.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: No, I am aware, yes.

Mr ROBERTS: But in terms of Forests NSW operations, the red gum was carried out relatively recently, the assessment of the red gum. The southern cypress was carried out reasonably recently. The Brigalow was not that far behind. So that committee is looking at the North Coast at the moment.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: We are hearing from people who are in the industry now who are starting to feel the pinch in terms of being able to access enough resources to keep their business profitable because for whatever reason they have been locked into what I will continue to call unsustainable yields and others will continue to call them that. They are now looking down the line at 2023 and demanding, asking, seeking access to reserves or areas that at the moment are off-limits to meet that supply. That is the political reality we are dealing with. Is the Government working with industry so that it looks at value-adding or to re-fashion their business to deal with what will be a reduced supply in the future, as well as their markets? Are you listening to them and trying to find new resources for them to continue operating?

Mr ROBERTS: I cannot talk about the 2023 steering committee in terms of reference other than it is looking at the wood resources on the North Coast. You could read into that that it could be looking at a whole range of different options.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Who is on that committee?

Mr ROBERTS: It is a range of different departments. DPC sits on that committee, OEH, EPA, Forests NSW and Trade and Investment.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: No-one else—is it just the directors general?

Mr ROBERTS: No. It is senior staff from within those departments.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Reporting to?

Mr ROBERTS: It reports to the Premier, the Minister for the Environment and the Minister for Primary Industries.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: So you cannot say anything in relation to the committee but in terms of what the department is doing now, what Forests NSW is doing now in terms of working with your customers and industry, do you know whether anything is being done to re-fashion, reform, whatever, the markets by 2023 that are currently reliant on the current quota? Do they know that less quota is coming in 2023?

Are you working with businesses and trying to help them continue operating with a reduced sawlog quota? If so, what is Forests NSW doing in that regard?

Mr ROBERTS: There are a number of answers to the question. We are still 11 years out from the end of the contracts so it would be very early for people to start to retool and get ready for 2023 now. There are mills that are making investments but to conceptualise a reduction of supply 10 years out and to start making that investment now would be extremely early, given that you have a 10-year depreciation process. So you would not invest this early in order to start taking account of those markets. I guess the other thing is the markets are so dynamic these days, so what we have seen in the last year, two years, is—I think I mentioned this at the last hearing—significant imports of high-value flooring products out of south-east Asia; bamboo flooring which, unless you have seen it, it is hard to conceptualise but it looks pretty much like a solid wood piece of flooring and it is competing effectively head-on with Australian hardwoods; and lots of engineered floors where you have plywood with a thin veneer of preferred species on the surface.

Given the dynamics of the market, again you would need to be careful about preparing too early because we do not know what the markets will do or what the exchange rate will do. You could head off in the wrong direction. From our perspective, we are certainly helping industry get through the downturn. We had agreed with industry a series of structural price increases, amounting to about 19 per cent price increase over three years, where every six months we have a 3 per cent price increase. On three occasions we have deferred those 3 per cent price increases. We have also, just this last October, deferred a price increase which flows through from a market adjustment. So the log prices are benchmarked to finished product prices; as the finished product prices go up and down, we adjust our log prices up and down.

In this particular case there was an implied increase in price for products in the marketplace which we did not apply to our log prices. We are trying to assist industry from an economic perspective at the moment to weather the storm of the current markets. I think that is probably where most people's concerns are at the moment. Trading conditions are extremely difficult and it is very hard for anyone to make any money. If you are looking at capital investments for the future, nobody has the capital to invest right now.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: I suppose that is like, in some way, almost a subsidy to the industry, what you were just talking about, not passing on the 3 per cent price increase. One of my questions was going to be about subsidies to the industry and whether you can tell me what they are now or whether the Committee can get those on notice. We have had a few different figures floating around; the \$14 million per year loss has been talked about by several people. I think you were asked that last time but anything like that in relation to subsidies to keep the industry profitable to assist the operators would be good to get.

Mr ROBERTS: In terms of not applying the 3 per cent price increase, I personally would not describe that as being a subsidy. I have worked most of my career in the private sector, always in the forest products industry, and it is the kind of thing you do as a commercial enterprise. When your customers are struggling in the market it would be crazy to apply an increase which might send people bust. The survival of their businesses is the survival of our business, so it is more in that context that we made that concession.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Is the 3 per cent a general CPI increase?

Mr ROBERTS: No. It is a structural price increase. We benchmarked our prices against other jurisdictions in Australia and argued that there should be an increase. Industry accepted that idea. They particularly accepted the idea based on a phased implementation, and we are working our way through that implementation. While we have not applied the 3 per cent, we have deferred it by six months. So we will catch it up but it is just that we have not applied it at the moment.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Following on from the Hon. Cate Faehrmann's questions about current wood supply commitments, in summary, is it the view of Forests NSW that your wood supply commitments to 2023 under the current wood supply agreements can be met?

Mr ROBERTS: They can be met in total volume terms. The difficulty we have is within the 270,000 cubic, if I just talk about high-quality sawlog, and the volume of preferred species that will be available. That is the tricky bit.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: The wood supply agreements, when they were entered into by government and industry, always envisaged a drop-off in the volume of supply to the industry at the end of the 20-year period, did they not?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes, they did. As I said, the resource estimates have been consistent since about 2003; the shape of the charts does not change much.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: We as a Committee have had a number of industry representatives putting a vigorous argument to us about the need for more forest to be made available to the industry. Given that Forests NSW contends you can meet your wood supply commitments under the current agreements, is the claim from the industry based around timber volumes once the current wood supply agreements expire?

Mr ROBERTS: I do not believe so. I obviously was not a party to hearing exactly what they said but from what I understand goes on, the concerns that industry are expressing and where I think they might be coming from in terms of the issue of seeking more resource, it probably speaks to two things. One would be preferred species. It is a little bit like fish or chicken. When you have a fish you can always sell the good fillets. What do you do with the rest of the fish in order to make money? Forestry is a little bit like that. If you have preferred species—in this particular case blackbutt or spotted gum—the merchants to whom the sawmillers sell their products always want blackbutt because it is a very well-known brand name and everybody wants to have a blackbutt kitchen floor. If you have blackbutt you can say, "I've got 10 packs of blackbutt but I've also got two or three packs of gray iron bark. If you want the blackbutt you'll take the iron bark as well." It is a little like when you are selling chickens or fish. You try to get rid of some of the less preferred stuff at the same time. So my sense of where I think they would have been coming from would be there is a significant concern about preferred species. Particularly in down markets you can always sell the preferred stuff but it gets harder and harder to sell the less preferred stuff.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: What about sizes?

Mr ROBERTS: If you are talking cypress, then sizing is an issue. That would be a fair comment. As I said earlier, with the smaller log size you are unable to cut the 100 x 100 posts, which is what the particular customer is looking to cut. If you get a larger log you can cut that kind of product. So that would be a concern, as I mentioned earlier, in that particular area. I think part of it would be about preferred species. I think the other part would be that while again we have the available volume there, the preferred species volume will drop but we will also be forced to go further and further into the escarpment and tablelands zones. So they are less preferred species. The country tends to be steeper and it is more remote and so our harvesting costs, which our customers pay, and our distribution costs—transport costs—are higher. So the delivered cost of those logs is going to go up and it is less preferred species. As less preferred species do not attract the same premium in the market place, it puts the squeeze on industry, particularly in a downturn.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Surely it would be the case, particularly given the 10-year depreciation factor that you outlined, that claims from the industry for more resource would be based in part on what happens post-2023?

Mr ROBERTS: I would surmise that is probably where they would be coming from too. Given that everybody is aware of the drop-off in 2023 to the extent that if there were a regime to supplement resource now, then obviously the 220 you talked about being sustainable or flat line, even flow volume into the future could be higher.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Environmentalists have told our inquiry that they do not like the current wood supply agreements and they were never party to them. They make the point very strongly that these were agreements between government and industry to which they were not signatories in any way. Whilst some industry operators tell us they are struggling with a lack of resource at the moment, is it in fact the case that both sides really are focused on what happens post-2023?

Mr ROBERTS: I do not know that I could say that. I think, particularly in a significant downturn as we have at the moment, people are very short-sighted in what they are looking at. There is no shortage of logs at the moment. We have had to lay off crews recently. Log yards are full, as you probably would have seen if you visited Herons Creek. There is a plentiful supply of log at the moment. We can harvest at high volumes and get people what they need. There is no shortage of timber at the moment. If it gets wet after Christmas that will turn

around. But at the moment there is no shortage. My read of it would be that it is more an issue related to cost pressures and preferred species from an industry perspective.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Does Forests NSW set targets about regeneration after logging and its efforts into that?

Mr ROBERTS: In terms of native forests?

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Yes?

Mr ROBERTS: The regime we operate under is that we have a strong belief based on the science that in order to get successful regeneration of natural forest you need light and disturbance. I am sure you would have been exposed to those concepts when you went to Port Macquarie. Whilst I accept that tracking heavy equipment across the land does not always look particularly attractive, it actually creates the conditions for the regeneration. We go back and survey the areas to see what sort of success we are having in regeneration. There are a number of problems we can encounter in that regard. Some relate to weed invasion, which we have to deal with through spraying or some other management technique, and in some cases of failure for natural regeneration we will go back and actually plant some seedlings to establish a regenerating forest.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: How extensive are your surveys?

Mr ROBERTS: I cannot answer you just at the moment. What we do is visit individual sites. I could not give you a percentage off the top of my head as to how we are going on those regeneration surveys. But that is the process we operate by.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Are there regeneration reports?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes. In terms of the surveys, there would be. Yes, I guess the regions would be keeping a tally as to how they have done their surveys and what they are looking like.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Would they be available to the Committee?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes, I think so, to the extent we have something there. I have been out to look at a lot of sites myself, particularly around the area you visited. The regrowth of the blackbutt forest is very impressive.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Once again we hear competing claims from the two sides of forest walls about regeneration after native forest logging. Could I ask you to take on notice a request to provide whatever records you have of regeneration surveys and reports?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Similarly with weed management, for some months people who do not like national parks told us that they are all weed infested and people who do not like native forest logging tell us that State forests are weed infested. What resources do you put into weed management, particularly in recently logged native forests?

Mr ROBERTS: We have a process that the regions run where they go back and do assessments of the kind of weed growth they are getting and manage it appropriately. In some cases, if the regeneration is vigorous and getting ahead of the weeds, we will not worry about that too much because the weeds will get shaded out by the regenerating eucalypts. In other cases, we might need to go and do more active management by spraying or mechanical treatment of the weeds. I have to say though that on the north-east coast, as I think in national parks, there are significant invasive weeds that are a challenge to us.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: If the practice of logging can lead to weed infestation, is there an automatic follow-up after a harvest where you will always go back into the relevant compartment to tackle weed management? Will you automatically go back in there?

Mr ROBERTS: It would be more a part of the regeneration. We want to have a good healthy forest following on from the harvest operation. So we would be going back to check on regeneration and if it is not occurring because there is a weed invasion problem then we will need to deal with that.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Will the corporatisation of your organisation have any impact on the resources that you put into regeneration?

Mr ROBERTS: I do not think so. I think, if anything, it will increase it. It is a significant asset with a potentially significant value into the future. We are mainly staffed by foresters and that is why we do what we do. We like to see our forest regenerating and regrowing. That is kind of one of the motivations of being a forester. I get a real kick out of going down to our nursery at Blowering and having a look to see how the seedlings are going for the next pine establishment.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: The starting point for the State Owned Corporations Act is to put public sector utilities on a commercial footing?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: You contend that once Forests NSW is corporatised, it will be in your commercial interest to put the same or increased resources into regeneration?

Mr ROBERTS: I believe so. Our forest is a bit like work in progress in a manufacturing situation. If you do not look after your work in progress, you will not have a product to sell at the end of the day. As foresters, we are highly motivated to make sure we look after the forest.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: I refer to a small issue in the south-east. Are you aware of the biodiversity fund grant from the Federal Government that Forests NSW and the Office of Environment and Heritage jointly applied for to exclude some forests from logging in order to protect koalas?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: We were told in the Minister's press release when that grant was awarded that "Forests NSW will receive assistance identifying alternative timber suppliers from suitable areas of State forests." Could you give us an update on what has occurred?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes. I do not know whether I can tell you exactly what has occurred, but I can tell you what the concept is. We are hoping to use, and may have used—I have not had a recent update on this—LIDAR technology. It is a radar process. I might have mentioned this at the last hearing. Essentially, you fly over the forest and send a radar beam down. It has different intensities and you get different feedback loops. At one intensity it will go all the way to the ground level. So you will get an absolute representation of the terrain. At another level it will bounce off the top of the under storey within the forest and at another level it will come off the top of the canopy. It will also give you a sense of how dense the canopy of the forest is. By correlating our actual on-ground field inspections of the forest—we will have a sample plot where we will have measured trees—we can locate a plot within a particular canopy structure, as determined by LIDAR, and then we can stratify the forest by those canopy types and determine what sort of resource is going to be available to harvest there. That is the concept. That is what we are thinking about doing down there.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: You received a grant that, in effect, led 2,800 hectares into a harvest exclusion zone in the Bermagui forest and a couple of other forests?

Mr ROBERTS: I think Murrah and Mumbulla were the other two forests.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: I am trying to get clear that the concept was to find another 2,800 hectares in the forest estate that could replace that subject to the exclusion zone courtesy of the biodiversity fund grant?

Mr ROBERTS: Not exactly because some of that 2,800 hectares is actually quite recent regrowth forest, in the volume available from that 2,800. It was not like it was dense, mature forest. Some of it was regrowth. It is a question of finding the volume to replace the volume that has come out.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: The Bermagui Forest had been logged recently, had it not?

Mr ROBERTS: Bermagui has. I am not aware that we have been in Murrah and Mumbulla for probably two or three years. We would have been in there last in 2008?

Mr KHAIAMI: I think so.

Mr ROBERTS: But yes, we have been in Bermagui recently. The areas we have been in, clearly there is no regrowth of any substance. But in terms of koalas and Murrah and Mumbulla, there is significant regrowth in that 2,800 hectares.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Prior to the awarding of the biodiversity fund grant that excludes those 2,800 hectares, when were you intending to go back into any of those forests for another round of logging?

Mr ROBERTS: There are maybe two answers to that. One would depend on the age of those regrowth forests. I do not know that, as at today, but it would be some time well into the future. It would not be in the next two or three years. It would be maybe 10 or 15 years on. I am just not sure. That would be the one issue. I have forgotten the other point I was going to mention to you.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: It stands to reason that if Bermagui was logged in the past 12 months, you were not planning to go back in there any time soon?

Mr ROBERTS: No.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: If Murrah and Mumbulla were last logged in 2008—

Mr ROBERTS: Sorry, that is when we were in those State forests, not in that particular area.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Could you take that on notice and give us any advice about what plans, if any, there were to go into any of those areas that are now harvest exclusion zones because of the biodiversity fund grant?

Mr ROBERTS: Okay, I can. I just remembered what it was I wanted to mention to you. Under the terms of the southern IFOA, there is a koala prescription and there is also a requirement for forests and the EPA to work on improved methods for koala detection. A significant body of work was undertaken in and around Murrah and Mumbulla with EPA staff, or DECW as they were at the time, and Forests staff using a transect system, or a grid system, where you look for koalas and if you find evidence of a koala you increase the intensity of the survey. That particular body of work identified these areas where there appeared to be clusters of koala activity, and that led to the reserve areas being set aside. That is a body of work that had been ongoing with the Environment Protection Authority for a number of years, so there would have been no plans, certainly during my times at Forests, to go into that 2,800 hectares; and I have been with Forests for five years, so there would have been no plans during that period.

CHAIR: For clarification, Mr Roberts: You mentioned before that for the high-value products on the North Coast, such as blackbutt, there is not the market strain placed on suppliers because it is a product that is desirable.

Mr ROBERTS: Yes, it is desirable from a number of perspectives. It is very easy to work with in the sawmill: it saws well and it dries well, so it tends to stay very stable. It has good structural properties, so that you can make wide beams out of blackbutt; and the light appearance is very attractive to the market for flooring products.

CHAIR: Given that the economic viability of some North Coast mills that you have mentioned can be affected by, firstly, your charges to them, and secondly the distance that has to be travelled from the coop back to the mill, do you have any standard data that would show what I will call the breakeven point for high-value timber in terms of distance travelled? In other words, if you had blackbutt forests 40 kilometres away from the mill, and then 50 kilometres and 70 kilometres, do you do any studies as to what you feel are the maximum distances that you could suggest are logged in order to meet a high-quality log profitability limit for the mills?

Mr ROBERTS: I am not aware that we have done those numbers specifically around blackbutt, but we have certainly done them around different State forests. So there are areas of the forest which would be reckoned to be uneconomic at the moment from the perspective of landed cost of that particular species; so it would be a highland species; and particularly to the point I made earlier about going up onto the escarpment of the tablelands, some of those logs, on the face of it, are unprofitable when they run through the sawmill. One of

the things that you have got to be a little bit careful about with sawmills is that whilst a log and its product may not of itself be profitable, it can contribute to fixed costs, and so it might be worth running it anyway even though of itself it is not making money.

CHAIR: I have one other question. A witness today talked about what she termed were clear-felling operations on the South Coast. She made the comment that the trash left by Forests in those operations was about 150 tonne per hectare. Under the IFORs, are you required to leave a certain amount of trash on the ground? Or is it preferable to completely clear the disturbed soil to generate regrowth? Or in fact are there any opportunities to use that material for something else if it is preferable that it be taken away? So there are three questions, I guess.

Mr ROBERTS: So probably three different answers. Yes, there are requirements for us to leave some of the material behind. So where we debark the logs we have go and put the bark back into what we would call the cut-over, so the area that we have been working on. To the extent it is possible to minimise the impact of heavy equipment, the contractors will actually try to lay material on their tracks, so that you do not compact of the soil; if you get compacted soil, it is much harder to regenerate the forest. As to the second part of the question, in terms of leaving waste or harvesting residue there, that slows the impact of water. So, if you have a flood event or a heavy rainfall event, to the extent that you have material on site it will prevent that causing an erosion issue. The third issue: It is good to leave some material on site, and particularly the material that tends to get left is from the very tops of the trees. It has the leaves associated with it. The leaves are where the nutrients are. So you really want to try to maintain that leaf litter in the compartment. Having said all of that, there is definitely woody material that could potentially be recovered and could potentially be used for biomass.

CHAIR: Perhaps the reference there was to creating a fire hazard. Of course, 150 tonne per hectare of tops is not the same as 150 tonne per hectare of leaf litter.

Mr ROBERTS: No.

CHAIR: What sort of fire risk is created by leaving those sorts of volumes on the ground?

Mr ROBERTS: In terms of the volume of 150 tonnes a hectare, that is an issue that we would need to manage pretty carefully.

CHAIR: Do you think that that is a reliable estimate of what is normally left in a South East Forest logging operation?

Mr ROBERTS: I could not say that it was an ongoing average. I do not have information on that today. I imagine there could be sites with that much remaining on them. To the extent we can, in those situations we will go and do a post-harvest burn to reduce the hazard.

CHAIR: Do you have records of those sorts of issues? In other words, after a site has been logged does the forester estimate what sorts of residues are left?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes. There will be an assessment as to how we are going to treat the compartment at the end of harvesting and whether there will be a post-harvest burn or not.

CHAIR: And would those records be available?

Mr ROBERTS: I believe they would.

CHAIR: Could you take on notice to provide the Committee with some sort of an indication on the South East Forest—we will stick to the area nominated—of some examples across the range, we do not want you to pick the ones that are small or large, across the range, of what sort of residues were estimated to have been left on those coops that were logged?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Mr Roberts, what is the total landholding of Forests NSW?

Mr ROBERTS: If you would like an accurate figure, we do have a record. It is roughly just over 2.2 million hectares, but I will get you the accurate mapped area.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Approximately how much of that would be described as plantation timber?

Mr ROBERTS: In terms of gross area, we have got about 250,000 hectares of plantations; approximately 200,000 would be softwood and 50,000 would be hardwood.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Would 50,000 hectares of hardwood timber be adequate to meet the entire hardwood requirements of the State of NSW?

Mr ROBERTS: No.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: By a factor of how much?

Mr ROBERTS: If you could give me a second. A lot depends on the productivity of the forest. So, if you said 50,000 as a gross area, you would probably have to factor that back by 20 per cent to about 40,000 of net plantable area, or something like that. The forests, on average, are probably growing at round about 10 cubic metres per annum; so 400,000 cube in total of all products. At the moment we are supplying 270,000 of high-quality sawlog, so it would be a stretch.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: So any assertion that Australia's timber requirements can be met exclusively through plantations at this current stage is completely wrong?

Mr ROBERTS: In my view it is. You defined it as Australia's plantations. If you look at Australia's plantations, the managed investment schemes investors tended to invest in eucalyptus globulus, bluegum, and those trees have been specifically planted on a very short-term rotation. They are generally being grown on a 10- to 15-year rotation for pulpwood markets. That species and that regime is unsuitable to hardwood sawmilling, which is the business that we are in on the North Coast of New South Wales. I should say the forests which our plantations are made up of have a range of different species, so we have got significant areas of spotted gum and blackbutt, eucalyptus dunii, which are suitable for sawing to a greater or lesser extent, but they are not eucalyptus globulus.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: So what would be the net effect of placing all of your non-plantation timber reserves in reservation?

Mr ROBERTS: I think you would close the business.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: It would be unviable for Forests NSW?

Mr ROBERTS: I believe so, yes.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: And it would crush the timber industry in New South Wales?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes, but particularly as the plantations are at this stage relatively young in their life.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Would you be surprised to hear that put forward as a viable option by people?

Mr ROBERTS: Forestry, as you know, certainly gets extremes of ideas, so I could imagine someone would propose an idea like that, yes.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: On the issue of reservation more generally: if the previous two decades worth of reservations had not been undertaken specifically in relation to the reservation of what was once Forests NSW land, if those two decades of reservations had not been undertaken do you believe Forests NSW would have been able to provide the 270,000 cubic metres of sawlogs on an indefinite basis into the future?

Mr ROBERTS: I do not know for sure, but I would surmise that that probably would be the case.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Would you be able to take that on notice and estimate?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Because, presumably, you would have had projections of those areas which have been reserved based on their expected yields at the time they were with Forests NSW.

Mr ROBERTS: So this would be back to the year 2000, the last 10 years?

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Yes, that would be fine.

CHAIR: Try 1995; that would be better.

Mr ROBERTS: All right.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: In relation to concerns about small diameter logs, which did appear to be quite valid when we spoke to people in the Pilliga, is it a bit rich of Forests NSW to say, "We can provide you with the minimum spec in the agreement, and you should be happy with that"? Minimum specs are not designed to be average specs, are they?

Mr ROBERTS: No. Look, that is their comment, and I was not trying to propose that that is the way that we were going to deal with the issue. Forestry is very complicated because on the coast fashions change as to what people want, depending on what markets are doing. So around the edges, people want flooded gum for a period of time, and then they do not; they want some other species. Scheduling the operations to allow that flow of timber to mills is extraordinarily difficult in a native forest business. But, in terms of cypress, we are doing whatever we can to assist the customer with larger sawlogs.

CHAIR: A point of clarification, if I may. By the last statement you made, I take it you mean that given the current constraints on the size of your resource area.

Mr ROBERTS: It makes it more difficult. There are lots of constraints on the business, and there is very limited room to operate as a forestry organisation.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: The point is that, without the reservation there you would have been able to deliver sawlogs of a diameter to enable them to make the 4 x 4 highly desirable building framing material, would you not?

Mr ROBERTS: As I say, I do not know for sure this afternoon, but I will take that question on notice. I would imagine that probably would be the case, yes.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: In terms of the issue of sustainability of the existing compartments, is it not the problem that you are locked into contracts that have been negotiated some time previously but you find that the land available to deliver those yields has been progressively reduced?

Mr ROBERTS: It has not made it any easier, no.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: In fact, it has made it significantly more difficult.

Mr ROBERTS: Given that you were heading towards a drop-off in total volume, and you are trying to extract preferred species, preferred size of logs, it is a challenging proposition.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: So when environmentalists, or people who call themselves environmentalists, complain about the supposed unsustainability of the yield, it is largely a factor caused by their demands that areas which were previously going to be selectively logged have been locked up?

Mr ROBERTS: I guess that is a comment.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: It is a bit like killing both your parents and then throwing yourself on the mercy of the court because you are an orphan, is it not?

CHAIR: Oh, dear. I do not think you are required to answer that.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Just in relation to concerns about logging operations in general and claims that have been raised by some people, the previous Minister said, in relation to forestry companies and Forests NSW, that allegations of systematic damage are overstated, and that the majority of alleged breaches in question are minor in nature, with little to no impact on the environment. That was said by the then Minister in 2010.

Mr ROBERTS: Yes.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Would that be a statement which would be applicable to any alleged breaches today?

Mr ROBERTS: Not any. We have a large number of contractors and we operate over a significant area, so there are issues that concern me, being responsible for the business. But there are a lot of issues we have to contend with, for which we can be breached, which I would argue are very trivial—administrative in nature—and do not contribute to environmental benefit.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Are you aware of any issues of systematic damage?

Mr ROBERTS: No, I am not, and we have been subject to a couple of court actions through the Environment Protection Authority [EPA] in the last couple of years. As a consequence of that, we did two things: firstly, we have an Australian forestry standard, which is audited by an independent third party. I asked the independent third party to specifically report to me on systemic issues to do with any breaches. They looked at that and came back and said they could find none. Subsequently, I employed Graham Wilkinson, who heads the Forest Practices Authority in Tasmania, and asked him specifically to look at our north-east region and our southern region earlier this year, again with a request to specifically advise of any systemic issues. There are some issues around training and communication, but in terms of systemic issues of breaches and problems with planning, there were not any to be discovered.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Do you have any plans to increase the size of your plantation holdings in the medium future?

Mr ROBERTS: Not at the moment, no.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Thank you. Are you concerned about your general forestry management practices within this context: It seems that your forest management practices are so good that your areas keep being asked to be reserved because of the environmental benefits which they have. Do you think that perhaps for the sake of your business into the future you should be adopting less stringent, less environmentally friendly practices so that your forests, as productive assets, do not keep getting locked up?

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: I am sure you will be happy to recommend that way.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Presumably, you are not unhappy that you are constantly receiving recognition of your excellent environmental practices by the fact that people keep wanting to turn them into national parks?

Mr ROBERTS: Seriously, as a forest manager, we always have room to improve. Our environmental management system is based on the concept of continuous improvement. We endeavour to take that very seriously.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: In fact, it is so good that some of your plantations have even been placed into national parks, have they not?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes, they have.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: So a straight-edged monoculture is now suddenly designated as something of great environmental benefit. Look out for your radiata pines. They will be coming for those next. They are all the questions I have.

CHAIR: Thank you. In relation to coupes in forests and active logging sites, who is responsible from an occupational health and safety viewpoint for those sites—the contractor or Forests NSW?

Mr ROBERTS: Both. The contractor is deemed to control the workplace and so has various obligations in that regard, but as the planner of the site and the operation that is going to go on where the operations are going to go on, we also have an obligation with regards to health and safety.

CHAIR: Are you aware that under the Occupational Health and Safety Act, the responsible person is responsible for people on that site, whether they are employees, visitors or in fact trespassers?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes.

CHAIR: Does Forests NSW believe that WorkCover gives due diligence to what are probably some of the most dangerous industrial sites around, certainly as dangerous as agricultural sites?

Mr ROBERTS: If I understand where you are headed, then yes, we have a concern.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Mr Roberts, can I go back to this issue of blackbutt on the coast. You indicated to us that blackbutt is by far the preferred species on the coast.

Mr ROBERTS: Yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: What is the relative price differential between blackbutt, and spotted gum and flooded gum?

Mr ROBERTS: Blackbutt, probably on average, is selling for \$80 to \$90 stumpage per cubic metre and for the less preferred—there is a very complex range of different prices—some species get down to the range of \$20 per cubic metre stumpage: that sort of range.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: So it is worth substantially more to the industry and to Forests NSW in that regard?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: You said that there was no shortage of logs at present and that the log dumps are full, and so on, but can you confirm that there is a shortage of blackbutt?

Mr ROBERTS: Blackbutt is always under very tight supply, and particularly in a downturn, people would like to get more blackbutt than other species. In terms of demand from our customers, yes they would like to see more blackbutt at the moment.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Do you have any contingency plans to rectify that situation and make more blackbutt available, or is that simply not possible, given the reservations that have occurred?

Mr ROBERTS: It is not possible, given the nature of the forests that we have left.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Do you have any idea of the extent of the resource, irrespective of land tenure?

Mr ROBERTS: Look, no; not exactly. There are certainly areas which, if you look right across all land tenures—which I think is the nature of your question—were historically State forests, for which we probably have some inventory records.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Suffice it to say though, there would be substantial amounts of blackbutt that now exists in those areas?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes, there would be. There would be some, yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: In the Pilliga, were there areas reserved that were destined for harvesting within five to 10 years of that conversion?

Mr ROBERTS: Look, I was not with Forests NSW at the time, so I am not aware of the detail, but I understand that there were. There was situation where there was a moratorium put on some areas, with other areas being harvested preferentially, and the other areas came over or remained as State forests whereas the moratorium areas went to national parks.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: You may have to take this question on notice, given that you were not with Forests NSW at the time, but I would be interested to know what proportion, or how much of that resource that was destined for harvesting within, say, the next 10 years, you lost through that process. Do you have those figures available?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes. I think we would be able to estimate that, yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Thank you. The other thing I would be interested in is the issue of log sizes. We heard from the industry up there that there was no problem dealing with 0.15 cubic metre logs as long as they had a range of sizes coming into the mill all the time.

Mr ROBERTS: Yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Within those areas, do you have any idea of the range of sizes or what the range of sizes is now in some of those areas? I think it is probably reasonable to suggest that that is the reason that the industry is looking at recouping some of those lost compartments: because they do have that preferred range of log sizes within them.

Mr ROBERTS: Look, I am not sure whether we have historical piece-size information for the areas that we have harvested. We are certainly monitoring it very closely at the moment. Our intent going forwards is being aware of what the customer is looking for—a mix of different sizes. We are trying to establish where the compartments are that can deliver that to us. The Pilliga is quite challenging because it is such a very large area. The inventory processes are extremely expensive—you have to send people out to measure the trees—so it is a little more hand-to-mouth in the cypress forests insofar as we are going out to identify blocks which look like they have the potential mix that we are looking for. Some of that work we do in conjunction with the customer. We go and jointly have a look at a block and say, "Is this going to deliver what you're after?"

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: From a forest management perspective, when we were up there the Committee took evidence from one of the industry people who suggested that there needed to be 18,000 hectares of community conservation area returned to harvesting in exchange for some 70,000 hectares going the other way. From a forest management perspective, do you think that is a credible suggestion for the industry to take?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes, look, I think it is. I think there needs some verification work around that first, but certainly it has the potential to deliver what is required, yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: If that was to happen, is it your view that that would then allow the industry to operate on a much more sustainable basis than what it has currently been facing?

Mr ROBERTS: In terms of what the customer is looking for, if the exchange as is being proposed were to go ahead and deliver them what they are looking for, then I cannot second-guess their business but you would have to think you are meeting your customers demands, so that would be good.

CHAIR: Before we go on, I will ask a point of clarification. Earlier you mentioned that Forestry NSW uses light detection and ranging [LIDAR].

Mr ROBERTS: Yes.

CHAIR: Is tree height or canopy height a good indicator of log size?

Mr ROBERTS: It can be, yes.

CHAIR: Are you able to use light detection and ranging [LIDAR] data to at least give you a rough estimate of where some of these larger trees or groups of trees might be?

Mr ROBERTS: We are.

CHAIR: That would cut down on the—

Mr ROBERTS: I am sorry, we are talking cypress again?

CHAIR: I am just talking cypress.

Mr ROBERTS: There are some issues with cypress, depending on what other overstorey there might be. So it is not quite as simple as it might be.

CHAIR: So where you get other species, you can get some problems.

Mr ROBERTS: Where you get the ironbark, there can be problems with that.

CHAIR: Right.

Mr ROBERTS: But having said that, I think that if we were going to do some inventory in cypress going forwards, we would definitely want to use light detection and ranging [LIDAR] and see how we could develop that technology to get us something reliable.

CHAIR: One of the contractors we met up there, who came all the way down to Grafton to make sure that he got on the witness stand, is an ironbark harvester in the area. I do not know whether you know of him. Most of the attention has been on the ability to keep the cypress mills running. I understand that is the type of work you have been talking about.

Mr ROBERTS: Yes.

CHAIR: What sort of condition is stipulated in your supply agreements for that single contractor who is harvesting ironbark? Are there any issues there that need also to be examined at the same time?

Mr ROBERTS: I am not sure which one you are talking about.

CHAIR: I think there is only one.

Mr ROBERTS: It is not a firewood operation, is it?

CHAIR: No. His mill is in Tamworth, I think, or somewhere like that. He does have a fair degree of costs involved in going and coming, but according to him the only available forestry resources for him are in the Pilliga region. Mr Clissold is the gentleman's name, I am told.

Mr ROBERTS: Clissold, okay. I am certainly aware of the name. I am not aware of the contractual arrangements though.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Mr Roberts, what assistance exactly has Forests NSW provided Gunnedah Timbers?

Mr ROBERTS: In terms of financial assistance, or general assistance?

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Yes, general assistance, including financial assistance.

Mr ROBERTS: What we have been endeavouring to do with Gunnedah Timbers is—they have the requirement for the larger piece-size logs—work in areas of the forest where we can meet their needs as best as possible. We meet with the operations manager with the customer on a monthly basis and run through a production plan as to what it is that we are hoping to have planned and ready available for harvesting. It is a stumpage operation; they actually employ the contractor out there. We talk through the blocks that are coming up and what we are going to plan, and we develop a schedule going forwards. We then monitor on a daily and

weekly basis how large the logs are that are going into the mill and report back to the customer on that to endeavour to ensure that we are meeting their needs.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: You are aware that when we met with them the last 20 loads that they had just taken to Hyde Haulage, for example, was 0.0156 in terms of—what is it?

Mr ROBERTS: Piece size?

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Thank you.

Mr ROBERTS: I was not aware of that, no.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: In terms of your discussions, you are aware that they are basically coming down to 0.15 cubic metres per log and that they are saying that if that were what they were getting every month they would not be able to make the month. Are you aware of that situation?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Have you spoken with the member for Tamworth, Kevin Anderson, about this issue?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: What was Kevin Anderson saying to you about it?

Mr ROBERTS: He is representing the customers' concerns.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: What was he suggesting needed to happen to address the customers' concerns?

Mr ROBERTS: I guess his concern is that there is an employer there that is struggling with the market situation. So to the extent that we are able to find blocks which meet the customers' needs, that would be a good thing to do—which is exactly what we would be trying to do as a business anyway.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Is it usual for local members to meet with heads of government departments?

Mr ROBERTS: It is not unusual.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: In the evidence that Mr Paul gave to the Committee, in his submission he is calling for an extra 18,000 hectares of resource to be rezoned. Are you aware of that?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Mr Paul said that in the submission that they made they had great help from Forests NSW in getting all of the facts and figures to calculate the extra 18,000 hectares of resource that was needed. Who do you think gave Mr Paul that advice?

Mr ROBERTS: I do not know.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Would you be able to find out how Forests NSW assisted Gunnedah Timbers to come up with that 18,000 hectare figure?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Essentially, the evidence that Mr Paul gave us seemed to imply that we have Kevin Anderson lobbying you for an extra 18,000 hectares of resource and your department, Forests NSW, giving the information to Mr Paul to make a submission to this parliamentary inquiry?

Mr ROBERTS: As I say, I do not know with information we might have provided, but I can tell you in terms of the resource assessment that 18,000 hectares would be very high level in terms of there would be issues like how many cubic metres per hectare would you get in that kind of forest at best, I would imagine. But I am really not aware that we have given any information to anyone on this matter.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: You are helping Gunnedah Timbers lobby for a rezoning from a conservation area to a State forest, are you not?

Mr ROBERTS: No, we are not.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: That is what he is doing with the 18,000 hectares in his submission; that is directly what he is requesting. He has specified a particular 18,000 hectares from what is currently zoned community conservation area, I think, to harvestable zoning.

Mr ROBERTS: Yes.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Figures that your departmental staff or Forests NSW or yourself—I am not sure—gave Mr Paul.

Mr ROBERTS: As I say, I am not aware of us giving any numbers to Mr Paul other than would normally happen in the course of a forestry operation, where as I mentioned earlier, we meet with the customer on a monthly basis and we talk about what is in the forest and what we are looking at over the next six to nine months. You could extrapolate that information if you wanted to; it would not be hard to do that. But I am not aware of any detailed information around the 18,000 hectares having been provided, and as a State agency or a public trading enterprise that is not our role to advocate one way or the other. If the Government makes a choice one way or the other we will go with it, and if there is going to be an inquiry we will provide the information, but we are not lobbying one way or the other for it.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: According to Mr Paul, you have been asked by Kevin Anderson to get bigger areas, better compartments—that is, bigger stands of timber—for the Pauls, and Mr Paul himself has said that you provided him with the 18,000 hectares that is needed to keep his industry viable to get the average log size up to 0.02. Who is correct here—Mr Paul or you?

Mr ROBERTS: I do not know; I did not hear what Mr Paul had to say at the time.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: I can read it to you if you like. Rick Colless asked him, "Is the extra 18,000 hectares of resource that you recommend in your submission what you need to bring that average log size up to 0.02?" He answered, "Yes". Mr Colless asked, "How was that calculated?" Mr Paul answered, "We have had great help from Forests NSW in getting all these facts and figures. That is how we arrived at the block and compartment numbers that are in the submission. That is what we need to survive, not only for the life of the 20-year wood supply agreement but for ongoing sustainability". It leads into our previous questions before.

Mr ROBERTS: I am not aware of any detailed work that we have done in regard to this. I can take the question on notice. I can only surmise that we provide information to them as a customer running a stumpage operation, which is very different to a delivered log sale. With a delivered log sale you are delivering the log against the specification in a contract; in a stumpage sale, selection of the block and the nature of the block has a significant impact on the customer and how they are going to harvest it. So there is an ongoing exchange of information at that level, and I would suggest that that is probably where it has come from.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: By the looks of this it looks like you are working with industry and some operators and giving them information they need to lobby government for access to more resources possibly beyond 2023—I think it looks like sooner. These questions were based around something within six months and that is what the National Party is lobbying for.

Mr ROBERTS: From my perspective the really concerning issue at the moment is the market circumstances the customer finds themselves in at the moment and we are trying to get the logs that will keep them operating and allow them to cover the products that they have markets for.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: From areas that are reserved now?

Mr ROBERTS: No, we are looking from within the State forest.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: The 18,000 extra hectares, which is what Mr Paul is asking to be rezoned?

Mr ROBERTS: There are two issues in my mind: one issue is about how do we operationally work with the customer at the moment to help him through a very difficult market circumstance; the issue of the 18,000 hectares I am aware of but I am not aware of us having done anything in terms of providing detailed information to provide for a lobbying opportunity. I would suggest—and I will check and I will come back to the Committee to let you know—that that is more in the nature of exchange of information that occurs about blocks in and around and all over the area, because we do that on a regular basis as a part of production planning.

CHAIR: Just to clarify: When you say "blocks" you mean forestry blocks?

Mr ROBERTS: Exactly.

CHAIR: Not national parks blocks—forestry blocks?

Mr ROBERTS: As I say, I am not aware of anything that we would have done there other than that nature of communication, which is what I am surmising. But I will get back to you on that.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Could I just go briefly to the question Dr Phelps raised on plantations that are now in the national parks estate? How many hectares would that add up to?

Mr ROBERTS: I could ask my colleague to see if we can find the number of hectares there. It is plus or minus 1,000 hectares.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: One thousand hectares of plantation?

Mr ROBERTS: From 2003.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: In the north of the State?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: That is it?

Mr ROBERTS: I believe that is the area, yes. If I can get you an accurate number I will provide it.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: I thought from Dr Phelps' comedy routine that half the national park estate was plantation. We are talking about 1,000 hectares out of seven million hectares, are we? That is about 0.0001 per cent of the national park estate, is it not?

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Are you saying environmentalists will never ask for another hectare of plantation timber, Mr Foley?

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: So-called environmentalists.

CHAIR: Order! This inquiry is about seeking advice from witnesses. Please allow Mr Foley to ask his questions of the witness.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Mr Roberts, are we not talking about small areas of plantation in a much larger national park? We are not talking about national park that consists wholly and solely or even in any large proportion simply of plantation, are we? That does not occur anywhere, does it?

Mr ROBERTS: No, there are blocks of plantation spread throughout the parks estate.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Is it the case that that was the result of an RFA process that at the end of the day delivered outcomes of both small pockets of plantation into large national parks and, on the other side of the equation, forests that were assessed through the RFA process as being old-growth forests of high-conservation value that remained in State forests? That was the case, was it not?

Mr ROBERTS: I cannot comment on the rainforest because I think that was a proceeding process late in the 1990s where there was a very high-level overview of the rainforest areas that may or may not exist in both the national parks estate and forest estates and there were some gives and takes provided with regard to those areas. So there are some mapping areas and some of those areas you can visit and they are mapped out as rainforest when clearly they are not. But that was part of the process that I believe took place in the late nineties. I am not aware, again because I was not around at the time, what the process was with regard to rainforest and the plantations in 2003, but there was a process that was undertaken to reserve the extra 60,000 hectares.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: If I can go back to the RFA process? Is it not the case that forests that were assessed through that process as being of high-conservation value remain in State forests today? That is the case, is it not?

Mr ROBERTS: It is. We have got a fairly comprehensive reserve system, so in terms of our total estate, if we say two million hectares of native forest we would only operate on about half of that area.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: On the other hand, something of the magnitude of 700 hectares of plantation ended up within the borders or within the boundaries of national parks that were made in the north of the State? Is that right?

Mr ROBERTS: That is roughly the area, yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Mr Roberts, can I just go back to this issue of the Pilliga and the issue that was raised by Ms Faehrmann? The six-month negotiations related to the backlog of environmental assessments in compartments that were destined for harvesting within the next, say, up to five years. Is that correct?

Mr ROBERTS: There are some issues, if I understand the nature of your question, with getting approval to go into some of the blocks. That has certainly been the case, yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Those were the basis of negotiations that occurred with the member for Tamworth, as I understand it, that he wanted to make sure that those environmental assessments were completed on time to allow those compartments already destined for logging to be brought online sooner than they were going to be?

Mr ROBERTS: That was certainly a part of the concern: how can we facilitate the planning process to make more blocks available for whatever the contingencies are, be they wet weather, small logs, large logs, whatever.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: The issue of the 18,000 hectares in exchange for the 70,000 hectares, what activity has occurred in that regard? Have there been any formal submissions made to you or only discussions between the industry and the members of Tamworth and who else?

Mr ROBERTS: I have certainly had correspondence regarding the idea but from a forestry perspective that is a political decision. There would need to be a process to determine whether that went ahead or not. From a NSW Forests' perspective we would want a good assessment of what the resource looked like—the 18,000 hectares and the 70,000 hectares—in terms of size in particular and whether it was going to meet the needs of the customer. A value judgement as to whether it is a good or bad thing to do is not our role.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: All it is at the moment is an idea?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes, that is as I understand it.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Can I ask you a philosophical question about the future of State forests: Where do you think State forests will be in 100-years? Will they still exist as an entity, will they still be in the business of harvesting native forests and if they are what will the native forests look like?

Mr ROBERTS: I would like to hope so. I think forestry is an activity that has gone on for tens of thousands of years and in that regard we are a unique industry. We have a renewable resource that regrows and is able to provide for a lot of our needs in terms of housing, decorative products, furniture and those sorts of things. We would like to think that NSW Forests is able to operate into the future. In terms of your question I would like to think that we had a somewhat easier environment to operate within, from a regulatory perspective. I would like to think the regulations were targeted at significant environmental impacts rather than administration and very small issues which can bog an operation down and take your focus off the big picture issues that we need to be focusing on.

I would like to think that our forests were productive, provide multiple use opportunities in terms of recreation and tourism and we had grown our capability in that area. There was a conference on Friday where one of our staff talked about some of the work Forests is doing around recreation and tourism on the North Coast. I think she is doing a wonderful job and I would like that to be encouraged into the future. I would like to think that our plantation estate had expanded. It is challenging economically but I would like to think we had a larger area of plantation that was supporting internationally competitive saw mills.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: You are referring to Kathy Jones from the North Coast?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: We did speak to her during our visit to the North Coast and we were very impressed with the work she was doing.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: I have a question on notice: From 2000 onwards could you provide the Committee with a complete list of all individual reservations which have taken place on what was previously Forests NSW land but ordered not necessarily by size or lost yield but in terms of what you consider to be—perhaps this is a subjective test—to have had the largest negative impacts upon Forests NSW's business?

Mr ROBERTS: Okay.

CHAIR: We are out of time, thank you for both coming along today. We used up an hour and a half fairly easily. If there are any further questions that the Committee members have they will put them on notice to you. We would prefer to receive answers by 18 January 2013. Do you think that would be possible?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes.

(The witnesses withdrew)

(Short adjournment)

ROBERT CONROY, Director, Conservation Programs Division, Office of Environment and Heritage, and

MELINDA JANE MURRAY, Acting Manager, Strategy and Performance, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Office of Environment and Heritage, on former oath:

GILLIAN SALLY BARNES, Chief Executive, Office of Environment and Heritage, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: Before we go ahead with questions, Ms Barnes, is there anything that you would like to add to the previous opening statements that were made in your absence in the earlier hearing?

Ms BARNES: Yes. Thank you for the opportunity to present to the Committee today. As you mentioned previously I was not here when my colleagues presented to the Committee the first time and I have not been able to join you on your tour around the State in national parks. I hope you have had a good tour. My staff enjoyed hosting you. They got a lot out of it as well. You would have to agree, having met them all in your travels, that they are a passionate group of people and committed to the work they are doing. They are not just committed to the work on the park but are also committed local community members. It is fair to say that over the last 10 years we have had less movement of people around the State. People who are in the north-east forests area, river red gum areas, Yanga or at Bourke tend to stay and they become part of the community.

Like the community they are contributing in terms of community spirit and they are concerned, like other community members, about jobs, economic growth and how the community is doing in general. They are concerned about protecting the community from any impacts that could come off-park including fire and feral animals. Hopefully you have been impressed by our use of science and our growing use of science in decision-making on-park. The work at Yanga in particular around water, birds and the recovery of species is exemplar. The work we are doing with river red gums includes ecological thinning, grazing trials and using science as the bases for management decisions: Hopefully you have been impressed with that.

Hopefully you have seen as well that in many cases transferring lands to national park has provided us with the opportunity to open the lands for public use. Yanga is the classic example of that. Toorale is another example we are working on. These lands were not public, they were private lands that were not available to the public, and the work we have been doing at Yanga by opening that area up to fishing, camping and a whole range of activities we hope will contribute to the local tourism product. I think you had a tour of the homestead followed by morning tea from the volunteers. You can see how passionate people are to make use of the homestead for weddings and tourism. We think we are on the path to contributing to communities and tourism in those areas.

Since your visit to Bourke the Minister has launched the Toorale and Gundabooka Nature Tourism Action Plan. I have copies I will table today.

Document tabled.

This plan follows similar lines to the river red gum action plan. I am pleased to report that the work in the Riverina red gum parks is progressing now the water is drying out. We are going full steam ahead revitalising the tired visitation areas that were there with Forests and also opening up new products including cycleways and hopefully the opportunity for eco lodges and a variety of other things. In many areas where you have toured you will have noticed that we are an employer of choice. We offer a different employment opportunity in parks, both for people who have lived in the area and completed science degrees at university to come back and work in ranger roles and also in terms of opportunities for Aboriginal people to work on-country. You would have seen people working with their communities to bring people back to country, help them build the health of Aboriginal communities and play a role in reconciliation. Hopefully you have enjoyed those visits. It may be worthwhile updating you broadly on things that have happened around what we have done since your visits and the first hearing. We have won some tourism awards. In front of me on the table is a display of four tourism awards.

CHAIR: For the record, congratulations.

Ms BARNES: Thank you very much. The first one is the gold award for a tourist attraction and that is Cape Byron State Conservation Area up near Byron Bay. That is a joint managed area where the facilities there

and the visitor opportunities we have leads to occupancy rate over 95 per cent. The money we make in those parks goes into looking after the park and employing local Aboriginal people as field officers.

The next is a bronze award for new tourism development, the Green Gully Track. That is in Oxley Wild Rivers National Park near Walcha. It came across to us as a donation through the foundation for national parks. It was an area that the farmer who had it before it was donated to us had a number of different sheds on his land from a management perspective, very old working sheds, if you like. We kept those and we have stabilised those in order to respect the cultural heritage of the area. We have joined up the accessibility to those different little sheds as a self determined walking track where people have a map, they head off and they have four or five days walking from shed to shed through the park. It is very popular. That is the bronze award for a new development.

The Blue Mountains National Park walking track won a silver award for heritage and cultural tourism. The Blue Mountains National Park has a history of walking tracks, which we are restoring. It is a world class facility. The Blue Mountains is our most visited national park. They are contributing to the ongoing revitalisation of that product. Finally, the big kahuna, the gold award for the major tourist attraction and that goes to Blue Mountains National Park. It is a fitting award for a park that not only provides visitor opportunity but has wilderness areas and a huge area that protects water and air quality. It has a whole range of different services. Our relationship with the Blue Mountains tourism organisation, I do not know whether they have appeared before the Committee, but I imagine they would have lots of positive things to say.

CHAIR: I am not sure whether they put in a submission. On behalf of the Committee I ask you to pass on our sincere thanks to all the staff that helped us out. They were at all times courteous, pleasant and very knowledgeable. We were sad to hear that a couple of them were leaving due to budgetary constraints but all of them were dedicated. I neglected to say the same thing to Nick Roberts when he was here. Both NSW Forests and national parks personnel were exemplary and no wonder you are winning awards based on the work of those people. Is there anything you would like to add?

Ms BARNES: Can I add one more thing? We submitted an additional briefing to you based on questions you asked.

CHAIR: We have that.

Ms BARNES: We do not do things by half. I think that covers your questions, plus there was some clarification of matters raised during the hearings where some of the information given to the Committee was slightly different to ours and we wanted to bring that to your attention.

CHAIR: Before we proceed with Dr Phelps, you mentioned in your opening comments the work that National Parks and Wildlife are doing with indigenous persons. We heard, prior to your session, a witness talking about co-management and some suggestions were put forward as to how that could be progressed. At Deniliquin we had evidence from the Werai people over one of the State forests there. They were expressing a view that their community, as perhaps a pilot community, could be given absolute control of the management of what is now that national park, rather than co-management. In other words, they are putting forward the suggestion that they would like the respect to be given to them that they were capable of managing what is probably about a 30,000-hectare national park. Has the Office of Environment and Heritage and the National Parks and Wildlife Service developed any programs to see whether those sorts of ideas could be progressed through testing those ideas or looking at what sort of resources might be necessary: Have you done any work in that area?

Ms BARNES: In the river red gum decisions there was a decision taken that the Werai State Forest would not come into the national parks and wildlife estate and it would be held as a separate area progressing to an indigenous protected area.

CHAIR: Under a memorandum of understanding?

Ms BARNES: No, quite separate from the national parks estate. There is work being done to progress that. An indigenous protected area is an area that is not registered as part of the national parks estate, it is where the traditional owners work with the Commonwealth to manage that land for conservation purposes or there can be a mix of uses there. The Werai State Forest was never slated to come into the national parks estate and there is a process being worked through identifying who the owners are and how the process will work. We are

involved in that and working with the local traditional owners to achieve a path for that. The Werai State Forest will never come into the park system.

As for the rest of the park system: We have always said we would look at ways to have joint management through part 4A of the Act or we have a number of less formal mechanisms for memorandums of understanding. At the moment there is not a mechanism to totally give it to a group outside and not have a joint management but it does not mean that we could not look at that. There is definitely an intention and there is definitely an appetite across National Parks to do joint management or co-management wherever possible. So we have got about 25 co-management agreements with Aboriginal people. About 25 per cent of the National Parks estate is under co-management arrangements and we are more than happy to look at how we extend that. We think it is very important to have the traditional owners involved in decisions. Under those different arrangements there are different levels of formality—some are under law and some are under agreement.

CHAIR: Is it correct that the Werai State Forest needs to negotiate all those issues with the Commonwealth Government?

Ms BARNES: Yes, for the Indigenous protected area.

CHAIR: For the management of that area?

Ms BARNES: And the State. What we need to do is to have assurity that there is a pathway through to an Indigenous protected area and we can lift it out of the State system. Once we work out who the entity is, it would then manage it—that is part of that ongoing process.

CHAIR: Is there any sort of expectation as to what time frame would be?

Ms BARNES: Our view would be as soon as possible. It is up to the community to see how they progress through this—there have been a number of community gatherings—so that they get the right people there to talk about it. This is Aboriginal business but we will facilitate and whatever their timetable is we will work with them on it.

CHAIR: In our discussions on the Millewa Forest we spoke to both Yorta Yorta and the Bangarang clan. There is a bit of a difference of opinion there as to who should have been involved at the start with the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Is the National Parks and Wildlife Service aware of that conflict of interest?

Ms BARNES: When you get down to the formal arrangements in terms of a hand back there has to be registered owners and there has to be quite a process where we use the registrar to actually negotiate who are the owners.

CHAIR: To determine the traditional owners?

Ms BARNES: That is right. Some of our memorandums of understanding are with groups who go: "We don't care. Just as long as we all have a say and we can work together, we are happy." That is where we need some flexibility. Do we have to sought it out legally first or do we just say that everyone around probably has an interest, everyone thinks they have a connection to this land, so we do not want to work it out legally. Let's see if we can all work together and everyone have a say in how we manage these parks. If we do not go down the legal trail that is the way we would approach it.

CHAIR: How do you start? Do you start with the non-legal trail and see if that works and then go to the legal trail, or do you try and do it the other way around?

Ms BARNES: We have done it in different ways in different parts of the State. I would say from my experience if we can work on relationships through a non-legal trail first, build up trust, build up the on-the-ground relationship then that is a good way to go. It is my understanding that we are happy to talk to anyone who has a connection with that land and try and work with them.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: I commence by congratulating you on the marvellous awards that you have received. I want to ask you about the processes applied if there are items of European heritage within national park areas. What processes are applied to protect and utilise those?

Ms BARNES: When we get a park we do an assessment of what is there through the plan of management process—that is where we have the discussion with the community about where to go on that. Often when we get a park like any good explorer we discover things we did not know were there when we first acquired it. Then, depending on what we discover, we do conservation management plans or a whole range of studies in compliance with other legislation in the State. In terms of utilisation, we then have to work out—for example, out west there are quite a few homesteads that we have acquired and they are in varying orders. I know the Committee saw the homestead at Toorale, which is in a very sad state I would say, that we inherited. Part of what the Government asks us for is better utilisation of State assets. What we have to look at is what the investment costs would be for some of those assets, then what the use could be and what the ongoing maintenance would be if we started to repair some of those. That is all part of that mix in terms of business planning, conservation planning and best utilisation of those assets. So it is not one-size-fits-all; it is on a case-by-case basis.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Does the same process apply in wilderness areas?

Ms BARNES: The Green Gully Track that I was talking about where we actually maintain the conservation value of those huts is in a wilderness area. The wilderness overlay and the wilderness policy at this stage do not encourage us—well we cannot do new developments. We would look at what the conservation values are in those areas and if appropriate maintain them. As to whether they get used or not, we are doing that on a case-by-case basis.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: The Committee heard evidence this morning about the bridle tracks in the southern regions of the State in particular. Sometimes those tracks were built with government support—there were cuttings and bridges included in them. So they were quite substantial tracks that were in use. Most of them were used just for horses without carts and carriages and so on—that is why they are called bridle tracks. The concern is that the bridle track network has been disabled because those tracks have been closed where they go through wilderness areas.

Ms BARNES: Closed to?

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Closed full stop to people using them.

Ms BARNES: They are generally closed to motor vehicles—

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: No, they are closed to everything.

Ms BARNES: Not to walking or to pushbikes or to access.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: The evidence the Committee heard was that they were certainly closed to horses.

Ms BARNES: Up until recently all of the wilderness tracks have been closed to horses. You are probably aware that the Government has announced a trial of horseriding in wilderness areas in five parts of the State, but certainly the policy up until now has been not to open tracks to horses in wilderness areas.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: There is a network of bridle tracks on which people could travel quite substantial distances, such as from Batemans Bay right through to Braidwood, but because of a couple of small sections of track that pass through wilderness areas those tracks are not able to be used.

Ms BARNES: Mr Conroy will answer that question.

Mr CONROY: To answer the question, if the track still exists then it can be used.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: That is not what we heard this morning.

Mr CONROY: That is not what we have been conveying to the stakeholder groups. What we have been saying is that because it is wilderness there will not be the construction of any new facilities in the wilderness because that is not in accordance with the wilderness management principle, but where the track exists then it will be able to be used for horseriding. Generally speaking if there are any cultural heritage items

within wilderness then the traditional uses or practices that coexist with those heritage values can continue within those wilderness areas. That is how our policy addresses the question that you ask.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: I suggest that you read the transcript of the evidence given by Mr Peter Smith this morning and then get in touch with him and advise him of those points. That is not his impression of what the case is at the moment.

Mr CONROY: We have spoken at length with Mr Smith about the issues down there but perhaps this one needs a bit more clarification for him.

CHAIR: In relation to wilderness areas in particular and the preservation of heritage, is there any differentiation given in the consideration between Indigenous heritage and non-Indigenous cultural heritage? For example, high country huts?

Ms BARNES: They are all looked at across the board and high country huts are a perfect example of those areas being conserved and restored in wilderness areas. The huts association has been working with us and I think we have done 10 or quite a few restorations with those huts.

CHAIR: Does restoration include rebuilding the huts that the National Parks and Wildlife Service destroyed 20 years ago?

Ms BARNES: There has been a rebuilding program. I will give you the list of ones that have been rebuilt.

CHAIR: No, that is all I need to know.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: Point of clarification, is the track one that is currently being used or the historical track?

Mr CONROY: The historical track. There is no current horseriding use on the bridle track as was raised this morning but there will be horseriding on that trail as it currently exists in the future as part of the rollout of our key directions in the horseriding strategy that the Minister announced on 7 November.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: When you say "that trail" does that apply to all those bridle tracks or just a specific track?

Mr CONROY: No, only the five pilot tracks that will be open to horseriding that were announced as part of that strategy. So the tracks in the south-east forests—national parks are part of that—are one of the pilot areas.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Where are the others?

Mr CONROY: There is one in Kosciuszko National Park, one in Mongo National Park on the South Coast, one in Mummel Gulf National Park south-east of Walcha—how many is that?

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Four.

CHAIR: And there is one other.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: At various stages throughout this inquiry we have been told that grazing in the high country constituted European cultural heritage and therefore Kosciuszko National Park ought to be opened up to the graziers. We have also been told that burning the forests constitutes Aboriginal cultural heritage and therefore broadscale burning of the forests estate should be allowed. Pardon my ignorance but what definition of "cultural heritage" does the Office of Environment and Heritage follow?

Mr CONROY: The challenge that we face as managers is balancing the various values that exist in the park system and sometimes they conflict with each other. The two examples you gave are good examples of where they do conflict with each other. On one hand you have significant natural heritage values that exist in the alpine and subalpine areas of Kosciuszko and on the other you have the cultural heritage values that exist with past land-use practices such as grazing and lighting of fires. It is where those two values conflict that we need to

balance and work out what is the most significant value. We try to do that through the plan of management process—that is, we assess the different values and then try to balance how we manage those values through a draft plan of management where we invite public comment and then make a call. Certainly some previous land-use practices are quite damaging to other natural heritage values that exist and vice versa, sometimes it can be the other way around. The example I used before of huts within wilderness, the stories that are attached to those cultural heritage values are of such significance that those stories need to be revitalised through ongoing use. Similarly, the fabric of some of these cultural heritage places that exist on park are best conserved through use rather than mothballing the facilities.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: I turn to the issue of fire management in national parks. We had evidence from an adjoining landowner—I am sure you are aware of this issue because it has been going on for quite a few years—about a dispute over the repair of a boundary fence. He showed us some photographs of this area that had quite large trees on the national parks side of the boundary—they were actually growing up through the old fence that was destroyed in the fire. Putting aside the issue that there was a proposal where National Parks would buy the material and he was expected to put it up, the main problem was that he could not get approval from National Parks to clear the fence line.

You only have to look at these photographs to see what he was talking about. As I said, there were quite large trees growing up through the fence line itself that obviously needed to be removed in order for the fence to be replaced. In addition, another issue is that even if that fence line was allowed to be cleared, say, a metre either side or a metre into the national parks side, there is an ongoing maintenance problem with falling timber on the fence line and future fires dropping timber over the fence again, et cetera. I would like to get your views on a better way forward of managing boundary fence lines, particularly when there is a need to have a fire access track on the national parks side of the boundary. Why would you not allow more extensive clearing of those fence lines, at least to the height of the standing timber, so that fence lines could be protected from storm and fire damage?

Ms BARNES: I will start and then I will get Mr Conroy to go into more detail. Our reserve fire management strategies look at access areas, look at cleared areas, look at a whole range of issues to protect neighbouring property from any impacts from fire and vice versa. So that is the stage to have the conversation with us when we are doing that planning. That planning generally involves not just ourselves but local landholders, local RFS people, and we sit down and map out all of those issues around access. When it comes to the fences post fire, we have longstanding practices and policies around repairing fences after fires. This is an area where we have been going backwards and forwards trying to get resolution.

People have been on the ground trying to get a sensible resolution. If there is a sensible way forward I will go back and we will have another look at it, but we definitely want to get on with our neighbours. We do have to look at some of those areas around how far around the fence line we clear for various reasons and if it is required. But I am happy to go back and look at it. In terms of longer term, I know the issue you are talking about. In turn, we have about 100,00 neighbours. I do not think I have seen—this would be the only fencing dispute I have seen in the last few years because we generally get on with it and people are generally fairly happy. I will ask Mr Conroy to give you more details—

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: In my experience of working with people in regional areas, which is all my life, it is not the only incident that I am aware of where there has been a dispute over a national park boundary fence. As I said, this particular incident, the fire, occurred in 2004, I think. So why would it not have been fixed? Surely it does not take eight years to sort it out.

Ms BARNES: I can give you more details of the offers we have made and the offers that have not been accepted offline, if you like.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: We did get them.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: I think we have them in his submission. He definitely tells us how long he has been saying no.

Ms BARNES: In terms of—I have just lost my train of thought.

Mr CONROY: We have 57,000 kilometres of boundary that we manage, and it is no surprise that often there are issues that come up. In this particular case, it sounds to me like it might be a dispute between our

assessor and the property owner because, if it was fire damage, then we generally refer those cases to our self-insurer to undertake an assessment of the legitimacy of the situation. If there is a problem, it may well be between the assessor and the landowner, rather than between National Parks and the landowner. In terms of the boundary fence, we are not obliged to comply with the Dividing Fences Act but we want to be a good neighbour and we do contribute materials for fencing to neighbours. We do it within our budgetary constraints, but we do allocate tens of thousands of dollars each year to the maintenance and replacement of fences on our boundaries. We try to do that cooperatively. We do it through a boundary agreement and we have a policy that covers boundary fencing and a policy and procedures to go with that. The only constraint are budgetary constraints because we have limited funds to allocate and we have lots of neighbours to deal with.

In terms of the clearing, there are provisions under the Rural Fires Act that enable our neighbours to clear on their land and to clear on our land, or at least to ask us to clear our land next to a boundary fence. In terms of the clearing, there are limits to that. I think it is either three metres or six metres—I cannot remember—from the boundary fence. I do not see why we would refuse an application to do that because it is in both our interest. In fact, more than twice as many fires come onto park from our neighbours than fires that leave our park onto neighbours' property. So it is in both of our interests in terms of making sure that that clearing is there because it minimises future liabilities in terms of fence replacement. It also helps us to manage fires that might come from our neighbours or fires that might come from the park.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: In relation to the number of fires that come from one to the other, can you provide us with some statistics on that, maybe on notice, because I have not heard that statistic before?

Mr CONROY: Just this fire season to date, of all the fires that have occurred on park, 12 per cent have escaped. I am talking about 150 odd fires so far this season; 12 per cent of those fires have escaped park and 31 per cent have come onto the park from neighbouring property. History shows that at least twice as many fires come onto park than leave park.

CHAIR: Perhaps when you do provide us with those statistics you could also provide the actual area of burnt country that has resulted from fires on park and fires off park, because we have had evidence to suggest that the statistic is correct. Most fires start off park but when you take into consideration the amount of country burnt it puts forward a very different picture. You might have to provide us with those statistics too.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: In hearings in Deniliquin we heard repeatedly the concerns of residents and local council that what I would classify as what amounts to a common law right to collect firewood or glean it from the surrounding forest had been extinguished and that they were no longer able to collect firewood, that arrangements had been made for residents to take trailers to certain locations to collect some wood on certain days. But for many of them, particularly the elderly and those without trailers, that was impossible, particularly when it was wet. There was no access to gas in the area. Electricity was obviously a concern; the cost of electricity, given the fact that that economy was based on burning wood. Can you comment on that? What undertakings can you give that people will have some access to that fuel or an alternative next year?

Ms BARNES: When we began the consultation process around the change of land tenure in January 2010 access to firewood and heating issues were raised with us. It was an issue that we were acutely aware of, and for that reason we have continued the existing State forest firewood program with the change of land tenure. When they stopped being forests and became national parks we just rolled over the existing system. Indeed, I think either the legislation or the second reading speech talked about that. We did not change the existing system. What happened is that the minute the parks changed from State forest to national park literally it rained. And it rained and it rained and it rained. So for two winters there was less access to what were traditionally the areas where people collected firewood.

In fact, in those two winters when it was very wet and the water had come up, after the change, State Forests, which used to run firewood programs, had to shut its firewood collection programs altogether because it was too wet. We had to shut areas because it was dangerous for people to get to them. We tried to keep areas open as long as possible. We recognise that it is an issue there longer term. We use the same rules as State Forests and we looked at the ecological impacts. There is a threshold level of coverage before you have to change areas because you need wood on the forest floor for a range of reasons. So we have continued the permit system. We operate it with the locals. The number of people asking for permits when there was a change of tenure stayed the same. So all of that was there.

We are looking longer term at how we can help them. I think you have hit the nail on the head that there is no gas and electricity prices are high. We are looking at how our energy efficiency programs or some of the other programs we run in the Office of Environment and Heritage could come in and help with that. We also know that there are people who do not have a lot of money who rely on those natural resources. State Forests will still run firewood programs. Interestingly, when we have looked at the issue, it is not a question of firewood not being available. What is happening is that market forces mean that local timber cutters and local timber mills get more money for their firewood by sending it to Melbourne and selling it at higher prices. It is a very complex issue and it is definitely one that we are working through and looking at some options before next winter.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: In the absence of the Hon. Dr Peter Phelps I will step into the breach and take up his concern that large parts of the National Park Estate consist of plantation forests as opposed to native forests. Is that the case?

Ms BARNES: There are some residue plantation forests in national parks. Through the regional forestry assessment processes there were some options available to State Forests after those assessments and those decisions for them to come and log those areas. My understanding is that those options were not taken up because it was not economical at the time to do that.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: We are talking about plantations in the north east of the State?

Ms BARNES: We are. There was some timber taken off the plantations in Bongil Bongil National Park. There was also a plantation in a park near Tumut, near Kosciuszko National Park, where we worked with State Forests to take the plantation timber off and rehabilitate that area. So we have a history of allowing that timber to leave the site. We would rather not have a monoculture on national parks. There are options for it to be cleared but my understanding is that in the early days that option was not taken up because it was uneconomical.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Is it the case that there are about 700 hectares of plantation in the seven million hectare National Park Estate in New South Wales?

Ms BARNES: I know it is a very small percentage.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: About 0.0001 per cent, I think. Would that be right?

Ms BARNES: I have not done the calculations but it is a very small percentage.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Thank you for appearing again and providing your responses to the questions. It was also good to get some of the facts from some of the incorrect statements that we have heard throughout this inquiry by some witnesses. That brings me to my first question. What we heard from a number of landholders, witnesses, timber industry operators and others obviously leaves a distinct impression that the National Parks and Wildlife Service could have a better relationship with regional communities. What are you doing within your department to build those relationships with regional communities? I want to know whether there are any specific positions or working groups. What are you doing to address that?

Ms BARNES: Reading through some of the transcripts and some of the comments, it struck me that our relationships were not as good as they could be. On reflection, I guess I have been watching, if you like, a transition when it comes to relationships. If you take, for example, Dorrigo, when the parks were expanded around Dorrigo there was a greater presence of National Parks and Wildlife Service people in the area, there was a change to jobs and timber production, things were pretty difficult and the relationships were pretty tense. Anecdotally, my staff would say they could not walk down the street in their uniforms at that stage, and they would make sure they went home and changed before they went shopping.

What tends to happen is that over time people get to know each other, find common ground and realise that their kids are playing soccer with the other kids, they are all parents—fathers, mothers—and they all go to the school and become part of the community. As I said, as there is more of a tradition of our staff staying in an area and being part of the fabric of that society, those relationships tend to change. They change through doing programs and projects together and they sort of evolve. What struck me, during a very sad occasion—a memorial service for Aaron Harber in Dorrigo, who was a National Parks and Wildlife Service staff person killed in a helicopter crash in 2009—was that the community gave the memorial service and community members spoke highly about him and about a National Parks and Wildlife Service family they got to know. That

was an eye opener to me about that transition of relationships. Generally it is up to the people and how they work together. We are trying to have programs when we get parks to have people come in, open them up, have community events, and start to work with local tourism bodies and local councils to facilitate those relationships. It is a relationship that builds by doing things together, such as using local shops for services. In Balranald the local hardware shop will say it got more business out of us than the Black family who had the property before. But it is an issue and I think we need to work harder at it.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: That does not sound like any concrete plan. I understand that it is all about relationships. I was trying to identify from the transcripts which council it was—I do not think I will find it—but from memory I asked about tourism potential in river red gum Forests and the local councils' tourism action plan. The response was that they did not really meet with National Parks frequently at all.

Ms BARNES: That was Mr Murdoch I think. That is very surprising because I have been down there personally and met with him three or four times. I have been to dinner with him and the mayor. His tourism officer has been part of the working group. I have not caught up with him since then, but I was surprised to read his transcript—and disappointed. I need to reconnect with him.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: That would be good if you could address that. Is the department doing anything more specific in building those relationships?

Ms BARNES: We need to revitalise our community engagement strategies. We need to look at how we communicate using a variety of mechanisms. I think we have relied on on-ground relationships. We probably need to engage people more and look at modern social media or a range of things to engage broader communities down there. Definitely the regional advisory committees are a great avenue for building relationships but, as I said, reading those transcripts it struck me that we need to do more work in that area.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: One thing that arose time and again was the issue of the loss of rates when land is converted to national parks—obviously that is usually land that was agricultural or pastoral. What are your views on paying rates to the local council for some national parks that have been converted from agricultural land?

Ms BARNES: I guess we need to look at the proportion. Most land that comes into the national park system comes from State forests or Crown lands. Certainly, in the past five years when we have done more work out west there has been land that has been in production that has come across and we are aware of the rates issue. It is a matter for council; it is important to them. We do not rely on councils to provide services to us. When we do withdraw from paying rates, we are not asking them to provide us with any garbage collection services or any road services—any traditional council services. We become the council area, if you like, for that particular park. I guess it is a quid pro quo in a way.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: But you still use the infrastructure outside the park when travelling to and from the park?

Ms BARNES: We do.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Quite frequently in this inquiry—ad nauseam, actually—the issue of access to some reserved areas for logging came up, such as the recent river red gum, Pilliga, Brigalow and North Coast forests. Some Committee members asked witnesses what would happen if we swapped some national park areas and threw some State forests into national parks. What is your general view of that and the national park acquisition process you go through? Would it be a sensible idea to convert and revert?

Ms BARNES: Most of the large transfer processes have involved some sort of scientific analysis of the vegetation, conservation values and a whole range of studies that have been the basis of some decision-making. But also at those times estimates were done on the timber that would come from those decisions as well, as Nick Roberts was saying, with a view to balancing outcomes. At that stage the amount of timber that was allocated for production would seem to have been what was required in meeting quotas and customer needs. Certainly, we have been managing the land for conservation that has come across as national parks.

If there is an issue around supply, that is for the government of the day, but you would have to look at the sustainability issues: Why was it not sustainable originally? What was wrong with the modelling to start with? How would you have confidence in any future modelling? Are you getting the most out of the forest? It is

a decision for the government of the day, but I can say that the processes at that time used the best science available and relied on figures supplied by the foresters as to how much timber would be required for an ongoing timber industry. Of course, that led to a range of structural adjustments and payments, and people choosing to exit the industry. It would be a big change, but it would be up to the government of the day to work out the drivers for those changes.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Do you still have a current biodiversity strategy for the State?

Ms BARNES: There is a biodiversity strategy that was done in 2004.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: I think it was more recent.

Ms BARNES: Perhaps 2007. We started to revise the biodiversity strategy. There are a number of processes underway at the moment that feed into that that need to be completed. We are doing a review of biobanking. We are doing a review of the priority action statement. We are doing a review of a range of other things that will feed up to a biodiversity strategy.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: If any areas of our existing national park estate were opened up to logging or transferred over, what impact do you think that will have on the State meeting—it is a general question and perhaps there could be specific examples—our threatened species targets? Would that impact on the current listing? Would it impact on any biodiversity targets? Would it impact on our current commitments—as you have given in evidence—to increase our reserve commitments internationally and nationally?

Ms BARNES: I think a number of things would need to happen. You would have to be fairly confident that the existing State Forests could not do the job it was asked to do. If there was going to be any land tenure changes, you would have to do a similar process to that done in the earlier transfers and look at the impacts on all of those things. You would have to do it on a case-by-case basis. You cannot make global statements. You would need to determine the risks of changing and the impacts on specific species and on meeting those obligations. It is speculative at the moment and I cannot go into more detail.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Would there be a negative impact in the overall biodiversity aspect?

Ms BARNES: Certainly, the past transfers were done to meet specific objectives and to deliver specific outcomes. I imagine that would shift, but you would have to look at what the proposals were on a case-by-case basis.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: What is your view, Mr Conroy?

Mr CONROY: I agree. A lot of the decisions government has made in the past have been based on a scientific evaluation of the values that exist across different tenures of public land. At the moment more than 50 per cent of New South Wales is public land. There is more than 40 million hectares, of which only 8 million is national park. It is only a small proportion of the total available public land in New South Wales and it is set aside in accordance with the objects of the National Parks and Wildlife Act. You are right in saying that it compromises some of the national and international agreements that we have in place in meeting IUCN definitions for protected areas. It may well compromise some of those national and international agreements.

My view is that there are some forest types, but very few, where a form of harvesting may produce conservation outcomes. Usually, those forest types are types where there has been significant disturbance in the past and there has been a natural response to that, which works against achieving conservation objectives. Two vegetation types that come to mind are river red gum forests and cypress pine woodlands and forests where a form of eco thinning may be appropriate in achieving conservation outcomes. But when you look at some of the more coastal hardwood forest types, in that situation you would have to look at the economics of allowing harvesting to occur. The harvesting would have to be minimal in not impacting on conservation objectives. Because it is minimal, then it begs the question about whether it is economical to do it that way or whether to look at other ways of achieving the same supply outcomes for which you are looking.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Therefore, could you argue that the ecological thinning that you said was also necessary for river red gum, or may be necessary for some parts of river red gum and cypress forests, was different to thinning or logging that takes place on an economic basis, which is what you just

referred to regarding the North Coast hardwood forests? No doubt you are aware that it was asked at Deniliquin why the current operators are not just allowed to undertake the so-called ecological thinning trial—to use their words—of the river red gums. Is not the problem that commercial operators are pressuring to undertake ecological thinning and that it would not be with national parks? Can you undertake ecological thinning and do so economically?

Ms BARNES: We are doing a trial of ecological thinning because we are doing it for conservation reasons to see whether it will actually enhance the values.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: You are not selling that timber, are you?

Ms BARNES: No. We have done a demonstration site. We are going to bring in contractors to do the thinning for us and that is where the local timber industry can put up its hand and be part of that contracting arrangement, if it wishes. But it is not for commercial purposes. Returning to the question about firewood and local communities and access to firewood, what we are going to be doing with that timber that comes off that particular area, which is often very thin and not much use for anything else but firewood, is to see how it fits with the community firewood program and have that as our first option and also for people camping in the area.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: There is a difference though between ecological thinning for conservation purposes, on which you are doing the trial, and what we hear are pressures for the normal logging activity that was taking place before hand because that is how the forest grows and we should be just allowed in there because we like to take it anyway?

Ms BARNES: My understanding—and I stand to be corrected—is that ecological thinning was not done previously; what was done was silviculture, which was about taking out timber for productive use. That was because growing trees close together and making them straight was actually a plus when it came to forestry activities. We have said that if we are managing those forests as we have been asked to do, for conservation, we do not want straight, slim trees; we want trees that are quite plump and open up so that they are habitat for nesting birds and a whole range of things. This trial is about taking out those small ones in between some trees to see whether that will increase the growth of the remaining trees and they become better habitat trees—not better production trees, but better habitat trees. So it is for completely different reasons.

As Bob Conroy was saying, if you were going to take trees out of a forest in the northern area for a conservation value, once again it would be done from a conservation perspective, and it probably would not be worthwhile commercially; you would not get that return. But that is the sort of thing we have to look at. Certainly, as I said, when State Forests had access to plantations that are already in national parks, at that stage they said it was not worth their while doing it because it was not economical for them to get equipment in and take it out.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: So why are not some of the timber operators—or are they—approaching you to undertake this ecological thinning and get paid by you, as I understand, as contractors and then not selling the wood?

Ms BARNES: Because we have said they cannot take the wood with them.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: So is what you are paying them not enough?

Ms BARNES: That has not started, so at the moment we have got the Review of Environmental Factors that have gone out around thinning operations for public comment.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: I thought when we were down there that ecological thinning trials were being undertaken.

CHAIR: That was a company called Ecological Thinning Services, which may well have been working for National Parks.

Ms BARNES: So we were doing a demonstration. I have been down to the demonstration site where we have got the different coloured ribbons and we have worked out the scientific research using our scientific advisory committee. As part of that demonstration trial we invited people who may be interested in the work later on to come and look at what we were doing and get a feel for it, so that when they are bidding for the

contracting work they know what is involved. Certainly, when the contracts go out—and I am not exactly sure of the timing, but I know the Review of Environmental Factors has been out for comment, and has just closed—it will be for people who want to fell the timber, but the timber is going to be used for firewood purposes. So they will not be taking the timber away and selling it; it will be our timber to keep.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: How much are you offering for contractors to do that?

Ms BARNES: We want the best price, so it will be a tender.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Some people in the area who are currently timber operators could very well tender to contract to take the timber, sell the timber and still get paid for that job.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Do you sell tickets when you sit down with Ken O'Brien about how it will work?

Ms BARNES: Well, just on—

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Just on Ken O'Brien?

Ms BARNES: No. When the structural adjustment package was done, when the Natural Resources Commission did its assessment, there were two objectives. One was the long-term health of the forests, and the second was a sustainable timber industry. Payments that were made for those exiting the timber industry were made on the basis that those who were left would have a viable business. I understand Mr O'Brien at that stage elected to leave the industry. He is more than welcome to put in a tender to work with us on the ecological thinning trial.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Just on the south-western cypress, which really has not captured our attention during this inquiry, the declaration of I think parts of the Yathong and Wilbertroy State forests originally meant to occur on 1 January this year was delayed, through an amendment to the legislation last year, to 1 January 2013 to allow what was termed an exit cut in those forests. Do you have an update for us on that? Have the exit cuts occurred? And is everything on track for those forests to come into the national park estate in a few weeks time?

Ms BARNES: I will need to get information for you on that. The Environment Protection Authority is managing that exit-type arrangement. But I will get information back to you on that.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: I go back to the ecological thinning issue. Understanding that it is for environmental purposes, not for production purposes, what spacings are you looking at? I gather there may be a number of different spacings in the trial, is that correct?

Ms BARNES: We are doing this jointly with the Victorians, and we are doing different plots. The idea is to see over time, over a short period of time actually, what would be the best. So different plots have different spacings, different plots are taking out different size trees. The design of the research has been through our scientific advisory committee, which is headed by Graham Phelps. They tell me that in a year or two we will start to get some results, which will give us more indications from a management perspective what we might do in the broader forest.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: What range of spacings are you looking at then? Is it in terms of stems per hectare, or individual spacings between trees, or what?

Ms BARNES: A bit of both. They have looked at vegetation types, the spread, whether to do greater spacings, and different plots have got different research designs. But I am happy to get you all that information about the research designs.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: That would be good.

Ms BARNES: It probably is with the Review of Environmental Factors, but I can give it to the Committee.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Thank you. And can you tell us what is the total area involved in the trial?

Mr CONROY: It is 360 hectares in both Victoria and New South Wales.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: In total?

Mr CONROY: In total, yes.

Ms BARNES: The bulk of them are in New South Wales.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: If it is successful, and provides results that show that at a particular spacing, et cetera, it will be successful, what area across the broad scale would you then be looking at thinning?

Ms BARNES: What we would then do is to say: Where do those principles apply? You would have seen in the forest that some areas are full of those young trees growing close together. I have to say that when I mentioned to Ken O'Brien that maybe burning them is the best way to help them, he nearly died. But we will look at what the best management practices are across the forest.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: So potentially we could be looking at 20,000, 30,000 or 40,000 hectares of—

Ms BARNES: We have to look at where they need thinning. There are some parts of the forest, like the sand dunes, where there is different vegetation. So we do that. I do not have the answer.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: What I am getting at is that potentially there are very large hectares of red gum forest which may currently have 100, 200 or 300 stems per hectare but will be thinned for ecological purposes down to 20 or 30 stems per hectare.

Ms BARNES: The good thing is that we have got a pretty clear vision of what a healthy red gum forest looks like.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Can you explain to me what a healthy red gum forest looks like?

Ms BARNES: We have got some pictures that we use as our guide about what a healthy red gum forest looks like. Certainly, from the scientific perspective, the scientists know the characteristics of a healthy red gum forest. These trials will tell us how we help make the existing forest healthier, and then we can work on where to from there. I will send you the pictures of what we see as a healthy red gum forest.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Can you describe it to me initially?

Ms BARNES: So large trees, open foliage, space underneath, regeneration, recruitment, enough for the future but not those small areas; and dead timber on the ground, and hollows.

CHAIR: For Hansard, I am presenting a copy of a document tendered by Mr Jurskis yesterday. It has photographs of different densities of red gums. When you give us your ideas, could you give us some photographs of what it looks like so that we can compare them?

Ms BARNES: Certainly.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: I think it was photograph number 3 that Mr Jurskis presented to us.

Ms BARNES: Photograph 4.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: It shows the open forest, with large hollow-bearing trees in it.

Ms BARNES: Yes. And there is structural diversity and, as I say, opportunities for recruitment.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Given that that is your vision, what range of tools do you then apply in order to achieve that?

Ms BARNES: We have done a number of vegetation surveys. We have done some light work as well. We have looked at where the water flows are. It is all interrelated.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Those are the physical resources, but what are the tools that you see as available to you in order to achieve the vision that you are working towards?

Ms BARNES: So we could do thinning, we could do fire management, we could do a range of other tools.

CHAIR: What about grazing? Do you see that as being a—

Ms BARNES: I would have to go for scientific advice on that. And, of course, as you know, we are using the existing grazing permits to help fill in that gap of information about what are the impacts of grazing.

CHAIR: Are you using the two-State scientific committee that you have?

Ms BARNES: The same committee is helping us on that.

CHAIR: The Victorian and New South Wales science group?

Ms BARNES: Yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Is there anything in the potential tool box which you simply will not look at, full stop?

Ms BARNES: Within our legislation, we would be open to ideas to having healthy forests. We need to look at that and get scientific advice and evidence.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Can I go back to the issue of fire management because it is an issue that has been brought up with us on a number of occasions, both through this Committee and also as individuals. Are you aware of the Canobolas bush fire model?

Ms BARNES: Yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: You would also be aware of their guidelines for boundary fence fire clearance areas.

Ms BARNES: I do not know the details of that.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: One thing that has been brought up with me on many occasions is this issue of the width of firebreaks adjacent to boundary fences in particular. The most common suggestion I receive is that the fence line should be cleared at least to the height of the standing timber. With that as a philosophy to be included in a national parks plan of management, would you be willing to discuss that with your people? I take on board what you said, Mr Conroy, about three metre wide clearing. But that is hardly enough room to get a ute down after you finished it for maintenance purposes, particularly if timber standing adjacent to the fence is 20 to 30 metres high. So why would you not clear to the height of the standing timber?

Ms BARNES: I am happy to take that away and have a look at it. The other thing to mention of course is that the Rural Fire Service and the commissioner in particular have interests in powers when it comes to protecting life and property, and can, if there are complaints, take those complaints and refer them to the appropriate authorities. If you look at the number of complaints the Rural Fire Service gets, I think about 9 per cent of complaints are about management of public land; and we are a small percentage of that. So there is that avenue as well for landholders to go to the Rural Fire Service commissioner; and certainly we get those complaints and fix them. But I am happy to have a look at those suggestions and get some advice. I guess our experience is that you need some principles but a blunt instrument in terms of metreage often does not work for various reasons.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: I understand that.

Ms BARNES: But I am happy to look at suggestions. And if it is an issue, we would rather spend time doing other conservation work than actually talking to people about fences. I mean, we would rather fix the problem. So, where it is practical and sensible, we would much rather fix the problem.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Could I also ask you about your procedures or policies for looking after fire trails within national park areas?

Ms BARNES: Yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: We have heard on many occasions that fire trails have been closed in some instances. I have seen some of those, where big rocks or big logs have been placed across fire trails to prevent access. We have heard also that those fire trails are not maintained once National Parks take control of them. What do you say to that?

Ms BARNES: I would love to have that budget to spend on something else, but we spend a lot of money on maintaining fire trails. We do a lot of work. I will hand over to Bob Conroy, but it would be interesting to compare the different management regimes of fire trails across public land and private land, and look at exactly what each agency spends. I would be confident that we probably spend more than any other land managers on fire trails. Bob, do you want to add to that?

Mr CONROY: On average, we maintain about 10,000 kilometres of trail each year. These are fire trails.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Across seven million hectares?

Mr CONROY: Across seven million hectares.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: That is not much, really, is it?

Mr CONROY: We have 36,000—it is a third of the total length of trails and roads that we have on park every year. It rolls on, so at least once in every three or four years that track or trail gets maintained. We have the Bush Fire Coordinating Committee of New South Wales that has adopted policies and procedures that deal with the maintenance and construction of fire trails, and we comply and implement those policies and procedures. We have our own roads manual and roads policy, which we implement within our parks and reserves. We make a big commitment each year to the maintenance of those tracks and trails.

In terms of closure, there is a process which is adopted in each of the district Bush Fire Management Committees of determining what are the essential and important fire trails, and those trails are registered and mapped. Other fire authorities and land managers, through that district Bush Fire Management Committee, are able to contribute advice and suggestions about where strategic trails should be located. If there are good suggestions about that, we often listen to those suggestions and may reopen trails or may close trails, particularly if they are identified as dormant, which means they are closed temporarily and reopened as required in the future.

When we close trails, we generally do that—and I cannot think of any examples where this is not the case—we do it through a plan of management process. We do not arbitrarily close trails, particularly those that are identified in district bushfire risk management plans. If we close a trail, we generally do that through a consultative process with the plan of management. I would be quite surprised to hear any examples of where trails are closed arbitrarily without some sort of consultative process. We have a policy of consulting with local four-wheel-drive clubs generally if there is a proposal to close a trail. After that consultation, then we consult more broadly through a plan of management process.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Can you tell me what length? You said you have 36,000 kilometres, I think.

Mr CONROY: We have 37,000 kilometres.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: You have 37,000 kilometres of fire trails. What length of fire trails have you closed following the acquisition of various parks?

Mr CONROY: I have to take that on notice. I cannot answer that easily.

CHAIR: Earlier in your evidence, Mr Conroy, you mentioned that national parks are only a small part of the total Crown estate. We heard in earlier evidence that in fact 36 million hectares are western land lease, which for all intents and purposes could be regarded as freehold. That land is maintained by the leaseholders.

Mr CONROY: Yes, and I was including that as public lands.

CHAIR: Thank you.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: In relation to these nature tourism action plans, how much in extra resources have been put into the tourism action plan? Anything?

Ms BARNES: There is funding to implement the actions in there. We have only put in actions that we can fund. For river red gum ones, the funding came through the river red gum package. This one has come through our capital works package.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: In the action plan, you outline how the Government aims to double tourism expenditure by 2020 and increase participation in recreational activities by 10 per cent by 2016, and that the national parks and reserves play an important role in that. Has your tourism spending within the department for tourism, Ms Barnes, broadly increased, stayed the same, or reduced?

Ms BARNES: What we have done is create a tourism and partnership branch. We used existing resources. There was a group that was looking at tourism. We have enhanced that. We have received additional funding for tourism activities. Part of the Government's \$40 million over four years is going into tourism and visitation. We were already spending quite a large proportion of our money on visitor facilities and visitor access. I cannot remember the exact percentage, but it was quite a large spend forever on visitors. What we have tried to do now is be a bit more strategic and have it as a more planned, more prioritised look at where we can actually increase visitation and where we can increase revenue from visitation, and then we can put back into the park system.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Your department, like many or all government departments, has had to make some cuts to staffing this year. That is correct?

Ms BARNES: That is correct.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: One of the big things that we have heard throughout the inquiry is the lack of resources by the National Parks and Wildlife Service to manage the existing reserve system. Could you tell me in terms of the staffing cuts what cuts are being made within the National Parks and Wildlife Service that will impact on the management side of parks in terms of managing the reserves?

Ms BARNES: We have had to make cuts. We have had to look at where we can change programs, shift programs, and get some efficiencies out of better systems. We have said what we would do, and we have now completed the process, which is to look at whether we can rationalise some management positions. That comes through the maturing of the reserve system through finalising pests strategies and plans of management. So what we have done is reduce area managers from 66 areas down to 50. That process is just about complete.

We did that through a merit selection process. We did that through adjusting boundaries and making some areas larger and through bringing together different workforces within those areas. That has been a saving. We will have to make some more backroom savings. Across the rest of the Office of Environment and Heritage [OEH] we are making savings as well in backroom positions in particular. But remember the national parks as part of Office of Environment and Heritage has access to scientists and legal officers. We are trying to maintain those on-ground resources, but we are looking at whether we can make some changes to, for example, our discovery program.

At the moment we have coordinators across the State and we are looking at whether we can rationalise some of that management of those programs and whether there are some programs we can do more web-based so that fewer people are running them. At the moment in Office of Environment and Heritage we have a number of different call centres and we are looking at whether there are efficiencies in having one call centre and

making some savings there. We are trying to minimise the impact on the day-to-day management of the park. There will be reductions.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: So from 66 areas that are managed, or area managers, to 50?

Ms BARNES: Area managers. The estate is still managed. Instead of having 66 different administrative areas, we have gone to 50, which is still quite a large number of senior staff.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Are there any other reductions in staff within those areas from the 66 to 50?

Ms BARNES: I think there are some area administration officers that might be seeking voluntary redundancy, so we will look at that. But at this stage, I do not think there have been any other reductions to those areas.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Regarding local communities and regional communities, we were talking earlier about the need to build relationships and about the frustration. Some of that you have addressed by giving us factual information about fires. I do not think we have touched on feral animals yet, but I think you did address that in some of your responses on notice. Some of what we are hearing is that there are not enough people on the ground to manage the enormous land that you have. Is it not a fact that it will be harder to appease regional communities and convince them that you are looking after the National Park Estate when you are reducing the number of people who are there now, looking after what is being alleged you do not have enough people to look after at this current time?

Ms BARNES: One of the things we are trying to do to address that issue and to make sure we maintain conservation values is to really utilise our asset maintenance system. What that does is actually give us a good idea of the assets on the park, a good idea of their condition and also a good idea about their use. There are probably areas where we spend a lot of effort maintaining, for example, a picnic area in a remote location that maybe is used by half a dozen people a year. We really have to look now at this issue: Is it better to maintain that or spend the money where there are more people using walking tracks, et cetera? We have to balance resource priorities, resource needs and look at where we put those resources, and we will have to have conversations with local communities through the regional advisory committees. Absolutely.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: In the supplementary information you provided the Committee, on page 20 there is sustainable use for conservation and community benefit, and there is the sentence which states that the New South Wales Government is looking to improve the contribution that parks and reserves make to rural and regional areas, including opportunities for sustainable use that benefits both communities and delivers good conservation and park management outcomes. The term "sustainable use", has that been used by your department and the National Parks and Wildlife Service in the past?

Ms BARNES: We added sustainable tourism to the National Parks and Wildlife Act in changes made in 2010. "Sustainable use" in that instance is for looking at how we can have more access to parks in a sustainable way in terms of cycling, mountain biking, people helping us with different bits and pieces through four-wheel driving, and definitely looking at how we can contribute to the local economy.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: But it has not been used by the National Parks and Wildlife Service or the Office of Environment and Heritage before, has it? You just said "sustainable tourism".

Ms BARNES: I am just thinking whether we have used the term. But it is not a deliberate new term we are putting in. I think we have talked about sustainable use or wise use of areas.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: "Wise use of areas" is a very different use from sustainable use.

Ms BARNES: It is. It is a different use.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: I would caution that that is not where New South Wales is going, as we know it publicly on the information I have before me, which is that the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the Office of Environment and Heritage and the Government have not signalled—

Ms BARNES: No, no, no.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: —a wise use. Or have they? That is the question.

Ms BARNES: No, "sustainable use" here is just in that heading in that we are using sustainable mountain biking, sustainable horseriding—a range of sustainable activities—looking at impacts.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Is there a strategy that you are looking at within the department around sustainable use?

Ms BARNES: Around sustainable use in terms of recreation, yes.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Is there any move within the department to look at sustainable use or wise use of national parks? Has there been any change in strategy over the past 12 months?

Ms BARNES: Only improved access for recreational purposes and tourism, and opportunities for private sector involvement in activities.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Is that what we have seen to date in terms of the trials of almost everything, I think—grazing, horseriding and ecological thinning? Is there anything else in relation to sustainable use?

Ms BARNES: We are looking at access for fishing in a similar way that we looked at horseriding and bike riding in that it would be fair to say there are groups in the community who feel excluded from the use of national parks, and there are ways of sustainably using those parks for recreational activities that we need to look at in a concerted way.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Four-wheel driving?

Ms BARNES: We have got a four-wheel-drive strategy. We have done that previously. Certainly we have built a good partnership with four-wheel-drive associations who help us in a lot of volunteer work. As Bob was saying on track maintenance, they are great eyes and ears, and now they report tracks where there are trees across roads and they do some clearing for us. There are opportunities to work with groups of common interest to do conservation work.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Will there be any change, do you think, to the National Parks and Wildlife Act to change the objectives of national parks, if we go too far down this track?

Ms BARNES: I do not know.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Sustainable use probably does impact on the current objectives of the National Parks and Wildlife Act.

Ms BARNES: No. We keep the current objectives in mind as we are developing those policies. The sustainable mountain biking and horseriding are all within the current objects of the Act.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: I think if you would look at what your language was before, which was wise use, and if you look at the wise use movement overseas, you would be very quickly changing the objects of the National Parks and Wildlife Act, if you are going down that path. They are all the questions I have.

CHAIR: You returned from Korea. You would be aware that part of that talkfest was discussions on the IUCN and their latest view on sustainable use.

Ms BARNES: There were lots of discussions at the congress on sustainable use but it was fairly similar to the work we are doing here in all categories.

CHAIR: Clause 151 would be the one I would be particularly interested in.

Ms BARNES: I did not go to any sessions on that in particular.

CHAIR: Could I ask that perhaps you look at what that states in terms of sustainable utilisation? That may very well give some colour to this particular discussion.

Ms BARNES: I think there was some evidence given previously by Ms Murray in terms of that category. Certainly when I was in Korea the issues that were in the program around sustainable use were in developing countries where there have been—

CHAIR: In indigenous use primarily.

Ms BARNES: Yes, indigenous use of areas and how—

CHAIR: And also recognised cultural use, I think was the other term.

Ms BARNES: Quite possibly.

CHAIR: We are out of time. Thank you very much for giving us an hour and a half. It has been very valuable to add to the previous testimony that you gave. Thank you very much for providing us with the questions on notice and the supplementary—we appreciate that too. Once again, congratulations on your star status there and that of the National Parks and Wildlife. Once again, could you pass on to any of those people that were kind enough to show us hospitality that their professionalism was appreciated?

(The witnesses withdrew)

ANDREW PETER HESTELOW sworn and examined:

CHAIR: Are you appearing here as an individual or representing an organisation?

Mr HESTELOW: An individual, although I probably should mention that some of the evidence I may give I have requested from people with similar concerns.

CHAIR: Before we begin do you have some documents you would like to table?

Mr HESTELOW: Yes, if I may. I have brought a few copies for members of the Committee. They are not elaborate; they are almost caption photos, just to give a visual idea of the circumstances about which I have to give some evidence.

CHAIR: Prior to questioning from the Committee would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr HESTELOW: Yes, thank you. The situation is that I am an angler, an outdoorsy type, with probably some 30 or 35 years experience. I live on the North Shore of Sydney and I am a boater and fisherman who has, as a sideline, a small fishing tackle company which brings me into a lot of contact with people of like interests. On the north side there is a substantial boat ramp colloquially called Roseville boat ramp within the confines of Garigal National Park, just underneath, on the eastern side of Roseville Bridge. The way that boat ramp has been managed, particularly in 2012, is a sort of snapshot of what is wrong with so much of public lands management in New South Wales, and it is on that topic that I would like to elaborate this afternoon.

CHAIR: Feel free to continue and then we will ask some questions.

Mr HESTELOW: Looking at these few little pages, there is a boat ramp which is extremely popular and has very large numbers of visitors every year, particularly on the sort of days you would expect a lot of people to be on the water—sunny summer Sundays, Christmas time, Easter, the Australia Day weekend and, of course, New Year's Eve. At that time the place becomes completely overloaded, so earlier this year there was an announcement made—and the notification of that is shown on the last page of this little attachment—that the boat ramp would be closed for boat launching while some new works were put in place. The thought was that the works would improve the ability and the frequency and the throughput of boats being launched at Roseville ramp. That has not taken place. In fact, if anything, the place is less efficient now than it was previously—and it was not very efficient previously.

I have brought some information on Roseville in particular but the same circumstance is taking place around the State. I guess it is an ideological issue in that the National Parks and Wildlife Service—I found it interesting listening to the previous testimony here this afternoon talking about the National Parks and Wildlife Service's mission statement. I am not sure how long ago—perhaps 15 years ago—the annual report of the National Parks and Wildlife Service used to have its mission statement published on page 4 or 5. That was a two-part mission statement: the first part was about protecting—I am paraphrasing here—the natural environment; the second part was about providing recreational opportunities. Where those two come into conflict I do not even think they can be co-managed, looking at Roseville, because, of course, National Parks and Wildlife ideology is not compatible with service to clients—I am sure you would have heard that throughout the inquiry.

In the specific case of Roseville boat ramp there was no consultation with those affected, despite quite considerable sums of money being spent—a million dollars is a lot of money. Even someone who is not a nautical engineer or anything, even someone with basic understanding would know that you cannot increase the volume of boats being launched and retrieved by putting a pontoon down the middle of a boat ramp—it is just common knowledge—and that is what they have done, at very considerable cost and a considerable overrun in the predicted time for completion of the project.

Separate to that, the pontoon itself is not compatible with easy launching for most types of boats—especially the smaller types of boats. The other issues there are just crazy landscape—I mean, large rocks placed at pinch points, rocks which are just covered in dings from cars and trailers; keeping in mind that, of course, to actually launch a boat involves reversing an often large structure down a boat ramp. Once you reach the tilt point of the ramp it is almost impossible to see what is behind you. In the case of Roseville ramp I refer you to a little piece of paper here: there is a photograph of the head of the ramp showing the pontoon with its cement

access ramp and two large yellow cement steel bollards positioned in the middle of the ramp where people are launching boats. That is just crazy.

Separate to the fact that that is guaranteed to cause damage to boats, trailers or vehicles, is that you should not really have a point in the centre of a boat ramp where vehicles are being reversed which gives the impression that it is a walkway or a pedestrian type spot. A boat ramp by its very nature, particularly at a busy time, is a place where you do not really need any signage to know it is not a place to hang around, and that certainly muddies the message at Roseville.

Without going through it point by point, the fact is that there has already been—it is all anecdotal—minor levels of aggravation. Boat ramps to those in the fraternity, and even perhaps people who are not in the fraternity, know that they are a source of conflict at times. There is a dichotomy between people who may launch a boat 50 times a year and the people who launch their boat on Australia Day. So that can turn to verbal or physical aggression quite quickly depending on the circumstance—it is quite an unusual environment at a boat ramp—and none of it needs to happen, especially considering the extraordinary sums that were spent on, effectively, making the boat ramp worse. All that needs to happen is that that pontoon needs to be moved approximately 10 metres southward, which would mean the access point would be through a small park—which has no environmental value because there is a cement fish table in the middle of it—and people would be able to go up and down the pontoon in perfect safety.

I go back again to the issue of the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the lack of consultation—the constant sort of crash or crash through mentality whereby it is after the event has been muddled that someone has to come back and clean it up, and that certainly would not be the first case at Garigal. I do not know how far Committee members' memories go back but they actually constructed a large structure there that subsequently had to be demolished back in the early nineties, which was an extraordinarily disastrous affair. I know that you sit here day after day, and for which we in the recreational fraternity are genuinely grateful—I do not know how you do it; I really do not—but the only way this is going to be corrected, if you feel it is worthy of correction, is by a direct recommendation from this Committee, because the National Parks and Wildlife Service are not responsive to the people whose decisions they affect—they never have been, despite the fact that there have been some very worthwhile and worthy people in that organisation. This is a classical case in point: a million dollars down the drain and the boat ramp is less effective; the boat ramp is more dangerous and the boat ramp is going to cause quite serious problems on busy days, which we all have ahead. Thank you.

CHAIR: We will proceed to questions. You made the statement that there was no consultation. Do you know whether it was the National Parks and Wildlife Service or the local council or a joint venture that provided the money and constructed the actual facility?

Mr HESTELOW: As far as I know it was a joint venture between the local council, between Maritime and, of course, National Parks and Wildlife. But seeing as the works fall wholly within the realm of National Parks and Wildlife they were the people charged with—

CHAIR: Getting it done.

Mr HESTELOW: Getting it done, delivering the message to the public. I have canvassed quite widely amongst people who use the ramp in preparation for this afternoon and I could not find anyone who had been consulted. There may have been opportunities for consultation but I could not find anyone who had been consulted.

CHAIR: Who manages access to the ramp, the council or National Parks?

Mr HESTELOW: National Parks.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: I am not a boating person. Can you explain to me why there would be a need for two pontoons?

Mr HESTELOW: Dr Phelps, the story is, even not being a boating person, when you drive around the suburbs, if you are a student of Sydney's history, there has been enormous growth in boating in Sydney over the last 20 years. It is phenomenal. I perhaps should have accessed the registration figures before attending, but it has been gigantic. The thought is that the two pontoons provide for a typical sunny Sunday at Roseville boat ramp: That will show a family arriving at the boat ramp with trailer boat literally in tow. The boat will pull up in

the preparation area, the assembly area, where the tie-downs are removed from the boat, which are the pieces of strap that hold the boat to the trailer, the bilge plugs are inserted, the gear is taken from the back of the station wagon and placed in the boat. At that time the small children, and perhaps the female members of the company, will go down to the floating pontoon and wait for the boat to be launched and brought around to a place of safe boarding. As you alluded to there is a doubling up—can I say duplicity?

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Why would you not have the floating pontoon bigger?

Mr HESTELOW: That is an excellent point. Why was the floating pontoon not increased in size? Incredible. I have no informed answer, just that it fits the profile and it fits the history.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Why would you build a pontoon right down the middle of a boat ramp when you have already had the foresight to build the access point to the other pontoon not through the boat ramp?

Mr HESTELOW: I have no idea. So many of these sort of decisions are headshaking, why would you make it more difficult to launch boats that at a popular and busy boat ramp? Why would you do that? No-one has any idea why. Even though I have many friends the lack of communication from these people—

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: —Is there a suggestion that national parks might not want as many people to be using the boat ramp?

Mr HESTELOW: Perhaps. When we say national parks I am always wary of the generalisation. there are two parts to national parks: There is Hurstville head office which is chock-a-block full of militant ideological people—I do not want to expand too much on this—and has a history of personnel who are hostile to people who enjoy their recreation on public lands which they administer. Then there is your regular friendly ranger who you might meet at Apple Tree Bay or the Royal National Park who is the salt of the earth type and may actually share your own recreation: he may be an angler or a boatie himself. Unfortunately your friendly parkie down at the boat ramp is not the person who makes the decisions; they are made at Hurstville by people like the people sitting here earlier.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Do you think that perhaps a reduction of 25 per cent capacity could mean with 25 per cent less boats there could be 25 per cent less carbon dioxide from those motors placed in the atmosphere?

Mr HESTELOW: That could be their intent.

CHAIR: Order! Mr Hestelow has made an effort to come in here this afternoon. We will continue with Mr Primrose.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Thank you for coming this afternoon. From reading this I am not sure which Minister is responsible for what happened here, whether it is the Hon. Robyn Parker or the Hon. Duncan Gay. Presumably what you are seeking for us to do is to seek information from them and then, as you indicated, put that in as part of our report?

Mr HESTELOW: I assume, given the time frame of these sorts of projects, that perhaps it was already chiselled in stone by the previous Government.

CHAIR: It does not matter, we are here to make recommendations.

Mr HESTELOW: It does not really matter. Mr Primrose, what I am hoping for, and I would not dare to presume that I represent other people but I can say that other people feel similarly, is that parks and wildlife have to consult with those who are affected and pay for their decisions. I go back to an important point which was aired earlier by Mr Conroy and his compatriots: What is the role of national parks and wildlife? Who is the member for Gosford?

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Chris Holstein?

Mr HESTELOW: I am thinking of Mr Hazzard's friend.

CHAIR: The Hon. Chris Hartcher.

Mr HESTELOW: When Mr Hartcher was environment Minister—

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Maybe that is how long it has been in stone for.

Mr HESTELOW: —as was mentioned, the parks and wildlife mission statement included 50 per cent to provide opportunities for recreation. They, of their own volition, dropped that from the mission statement. However, they are still more than tempted by the cashflow that recreation represents. It is \$7 a day to park at Roseville ramp and you would be surprised how that totals up when you look at the number of vehicles parked there on a sunny Sunday.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: My final question is: When you have raised this with your local member what is their response?

Mr HESTELOW: I have not raised this with my local member.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Who is your local member?

Mr HESTELOW: My local member is Mr O'Farrell. I have raised other issues with him but not that one.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Have you considered raising it with Mr O'Farrell, or is there a reason why?

Mr HESTELOW: There is a reason why.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Please inform us.

Mr HESTELOW: It might sound absurd in a way.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I am sure it will not.

Mr HESTELOW: I am sympathetic to the Premier and his workload and I genuinely would not ask, because I know he would spare the time to see me, on a matter which I think is more the proviso of his Ministers.

CHAIR: Not only is he a good Premier, he is a good local member as well.

Mr HESTELOW: The Premier is a wonderful local member. I have seen him many times in the driving rain handing out leaflets at Wahroonga railway station and it is hard to front a man with that level of commitment on what essentially is not under his purview.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: You have not raised it with your local member of Parliament?

Mr HESTELOW: No.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: But you have come today?

Mr HESTELOW: Yes.

CHAIR: Mr Colless, you own a boat.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Dr Phelps asked most of the questions I wanted to ask. How many boat ramps are there on the north side of the harbour that go into the harbour and not into Pittwater?

Mr HESTELOW: There are three regular ones and there are three antique ones. By the north you mean including middle harbour?

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Yes.

Mr HESTELOW: At the southern part of Pittwater there is Bayview boat ramp, which is a large ramp, administered by Pittwater council.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Which comes into Sydney Harbour?

Mr HESTELOW: No, Pittwater. There is Apple Tree Bay, which is also within the national park estate at Bobbin Head.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: That would also go into Pittwater?

Mr HESTELOW: It goes to Cowan Creek which is a feeder tributary of the Hawkesbury. We are not well served, which is, in a way, understandable.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: The Roseville boat ramp is the only boat ramp on the north side of the harbour that comes into Sydney Harbour itself?

Mr HESTELOW: Effectively. There is a tiny antiquated ramp near the gas works at Manly which would be suitable only for the launching of the smallest possible boats and is also exposed to swell. Roseville is the main boat ramp for the North Shore. Having said that, as I mentioned in my document, it is surprising how many people come from a great distance to launch there. You can see that by looking on the fishing forums or by looking at the Hilux tow car that says "Toongabbie electrics", or whatever. It is the number one ramp.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: When you say that the pontoon should have been moved 10 metres further south?

Mr HESTELOW: Yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Is that the small boarding pontoon or the major pontoon within the ramp itself?

Mr HESTELOW: If you look at the photo on the front page it shows the main part of the ramp. To the right-hand side of that image there is a landscaped rocky foreshore with the sandstone pieces cemented in and protruding from that rocky foreshore is a boarding pontoon.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: That is the small pontoon that you show on page 3?

Mr HESTELOW: Yes. That has not been changed. In the background of that photo with the blue station wagon there is the alternate, for want of a better word, headland and behind that are the fish cleaning tables. That would be the ideal position for the pontoon, which they have placed in the middle of the boat ramp.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: What you are saying is that people could launch their boat, take their car out and park it and then drive the boat around to that little headland to another pontoon where the family could board the boat?

Mr HESTELOW: That is it. That process takes a little longer than you expect. It is just human nature that often the ramp is cluttered and there are a people unfamiliar with basic boat launching procedure. You are familiar with that? It is not restricted to Roseville boat ramp by any means.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Mr Hestelow, thank you for coming along this afternoon. What was your communication with the National Parks and Wildlife Service about this ramp?

Mr HESTELOW: None whatsoever because at the time that the notification went up that it was happening the consultation period for me personally had closed. My assumption, like other people who use the ramp regularly, was that the money they were going to spend would be an improvement. I was not cynical enough to expect the disaster that has happened.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: You have come along this afternoon to complain about this issue to a parliamentary inquiry into public land management, looking at a broad range of issues, and made some quite

strong statements about the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the lack of consultation, yet you have not contacted your local member or the National Parks and Wildlife Service about the issue?

Mr HESTELOW: To take your earlier point, I consider my comments very restrained.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Why have you not approached the National Parks and Wildlife Service in the first instance with your concerns?

Mr HESTELOW: I thought I explained that already.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: No, you have not.

Mr HESTELOW: Okay, please listen carefully.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: I am listening.

Mr HESTELOW: Great. The National Parks and Wildlife Service are renowned for their lack of consultation.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Consultation is different from you having concerns about the issue and requesting that they move it. You have come along to a parliamentary inquiry requesting that the Committee take on board a concern to move a pontoon 30 metres south. Surely, the best thing to do in this situation, as Mr Primrose has suggested, is to either speak to your local member or speak to the government department that you have concerns with, rather than in the first instance coming to a parliamentary inquiry.

Mr HESTELOW: You constantly host public process yourself, why wouldn't you go and speak to Mr O'Farrell? Would you consider that?

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: That has nothing to do with question I just asked you.

Mr HESTELOW: It is exactly similar.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: You are before a parliamentary inquiry; can I get you back to the question I have asked you?

Mr HESTELOW: I have already answered it, but go on.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: You are before a parliamentary inquiry with your concern that we have to investigate, you have just made some full-on statements about the National Parks and Wildlife Service and my legitimate question to you—you are the person appearing before the inquiry—

Mr HESTELOW: Yes.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: —is why have you not written with your concerns to the government department you are here complaining about?

Mr HESTELOW: For two reasons: Number one because the consultation period had closed before I became aware there was an opportunity. The first notice I had is shown on page 5 of this set of papers—that was a sign at my local boat ramp. Second, because I think it would be a waste of time and effort. If you can indicate to me when the National Parks and Wildlife Service have been responsive to the concerns of people whose lives they affect—

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: They are not hearing the concerns because you have not written to them.

Mr HESTELOW: You suggested that I contact the parkies.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: No, I am asking why you have not written with your concerns to the government department. We have heard from many witnesses that said to us that they have written to parks. That is a legitimate way to raise concerns. Who asked you to appear before the inquiry, Mr Hestelow?

Mr HESTELOW: I am appearing on my own motivation. Let us just answer these questions—

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: I am the one asking you questions.

Mr HESTELOW: I will thank you not to use that cynical sneer.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: I am not. I think it is a funny situation.

Mr HESTELOW: I am asking you to represent yourself as a politician and parliamentarian. Now, let me answer those questions.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Mr Chair, I suggest that you get involved in this.

CHAIR: Yes, it is getting a little bit out of hand.

Mr HESTELOW: Really?

CHAIR: Mr Hestelow, the Hon. Cate Faehrmann has put a couple of questions to you. Please try and answer the questions to the best of your ability. I suggest to all members, including the member asking the questions, that the witness be allowed to answer to the best of his ability.

Mr HESTELOW: Thank you. The situation is this. The first notification I had that there were to be modifications to the Roseville Boat Ramp was when I saw a sign at my local boat ramp. I assumed at that time—and I am quite sure that the assumption would be correct—that the plan was going ahead, the Parkies plan to modify the boat ramp was going ahead. If the notification that the works were about to commence is my first notification I assume there is no time for further consultation. The fact is whether there had been consultation or not these works have made the ramp more ineffective. They have made the ramp more dangerous to the public.

They have made it more likely that there will be physical confrontations—certainly already we are having verbal confrontations—there because we have not yet entered the busiest period for Roseville ramp. I am appealing to the Committee. The request is not for some major investment; the request is quite simply to move the pontoon that they have placed in the centre of the boat ramp to the corresponding point of the existing pontoon. That will free up the boat ramp and make it more effective and efficient. It will reduce the risk not only of people getting into physical or verbal confrontation but also the possibility that someone could be run over on the ramp because you should not have a walkway in the middle of a ramp. Please take a moment to look at this photograph. You should not have a pedestrian access point in the middle of a boat ramp where people reverse large boats. It is absolutely crazy.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: In relation to you making a recommendation to the Committee that it could probably handle, the Committee will probably not be able to take this single issue to a single Minister. If you had a suggestion that you could make to the Committee that we could make to the Government about—for example, the issue of consultation on these sorts of things—what would that be?

Mr HESTELOW: The request I would have is that where the National Parks and Wildlife manage some sort of facility that is very popular for recreation, whether it be Roseville boat ramp or the ski resorts at Kosciuszko National Park, that before going ahead and spending vast amounts of money it should consult with the people whose activities will be affected.

CHAIR: We are out of time. Thank you for taking the time to come in and see us.

Mr HESTELOW: You are very welcome.

CHAIR: You can be assured that the Committee will take forward your recommendation about consultation. I also think that if you get the opportunity you should bring this matter to the attention of your local member by way of letter.

Mr HESTELOW: I will take that on board. I thank the Committee for its time. I can only imagine how onerous this is day after day.

CHAIR: Today is the last day and you are the last witness.

Mr HESTELOW: Really? I did not know. Congratulations.

(The witness withdrew)

(The Committee adjourned at 5.18 p.m.)