

GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE No. 5

Wednesday 3 September 2003

Examination of proposed expenditure for the portfolio areas

AGRICULTURE AND FISHERIES

The Committee met at 5.30 p.m.

MEMBERS

Mr I. Cohen (Chair)

The Hon. I. W. West
The Hon. K. F. Griffin
The Hon. A. S. Burke

The Hon. R. H. Colless
The Hon. D. J. Gay
Ms S. P. Hale

PRESENT

The Hon. I. M. Macdonald, *Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries*

New South Wales Agriculture

Dr R. Sheldrake, *Director-General*

Mr T. Ely, *Financial Controller*

New South Wales Fisheries

Mr S. Dunn, *Director-General*

Mr T. Powys, *Chief Financial Officer and Acting Director Corporate Services*

Rural Assistance Authority

Mr S. Griffith, *General Manager*

SafeFood Production NSW

Mr G. Davey, *Chief Executive Officer*

CORRECTIONS TO TRANSCRIPT OF COMMITTEE PROCEEDINGS

Corrections should be marked on a photocopy of the proof and forwarded by 30 September 2003 to:

**Budget Estimates
General Purpose Standing Committee Secretariat
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000**

CHAIR: I welcome you to the public hearing of General Purpose Standing Committee No. 5. First, I would like to thank the Minister and the departmental officers for attending today. At this meeting the Committee will examine the proposed expenditure for the portfolio areas of Fisheries and Agriculture, in that order.

Before questions commence, some procedural matters need to be dealt with. The Committee has determined that the allocation of questions will be left in the hands of the Chair and I propose to allocate questions in approximately 20 minute segments to the Opposition, cross-bench and Government members.

Following a request made by the Minister I propose to address the Minister's portfolio responsibilities in the following order: Fisheries and Agriculture.

Part 4 of the resolution referring the budget estimates to the Committee requires evidence to be heard in public. The Committee has previously resolved to authorise the media to broadcast sound and video excerpts of its public proceedings. Copies of the guidelines for broadcasting are available from the attendants.

I point out that, in accordance with the Legislative Council's guidelines for the broadcast of proceedings, only members of the Committee and witnesses may be filmed or recorded. People in the public gallery should not be the primary focus of any filming or photos.

In reporting the proceedings of this Committee, you must take responsibility for what you publish or what interpretation you place on anything that is said before the Committee.

There is no provision for members to refer directly to their own staff while at the table. Witnesses, members and their staff are advised that any messages should be delivered through the attendant on duty or through the committee clerks. I do appreciate that you have advisers behind you, so if they wish to directly hand you material that is certainly fine by me.

I would also ask, for the benefit of members and Hansard, that departmental officials identify themselves by name, position and department or agency before answering any question referred to them.

Where a member is seeking information in relation to a particular aspect of a program or a subprogram it would be helpful if the program or subprogram is identified.

I declare the proposed expenditure open for examination.

I also understand, if anyone has mobile phones, if you would turn them off as they do send out a pulse which disturbs Hansard with their recording.

Minister, if you wish to make a brief opening statement, I welcome that.

Mr MACDONALD: No, I will be available for questions.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Are there any questions, starting with the Opposition?

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, what was the total staff and operational cost of helicopter and boat patrols for abalone poaching on the weekend of August 9 and 10 on the south coast of New South Wales?

Mr MACDONALD: I will have to take that on notice and get back to you. It is a very specific question.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: It is a very specific question. You will be coming back with an answer, though?

Mr MACDONALD: Yes.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: I will not get an answer saying that it is outside the guidelines?

Mr MACDONALD: No, you will get an answer on that, there is no problem.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Excellent. Minister, how many illegal fishermen were caught in that operation?

Mr MACDONALD: I will have to take that on notice as well.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Could you also take on notice whether they have been charged with any offences?

Mr MACDONALD: Yes, I will take it on notice.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, are you aware of any potential or actual legal action being taken against New South Wales Fisheries as a result of this operation?

Mr MACDONALD: I will have to take that on notice. I have not actually heard that that is the case, but I will take it on notice.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Perhaps the Director-General might be able to answer that?

Mr DUNN: We will take it on notice. As far as I am aware, we have received no information concerning possible legal action.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Minister, do you have a policy that all freedom of information requests be brought to the attention of your ministerial staff?

Mr MACDONALD: In relation to freedom of information, all Premiers in office since the Freedom of Information Act has been in place have requested regular briefings on FOI matters being considered by their departments. This was a standing requirement of ministers under the Greiner and Fahey governments. The Premier's Department has been preparing current FOI returns and tendering advice to the premier of the day, as I understand it, since 1989. The Auditor General has expressed an opinion on this process. The Premier's Department respectfully disagrees and has strongly criticised the methodology of his recent audit. All ministers are entitled to know what matters are being considered by their departments, including FOI requests. Such information assists ministers in performing their duties. Every fortnight a report listing all FOI applications which my agencies deem to be contentious is forwarded to my office. The report includes information on the status of these applications. My office then forwards the report to the Premier's Department.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Is that before it goes to the person who requested it?

Mr MACDONALD: No, it is not dealing with the FOI itself, it is only in terms of the request, the nature of the request.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: But does the information go to the Premier before it goes to the person who requested it?

Mr MACDONALD: I would have to take that on notice.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Following on from that, Minister, in the past year how many FOI requests has your department advised your ministerial staff of?

Mr MACDONALD: Well, it is not in the past year, I took office in April.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Well, it is your department now, though. In the past year how many requests has the department advised the ministerial staff of?

Mr MACDONALD: I am advised that in the last year there were 22 freedom of information requests. I do not have any information about reference of any of that to the Minister's office. I will take that part of it on notice.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Would you be able to provide a list of those FOIs and who requested them?

Mr MACDONALD: I will take that on notice.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: To the Director-General, if I may: Do you have a policy, sir, that all freedom of information requests be brought to your attention?

Mr DUNN: All freedom of information requests are logged and reported on a fortnightly basis through the Minister's office to the Premier's Department, so I see them as they go through it, yes.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, did you promise Ocean Watch that there would be \$12,500 available to do an oral history of the condition of the south coast estuaries, particularly relating to fish kills?

Mr MACDONALD: I do not specifically recall that request, but I will hand it over to the director.

Mr DUNN: Ocean Watch raised this as an issue and I understand that the matter is under consideration, but I am not aware that any promise was made.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: What appears to be the difference of opinion?

Mr DUNN: I do not think there is any difference of opinion. I think it is an issue that funding has been sought for a particular project. I do not think the matter has been determined yet.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, did you promise a three year study employing a PhD student on Wallaga Lake on the south coast?

Mr MACDONALD: I have had submissions put to me about the quality of water - we are talking about Wallaga Lake?

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Yes.

Mr MACDONALD: In relation to that, but I do not specifically recall making a promise about a specific investigation.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Minister, turning now to the management advisory committees, is it true that MAC members receive \$170 per meeting and, if that is not the case, how much is the fee?

Mr MACDONALD: I am advised that it is \$150.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Is that fee CPI adjusted; does it change at all?

Mr MACDONALD: Not to my knowledge, no.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: How long is it since it has been increased?

Mr MACDONALD: I would have to take that on notice.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Is the Director-General aware of that?

Mr DUNN: It has been \$150 for some years now.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Given that country based MAC representatives can spend up to four days reading material for a meeting, travelling and attending the actual meeting, do you consider the fee is adequate?

Mr MACDONALD: Well, I have not had any specific submissions that it is not adequate at any point in time, but if someone wants to put something forward to me I would be prepared to consider it.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Do you provide an allowance at all to MAC members to cover telephones, faxes and postage in their role as MAC representatives; any other fees?

Mr MACDONALD: No.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: If there are no allowances, how do you expect these representatives to communicate, especially with the fishermen that they are representing?

Mr MACDONALD: Well, again, I have not received any specific submissions from any of the MAC members that there is a difficulty in this area. This is the first I have heard of it. If any do have difficulties with this they should write to me and I would be prepared to consider it.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Is it true that some of those MAC members will not accept faxes from New South Wales Fisheries because you will not provide an allowance for fax paper?

Mr MACDONALD: Well, I am unaware of any of this.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Can you explain to me how the pot, line and trap MAC representatives elected in Sydney represent people at the other end of the State at Eden, 450 kilometres away, with little resources for communication or travelling?

Mr MACDONALD: Again, no submission has been made to me in relation to these matters.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, on the grey nurse shark review, in regards to a review of the regulations done on the grey nurse sharks' critical habitats site at Fish Rock, South West Rocks, when did this review begin?

Mr MACDONALD: I am glad this question has been raised. It is a question of significance.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: It is a specific question I was asking. It is not a chance to deliver a soliloquy.

Mr MACDONALD: I will answer it the way I see fit in relation to it. Recent results from a two year New South Wales Fisheries tagging program show that the numbers of grey nurse sharks are critically low, down to between 300 and 500 in New South Wales. The latest estimate is that the numbers are between 416 and 461. This suggests that even greater levels of protection may be needed to prevent the species becoming extinct. I recently released a discussion paper inviting commercial and recreational fishers, scuba divers and the broader community to have their say on opportunities for increasing protection for the grey nurse sharks. Specifically, I invited comments on critical habitat, which is the term referred to, and buffer zone conditions, feeding grounds, hook and bait fishing, trawling and drifting, spear fishing, commercial net fishing, scuba diving and night fishing.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Point of order, Mr Chairman. Mr Chairman, my question is quite specific: When did this review begin? I was asking a specific question.

CHAIR: I think, Minister, the member has asked specifically about that date, and you will get an opportunity if you would like to expand further on that.

Mr MACDONALD: Thank you, Mr Chairman. 3 July 2003 I released a discussion paper.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Marvellous, thank you, Minister. What measures were taken by New South Wales Fisheries to inform recreational and commercial fishermen, scuba drivers and the broader South West Rocks community that this review was under way? Again, a specific question.

Mr MACDONALD: There was a lot of advertising, a lot of media, in a lot of bait shops. In fact, it got considerable publicity, as you may recall, at that time. As for - was it South West Rocks we are talking about?

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Yes.

Mr MACDONALD: I am not specifically aware of what was actually done at South West Rocks, so I will take it on notice.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, could you also take on notice a question of how many discussion papers in regards to this review were distributed throughout the South West Rocks community and where they were distributed?

Mr MACDONALD: I will take that on notice.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: If any?

Mr MACDONALD: Yes, I will take it on notice.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, there is one more question on that. Given that many of the South West Rocks community believe that insufficient public notification has been given by New South Wales Fisheries in regards to this review, will you extend the deadline beyond 29 August so that all the affected individuals and groups have the opportunity to comment on this important issue? I think you indicated yourself that you just don't know what or was not put out.

Mr MACDONALD: Well, I know that there was a widespread dissemination of material in relation to this. What I am saying -

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: With respect, Minister, you don't know; you told me you didn't know.

Mr MACDONALD: No, what I am saying is I don't know specifically how many and where they were distributed in that specific area, South West Rocks, but a lot of material was sent out across the State and it received a lot of publicity at the time. I did television up and down the coast in relation to it, including areas that cover South West Rocks. So I believe that there was a lot of publicity in relation to it. As for where it was distributed in South West Rocks, I am not sure. We will find out for you in relation to that.

In terms of the deadline, you have got to remember that there was an inquiry the previous year. There were over a thousand submissions put to that inquiry. There are several hundred submissions before this particular inquiry, which closed on 29 August. I have not had any requests from anyone for an extension of time on the closure for submissions. I put out releases up and down the coast prior to the closure date and did extra radio in relation to that in the areas along the coast. I do not know how much time people need to be appraised of it. It was three months. I believe what you are echoing is that Andrew Stoner from the other chamber has asked for an extension.

In relation to how many papers, there were 15,000 papers distributed up and down the coast, including advertisements. So I will take on board that request for an extension and give you a reply.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Minister, just switching now to the issue of marine national parks, if I may, are you aware of concerns of potential job losses within the commercial fishing industry as a result of future zoning changes and future water use of the Cape Byron marine park?

What guarantee can you provide the commercial fishermen, aside from the offer to take part in the Government's \$4.3 million voluntary licence buy-out program, that their jobs will be secure as a result of the changes?

Mr MACDONALD: The Government, as you rightly point out, has a buy-back program in place for any displacement caused by the zoning operation of the national park. I do not anticipate it going beyond \$4.3 million. I believe that the local fishing industry has been fully co-operative in the process. I have met them many times in relation to the marine park, as I have met the proponents of the park and the proponents that want large no catch zones and so on and so forth. I will be consulting with my colleague in the other place, the Minister for the Environment, in due course after the public process to determine the sort of zoning plans for the marine park, but there is, as I say, a fair and equitable buy-out proposal on the table in relation to any zoning issues that impact upon the local commercial fishing sector.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Do you propose to establish any more marine parks?

Mr MACDONALD: The Government has discussed two further marine parks, one in the vicinity of Port Stephens, in that region, and one down around the Batemans Bay region. We are in the process of getting close to finalising the Byron Bay marine park, and Byron Bay, as I said, I have released the discussion paper recently which has a number of options in it and that will be open for community discussion over the next few months.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Finally, what specific benefits will New South Wales commercial and recreational fishermen receive from an increase of the 92 Fisheries related fees and charges gazetted in July this year?

Mr MACDONALD: They were CPI related increases. The stipulated increases have been in place across most Government fees and charges over the last --

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Nothing?

Mr MACDONALD: --13 years. Sorry?

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: They will get nothing?

Mr MACDONALD: I don't follow what the member was getting at in relation to that, but they are increases which are CPI related.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: So you are saying there are only CPI increases in those increased fees and charges?

Mr MACDONALD: That is my understanding.

CHAIR: Minister, how much dedicated New South Wales Fisheries funding, excluding external grants, will be allocated to the protection of the critically endangered grey nurse shark in 2003-04, 2004-05 and 2005-06?

Mr MACDONALD: I am advised that within the Fisheries budget we do not break down the budget. We do not break it down to specific species within that framework.

CHAIR: Can you perhaps break it down into the money generally directed to research, management, staff costs and compliance?

Mr MACDONALD: Yes, we can take that on notice certainly and provide you with an answer.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Minister, could you tell the Committee how many threatened species recovery plans have been finalised to date? Perhaps, how many are in draft awaiting approval by you?

Mr MACDONALD: How many plans, you want to know how many plans are in place?

CHAIR: How many have been finalised, how many drafts are awaiting approval by you and how many are in preparation, and ideally the total required if that is possible?

Mr MACDONALD: Yes, I will take that on notice.

CHAIR: Minister, what funding was set down in the year 2001-02 to target the threatened species conservation, and also 2002-2003 funding for threatened species conservation?

Mr MACDONALD: I am advised that the budget is \$1 million.

CHAIR: Is that for both years, 2001-2002 and 2002-2003?

Mr MACDONALD: Yes, it is for both years.

CHAIR: And how much was spent on recovery planning and threatened species conservation assessment and could you detail the spending of the balance?

Mr MACDONALD: I am sure we can on notice.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. What resources were allocated to complete the finalisation of recovery plans in the 2002-2003 budget?

Mr MACDONALD: I cannot specifically answer that one. So we will take it on notice.

CHAIR: Also, on notice, if you could give us information about the amount allocated to the 2003-20004 budget, we would very much appreciate it.

Mr MACDONALD: I will do that as well.

CHAIR: Minister, in 2001 the New South Wales Government committed to undertake a program of marine bioregional assessments. The timetable given had the assessments for the five marine bioregions completed by 2003. What action has the Government taken to complete the assessments for the Manning Shelf, the Hawkesbury Shelf and Batemans Shelf marine bioregions?

Mr MACDONALD: I am advised that they are more than substantially completed and they are now undergoing peer review.

CHAIR: Can you give a timetable for the completion of that process?

Mr MACDONALD: No, not at this stage.

CHAIR: Regarding issues of compliance, what is the number of active (not office bound) compliance staff employed by New South Wales Fisheries?

Mr MACDONALD: I am advised that there are over 100 Fisheries officers. The reason why that is the best we can do at this point is because some are industry funded and it changes in very short order, but it is over 100.

CHAIR: And these are all out in the field compliance staff?

Mr MACDONALD: That is my understanding.

CHAIR: And can you tell the Committee what the number of vacant compliance staff positions at the New South Wales Fisheries is?

Mr MACDONALD: I would have to take that on notice. There are a few.

CHAIR: And, Minister, why were the Recreational Fishing Trusts, both fresh water and salt water, accounts debited for compliance officers when compliance officers vacancies existed?

Mr MACDONALD: I will hand you to the Director-General.

Mr DUNN: We have over 100 fisheries officers in New South Wales Fisheries. Obviously people leave, they get promoted and there are vacancies from time to time. We do at least one large recruitment every year when we might take on over 10 officers. We then train them, they then get posted to the various regional locations. That occurs periodically, so at any one time we might be carrying a number of vacancies. The burden for paying for the overall Fisheries officer budget is shared between the Government, the abalone industry, the rock lobster industry, the Recreational Fishing Salt Water Trust, the Recreational Fishing Fresh Water Trust, the Australian Fisheries Management Authority, and they all pay a portion of the vacancies that are being carried at any one time. So we have an approach where we are progressively developing service delivery agreements with each of these stakeholder groups so that we focus more on the outputs that we actually do rather than the specific numbers of employees at any one time because if we are providing services to the Recreational Fishing Freshwater Trust then they are primarily interested in the number of patrols directly focused at their work rather than the number of fisheries officers employed at any one given time.

CHAIR: Thank you. I am wondering, Minister - perhaps Mr Dunn could answer this as well - given that answer, can you give an average area, land and water, that each officer would have to patrol? Do you have a rough jurisdiction, given the number of officers you have available?

Mr DUNN: It varies quite significantly. The busier areas tend to have a higher concentration of fisheries officers whereas particularly in the inland areas fisheries officers often have very, very large areas of patrol.

CHAIR: Have there been any demographic studies to balance the number of fishers and/or the population with the appropriate number of compliance officers?

Mr DUNN: Not that I am aware of.

CHAIR: Does the average compliance officer work as an individual or as part of a team?

Mr DUNN: Most of our compliance officers work as part of a team. I think we now have just two one-man stations, but I will confirm that and, if it varies, I will let you know. Those two one-man stations are located very close and those officers do work together. We have a policy in place that ensures that, whenever fisheries officers are engaged in an activity where there is likely to be any risk at all, they work as a team, not as individuals.

CHAIR: Minister, looking at perhaps another threatened species - and I would be interested to hear your opinion on this - are you able to give an estimate of the remaining size of Orange Roughy stocks in New South Wales waters?

Mr MACDONALD: I am pretty well informed of a lot of issues, but I cannot tell you about the Orange Roughy stocks in New South Wales. I will ask the Director-General, he may be able to comment further.

Mr DUNN: In New South Wales we do not have an Orange Roughy fishery. Our research trawler, Kapala, identified a stock of Roughy off the shelf of New South Wales, and I believe off Newcastle. That stock has never been legally exploited. We have an enclosure in place that sees that stock as a bit of, I suppose, a reservoir of fish.

CHAIR: Would that be a sanctuary zone?

Mr DUNN: It is a deepwater area and we have never allowed that stock to be exploited legally. There was some speculation that it might have been exploited illegally some years ago, but as far as we know that stock is still in its original shape, which I think is a good thing because the Orange Roughy is a mining fishery, it is a fish that takes a long, long time to grow and, as we know from the example of Orange Roughy stocks in New Zealand and off Tasmania, once they are exploited the stocks drop very, very rapidly and we have no idea how long it will take them to recover.

CHAIR: Minister, could you describe to the Committee any action that you are undertaking to address the environmental problems inherent in aquaculture?

Mr MACDONALD: In terms of any specific projects or in general terms?

CHAIR: Well, in general terms. You are quite welcome to look at specific projects that we have adopted in many sites along our coast.

Mr MACDONALD: Yes, the department does comment on various aquiculture - are you meaning any environmental problems that arise out of aquiculture proposals?

CHAIR: Well, yes.

Mr MACDONALD: Or environmental problems that may impact on aquiculture developments?

CHAIR: I am probably displaying a prejudice here, but I am interested in the environmental problems that arise from aquiculture activities.

Mr MACDONALD: I am not specifically aware of any problem that is being brought to my attention at this stage in relation to aquiculture. Most of the issues that have been raised with me are in fact environmental impacts that affect aquiculture itself, such as development around Wallis Lakes, for instance, or Port Stephens and the Hawkesbury that impact upon the oyster industry, for instance. I have not heard, to be honest, of major environmental problems arising from aquiculture developments, so I am quite interested to hear what you have to say if you can put something to me. For instance, one of the potential problems or identified problems with oysters has been tar on the trays and we are moving towards now a program of replacing those with a non-tar based product which has been very successful.

CHAIR: Minister, I would ask about bio-nutrient loads associated with various aspects of the industry; fish escape into wild areas and therefore we have the development of feral fish populations from aquiculture activities and other impacts with the building and development of aquiculture areas in our waterways and coastal areas. Perhaps you could take that on notice.

Mr MACDONALD: Yes. I might comment here, though, that there is an increasing demand for seafood and fish as a major source of protein, not only here but overseas, and if we are to move to a more sustainable fishing production overall we will need to expand our aquiculture units. Next year we will be having an international Asia Pacific aquiculture conference in Sydney in September with delegates from the Asia Pacific as well as from Australia and New Zealand and we will be looking at advances to make aquiculture environmentally sound as well as sustainable and profitable. I recognise the sorts of things you have raised as some issues that have been mentioned in relation to aquiculture developments, but we must continue to develop our aquiculture industry if we are to meet this demand on a sustainable basis for fish from the community, so it is not just a question of the potential downsides, it is also the importance of the aquiculture industry to the economy and to nutrition of Australians in general, so we will be continuing the research on any downside in relation to aquiculture but we will be also endeavouring to expand our aquiculture developments in this State.

CHAIR: I take your point, Minister; however, it is not sustainable if it is environmentally harmful. Nevertheless, I think we need to have - and you would agree - further investigation into those issues.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Minister, are compliance officers forced to conduct patrols on their own, or do they?

Mr MACDONALD: I will hand that to Steve.

Mr DUNN: We have a very strict policy which controls the way in which we conduct patrols, so there are certain things that fisheries officers can obviously do quite safely. They can go and do school visits, they can do basic advisory and education work on their own without the need to operate as a team. Any inspections, for instance, working out at sea, working on poaching operations, all those kinds of more risky compliance operations require them to operate with at least two people.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: So individual compliance officers do not avoid such patrols because they are by themselves and therefore exposed to considerable levels of risk?

Mr DUNN: We require them to operate in teams, not to operate individually.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Are compliance officers adequately resourced?

Mr DUNN: Our compliance officers, in my opinion, have some of the best equipment and best resources that are available anywhere in Australia. They have very good vehicles, very good boats, they are excellently maintained. All of their equipment is of the highest standard.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Are they required to share resources with other New South Wales Fisheries staff, such as vehicles or boats?

Mr DUNN: Well, I hope so. We would use them in the most efficient way as possible.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Does each officer or unit have its own boats suitable for inland, coastal and/or marine patrols as well as suitable support staff so that they are not office bound?

Mr DUNN: The first part of the question was boats. The answer is no. We share boats when that is an appropriate thing to do. The second part of the question related to support staff. In fisheries offices where there is a strong administrative workload we have clerical officers. Where that load is reduced we do not, and fisheries officers, like all public servants, have a certain amount of administrative workload.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: What is the break-up between the offices? When you said there were some where you have a high clerical load and some where you do not have such a high load--

Mr DUNN: Well, if I could give you an example, a coastal fisheries office - our office in Wollstonecraft, for instance - even though there are a lot of clients in and around Sydney Harbour, we do not have a lot of people coming to our front door seeking information. In other areas, particularly where we have a lot of oyster farming and a lot of commercial fishing, we have quite a high through-flow. In those areas we have clerical assistants; in other areas we do not have clerical assistants. It is really a question of balancing the needs against what the demand is.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: How much dedicated New South Wales Fisheries funding, excluding external grants, will be allocated to resourcing compliance officers in 2003-04, 2004-05 and 2005-06?

Mr MACDONALD: We will take that on notice.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: How much dedicated New South Wales Fisheries funding, excluding external grants, will be attributed to after hours compliance call centre to combat illegally fishing activity?

Mr DUNN: We do not have an after hours call centre. We have a system where all our officers carry mobile phones. If they are on duty then they are contactable. If there is no one on duty then there is the opportunity for people to leave information that can assist us on a recorded service.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: I have two brief questions on other matters. How many times has the Minister exercised his powers under section 154 of the Local Government Act? Would you like to take that on notice?

Mr MACDONALD: Absolutely.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: What are you doing to remove weirs obstructing the passage of fish in our streams and rivers?

Mr MACDONALD: We have a program in relation to this and we will give you the details.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: I have just two more questions because the rest of my questions are quite specific and the Minister indicated earlier that he would have questions that we put on notice answered and we would be happy to put those on notice. The two questions that are not quite so specific are: On what basis did SafeFood New South Wales close oyster farming regions on the south coast; were the local oyster industry representatives consulted prior to the closure and what information has been made available to the local oyster industry since the closure was enforced?

Mr MACDONALD: As I understand it, the oyster closure was by SafeFood relevant to a problem in that area and, if you like, I can deal with that when we get on to agriculture, of which SafeFood is a part at the moment.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: That is fine, and if you like, Minister, you can take it on notice and come back with an answer on that one as well, I am quite happy with that.

Mr MACDONALD: Yes.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, you mentioned earlier that you increased the fees and charges by CPI and you felt that that was legitimate. Can you explain why it is legitimate to increase the fees and charges by CPI but not increase the payments to the MAC members by CPI? It is incongruous to me.

Mr MACDONALD: Yes. This is the first time that anyone has raised the issue with me in relation to the fees paid to MAC members. I am quite happy to look at this issue upon receipt from some MAC members of the difficulties that they may perceive having in this area.

CHAIR: Following on from weirs, I am wondering as to what you are doing to encourage landholders to retain snags in rivers adjacent to their properties to promote the breeding of native fish?

Mr MACDONALD: We are doing programs in relation to this and I will give you a detailed response on notice.

CHAIR: Do you have a budget for these programs and do you have specific expenditure on information to disseminate on these issues?

Mr MACDONALD: Again, I will take that on notice and give it to you.

CHAIR: Minister, I am wondering if you are aware there is an abundance of scientific evidence from around the world to show that marine sanctuaries not only increase the number, size and diversity of species in the sanctuaries but also in waters surrounding sanctuaries to the extent that fish catches double near sanctuaries?

Mr MACDONALD: Yes, I am aware that there is some evidence, although I have not actually read the evidence myself in relation to this matter. The Government does recognise the benefit of sanctuary zones and marine protected areas as one of the primary tools to preserve marine biology and biodiversity. The Solitary Islands marine park includes approximately 8,700 hectares or buffer sanctuary zones, buffeted by nearly 39,000 hectares of habitat protected zones. Jervis Bay marine park includes approximately 4,400 hectares or 20 percent of sanctuary zones. The draft zoning plan for Lord Howe Island, which is currently being prepared, will also include substantial sanctuary areas to protect the unique biodiversity of the island.

CHAIR: On Lord Howe Island can you give us the percentage of the sanctuary zone?

Mr MACDONALD: That has not been determined as yet. Every attempt is being made to locate sanctuary zone areas and that will effectively preserve biodiversity and minimise impacts on fishes and the environment. In February 2001 there was a scientific assessment statement on marine reserves and marine protected areas by 161 of the world's leading marine scientists. The statement confirmed that sanctuary zones would result in long lasting and often rapid increases in the abundance, diversity and productivity of marine organisms. So in essence, yes, we are aware of it and that is one of the very positive sides to marine parks.

CHAIR: Could I ask you what you are doing to let recreational and commercial fishers

know that these large sanctuaries are unquestionably in their own best interests?

Mr MACDONALD: In many of the statements I have been making, I have pointed out that marine parks do have this ancillary and very necessary function. We will continue to promote this within the context of our marine parks. In fact, it is acknowledged by the fishermen I have met in relation to, for instance, the Byron Bay marine park. It is really a question of how extensive that no-take zone is that is the crux of the matter and how much that impacts then on the day-to-day running of their businesses. We will be looking carefully at that. We have a range of brochures that we can send to you in relation to the value of these marine parks, to fish biodiversity and as well to their numbers.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. You would at least be able to recommend or state to the Committee that, in keeping with past New South Wales Government Ministers, particularly Environment Ministers, there have been promises for at least a 50 percent no-take zone in the Lord Howe Island sanctuary area?

Mr MACDONALD: I will take that into consideration when I have discussions with the Environment Minister. As I say, this will go through the processes in relation to that marine park.

CHAIR: Do you, Minister, have any input into the new marine parks being proposed by the Government or are these prepared solely by the Department of Fisheries?

Mr MACDONALD: Me personally, are you asking do I personally?

CHAIR: Yes.

Mr MACDONALD: No, I do not personally determine the marine parks. I would not have the expertise to work out where fish needed to be preserved south of Cape Byron Bay lighthouse.

CHAIR: I could tell you.

Mr MACDONALD: I am sure you could tell me all sorts of things, and I hope to get up there and actually practice my ability as a scuba diver one day there with you. But I do not actually prepare these plans. They are done by the Marine Park Authority and they are determined finally after a due process by the Minister for the Environment and myself acting jointly.

CHAIR: Regarding threatened species conservation, what funding was set down in the 2001-02 budget for threatened species conservation and also the 2002-2003 budget?

Mr MACDONALD: I will have to take that on notice.

CHAIR: And if you could take perhaps take on notice how much was spent on recovery planning in threatened species conservation assessment and if you could detail what other money was allocated to threatened species conservation?

Mr MACDONALD: Certainly I will take that on notice.

CHAIR: Are there any more questions on Fisheries? We have finished a little early as you would appreciate, Minister. Particularly National Party members are very keen to question you fully on Agriculture issues, so if we could move now to that portfolio.

Mr MACDONALD: I am happy to.

CHAIR: Would you like to say anything in particular about the Agriculture portfolio?

Mr MACDONALD: No.

CHAIR: Mr Gay?

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Thank you, Chairman. Minister, in regard to staffing of the Department of Agriculture, the equivalent full-time staffing allocation across the department is forecast to fall by 40 equivalent full-time positions this financial year. Why is the department

shedding jobs during the worst drought in more than 100 years?

Mr MACDONALD: Yes, we believe that, particularly in the corporate services area, there are some efficiencies that can be made. You might have seen that I made an announcement today in relation to corporate services. Across the full budget program it has been estimated that staff numbers will fall by 40 equivalent full-time positions. This loss is due to corporate services reforms and has been spread proportionately across all programs.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Yes, but Minister, you understand the concern of you shedding staff during the worst drought in 100 years. If you are making efficiency gains there, why aren't you putting it into service in other areas, rather than just shedding staff?

Mr MACDONALD: There is no fall in staff in front line services which affect the farming community directly. In corporate services, the advent over the last few years of enhanced technology has meant that we are able to do more better and as effectively and efficiently, and we are consolidating that area at the very moment.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, have you personally placed restrictions on specialist staff from within the department talking to regional media outlets?

Mr MACDONALD: I have not placed any personal restrictions on anyone in the department. In relation to the issue of the drought, particularly when it referred to issues relevant to the Commonwealth, I have handled those matters, because quite properly, public servants in our administration should not be required to enter into debates with the Federal Minister, particularly in relation to special circumstances funding. So in the last few months I have taken any steps relevant to those issues.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, is this because you wish, and you alone wish, to control the flow of specialist information from the department?

Mr MACDONALD: I think you will find, if you look at Agriculture Today last week, you will see numerous statements by technical staff on technical matters, and that is continuing, but on the issue of the drought I believed quite properly at that point, when there was a number of rejections of applications of exceptional circumstances for various board areas and regions of New South Wales that had been rejected at Commonwealth level, that I would do the talking in relation to those, and I think that is quite proper, rather than have a situation of public servants engaging in disputation with the Federal Government. Fortunately, most of those particular areas have now been incorporated within exceptional circumstances. In fact, as recently as yesterday I commended, or the day before, I commended to the Federal Government in relation to the granting of the Hume area, last Friday.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, are you aware of the loss of good will that your left wing, Stalinist, Leninist activities in controlling your department have had on the image of your department?

CHAIR: Can you be objective in your questioning?

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: I thought I was.

CHAIR: I would appreciate it if you don't go into denigration of the Minister's actions and I would appreciate a bit of decorum.

Mr MACDONALD: I thank the honourable chairman for his intervention there. He was stirring me up. I was ready to fight that one head on. He was only echoing--

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: The concerns of the media.

Mr MACDONALD: He was echoing the comments of the charming Ian Armstrong in another place, who said similar things when I took office. However, I do note that some of those aspects of my behaviour that he is alleging bear strong resemblance to his own descriptions of a degree in socialism. I don't think indulging in this sort of slanging at me in an estimates committee is really dignified and I would hope that he would be able to question me in a more reasonable manner. I believe that a lot of staff in the department--

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Are not happy.

Mr MACDONALD: --that I have spoken to in the institutes are very happy with my administration of the department and particularly--

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: It is not what they are saying.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: That is what they are telling you, not what they are telling us.

Mr MACDONALD: Yes, well, the National Party has been off the planet for the last few years. "The men from Mars" is what they have been described as. They are out of date; they go to people, they try to find a few little problems and then jump up and down; but the thing is that the department has been projecting a very positive attitude on a whole range of issues. We have an exciting review of extension services. Those extension services, I believe, can be enhanced to the benefit of the farming community, and we are looking at the research side to develop our research effort even further. I believe that overall the department's morale is very high and I have been to most of the major institutions in the department. I am working hard for the department, I am working hard for the benefit of the farming community, and I guess anyone can wander around and find a few people who are disgruntled, and I don't think that is fair to the department or to the current administration of the department.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, is the former Labor candidate for Orange, Glen Taylor, working for the Department of Agriculture?

Mr MACDONALD: Glen Taylor is one of my policy officers. He is based in my Orange office, which I will be using regularly and have been using regularly. He assists me in a range of activities with special responsibilities for advice in connection with Ovine Johm's Disease and, if the honourable member would like to talk to the other member of the old Gay-Bull conspiracy, that is the Honourable Richard Bull, he would find out that Glen is in fact working closely with Richard on that particular review. As I said, OJD is an insidious sheep wasting disease and I believe that the work that Glen is doing with the Honourable Richard Bull has been very effective and next week I think you will see some of the excellent results of that work.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: When was he appointed?

Mr MACDONALD: I will have to take the actual date of his appointment on notice.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Was the position to which he was appointed advertised?

Mr MACDONALD: He is a policy officer. I will take that on notice, but my understanding is that he is on my personal staff but based in Orange.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: But you are not in Orange?

Mr MACDONALD: Well, no, I am not 100 percent, sure, that is true. He is not Department of Agriculture; he is on my staff based in my Orange office.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: So he is paid out of your ministerial allowance?

Mr MACDONALD: Correct. That is my understanding, correct, yes.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: That is your understanding?

Mr MACDONALD: Well, yes, yes, that is correct.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, did any other people apply for that job?

Mr MACDONALD: Well, the Honourable Duncan Gay may know that ministers sometimes advertise but often appoint officers to their personal staff as they see fit, just as you do in your own office.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, can you detail what qualifications he brought to that role?

Mr MACDONALD: I will take that on notice, but he has great qualifications, he can work in my office and I will give you a reply in due course.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Minister, switching now to Rural Lands Protection Boards, can you provide details of plans to hand over responsibility for the management of travelling stock routes from Rural Lands Protection Boards to the National Parks and Wildlife Service?

Mr MACDONALD: I will take that on notice. I have not approved anything in that area.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: But you are aware that there is a joint management agreement under consideration?

Mr MACDONALD: I have not seen that particular document.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Well, it is a draft of a document that is to be made between Rural Lands Protection Boards and the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Mr MACDONALD: Yes, there may well be a draft, but it has not been put to me.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: My question was: Can you provide the details of plans to hand over the responsibility for management of travelling stock routes from RLPBs to the National Parks and Wildlife Service?

Mr MACDONALD: I will take that on notice.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: What assurance can you give to farmers who use travelling stock routes that access to these important resources will not be jeopardised by any involvement of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, if they are managing them?

Mr MACDONALD: I will take that on notice.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: If we can go quickly to drought relief, Minister, you told Stan Zemanek on Radio 2UE early in June that many tens of millions of dollars in additional drought relief funding would be made available as part of the 2003-04 budget. Minister, I put it to you that the tens of millions of additional dollars that you promised has never eventuated. What is your response to that?

Mr MACDONALD: I believe they have. If you look at the budget, I think the budget for the first six months of this financial year is around \$48 million.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: When you told Stan Zemanek that tens of millions of dollars would be available, were you aware that your drought relief measures would only be set in stone until December?

Mr MACDONALD: I have explained this several times to the House and to anyone that would listen that in October of this year, when we know what is happening with this drought, whether it is going to continue or not or it has broken--

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Well, you don't know--

Mr MACDONALD: You constantly want to make these assertions, I am just exactly explaining to you what is happening. In October when we have a good handle on when or what is happening with this drought we will be then making appropriate submissions for funding in relation to that, whether it is recovery funding or whether it is continuing drought funding, and then I will take that to Cabinet.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Can you provide information on how the State drought declarations are processed? What process is undertaken to determine those areas that are considered to be in drought? Is it based purely on rainfall data or are other indicators utilised and how long has the system been in place?

Mr MACDONALD: There are many elements to the assessment process. In relation to our own, we have the rainfall figures over the last couple of months; we have the amount of pasture that is useable in the district; we have also the state of the dams in the area. These are made by RLPB staff and they advise us eventually of the drought declarations in the area. In relation to exceptional circumstances, a lot more work has to go into particularly the socioeconomic conditions in the area.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: How long has that system been in place? Has it been used in droughts previously or is it only in this current drought?

Mr MACDONALD: A long time, yes.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, moving to drought expenditure, can the departmental staff provide me with a consolidated figure of the total expenditure on drought, basically how much money the Government has spent on the current drought for the last financial year and this financial year to date?

Mr MACDONALD: Across the agencies, the New South Wales Government allocated \$78 million on drought related expenditure in 2002-03. This included \$23.6 million on drought transport subsidies; \$4.5 million on a community disaster relief fund; \$28 million on special conservation loans and OJD levy loans; \$5.4 million on town water and \$2.5 million on payroll tax concessions. There were a number of other programs.

\$29.8 million was the specific additional drought allocation to New South Wales Agriculture's budget for 2002-03. The budget papers reflect this figure as 28.5; however, by June 30, 2003, the allocation had reached \$29.8 million, including \$500,000 for the RSPCA to attend to the animal welfare issues of drought.

Other drought initiatives included fodder transport subsidies and \$1 million allocated to specific feral animal control programs in the western division. This has seen 10,500 feral pigs and 1,000 foxes culled with over 170,000 fox baits laid to date. At the time the budget was prepared the Government estimated that additional New South Wales Agriculture expenditure on drought for the first six months of 2003-04 would be \$22 million. Of course, the Government will continue to meet its commitments under all the drought relief programs in place and, if necessary, as I have said before, additional funding will be provided to meet those demands.

Expenditure in 2003-04 to 28 August had already exceeded \$13 million, \$8.7 million in transport subsidies, \$0.7 million in community disaster relief and \$1.6 million in new and pending conservation loans.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, you may need to take this on notice, and you have answered some of it: How much of this money has gone directly to farmers' pockets and can this figure also be broken down by program item, for example, cost of transport subsidies, which you did delineate, emergency relief fund, et cetera?

Mr MACDONALD: Yes, we can do all of that and I will take it on notice. In relation to transport subsidies - I might add that these figures exclude staff allocations, so that they are not including any proportion notionally allocated towards the staff costs of delivering that money, so I would say that with conservation loans that would almost be entirely to farmers who made the application and similarly with the transport subsidies.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, has the department undertaken any analysis of the adequacy, success or appropriateness of the Government's current drought policies? Can the Committee be provided with any reports of this nature and is any research work of the Government's response to the drought currently under way and, if so, what is the nature of this research?

Mr MACDONALD: This is a good question. The Federal Minister is having a committee in October, or maybe November, it is dependent on where the drought is going in part. He has asked us to participate in that and we will be enthusiastic participants, and these issues will be dealt with in the context of this committee.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Can the Committee be provided with a breakdown of what assistance has been provided to farmers by regions?

Mr MACDONALD: Yes, we can, and I will take that on notice and supply that. It is by RLPB areas.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Yes, thank you, that is accepted. Can the Committee be provided with the breakdown of assistance that has been provided based on departmental expenses/costs, which you indicated a moment ago had been excluded, versus payments made directly to farmers and small businesses affected by this drought?

Mr MACDONALD: Yes, we can.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, can you provide a list of those consultancies or agencies that have been commissioned to undertake work on behalf of the department assessing the drought or the Government's drought policies?

Mr MACDONALD: Yes. I do not think there is anything major in that area, there might be some workshops, but we will check that and give you the details, if any.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Minister, apart from the drought recovery booklet that is available on the New South Wales Agriculture web site, what other measures are in place or are about to be finalised to assist farmers in planning for drought recovery? If you would like the Director-General to answer himself, I would be quite happy with that.

Dr SHELDRAKE: In addition to, as you indicated, the recovery guide, during the drought we had what we were calling a weekly meeting of the regional directors of agriculture program managers. They are now starting to move over into a recovery phase, and it will be a recovery phase if we get the rain that we hope for in around October-November, so what we are now starting to do is get our extension staff to think in a different vein and, to be honest, a lot of our staff, extension staff - livestock officers, agronomists, our economists - have spent a lot of time assisting with exceptional circumstances applications and, with that process coming to a finalisation, our staff can start moving back to what they traditionally were involved in, that is technical advice to farmers.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Minister, have you made any additional requests to the Treasurer for more funding for drought recovery or will you be turning this issue onto the Federal Government again?

Mr MACDONALD: No, as I have said several times, both in the house and here tonight, when we have an indicative assessment that the drought has ended, we will have a series of appropriate consultations and go to Cabinet with a series of propositions in relation to how we can recover from the drought and assistance programs within that.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, I turn to the Murrumbidgee Agricultural College and the letter from the Director-General today detailing the consolidation of the educational functions with New South Wales Agriculture commencing on 2 February 2004. Can you indicate where in the budget papers the ramifications of this decision, this major decision affecting the people of southern New South Wales and New South Wales as a whole, could be found?

Mr MACDONALD: Are you asking the director? You are asking me, of course.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Yes.

Mr MACDONALD: I think this is a difficult issue. I want to deal with it at some length.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Well, it is a specific question, Minister. It is not one for you to

delve into your bucket of oratory.

Mr MACDONALD: Well, you really want to have an answer as to why the decision has been taken, right?

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: No. The question was: Can you indicate where in the budget papers the ramifications of this decision are?

Mr MACDONALD: I do not think every management decision that is ever taken by any department is necessarily reflected in a budget that is delivered in June of any particular year. The question of Yanco and Tocal has been raised over some considerable period of time. I remember a report a few years back in relation to our education services. The problem is this: that in relation to Yanco, for the full-time students that are taking courses there, there has been a decline over the last three years. There are 39 full-time students now. Of those 39 students, seven are from Victoria, there is a number more than that from the southern highlands and the south coast of New South Wales. In consideration of the issues relevant to that, it was brought to my attention that there was a unit cost of \$24,800 per full-time student for the education services at Yanco, and \$9,000 for the total. I believe it is a proper management decision to try and take advantage of the situation at Tocal for the training of full-time students at the facility, an excellent facility, and so, in order to more effectively manage our educational services at the two colleges, we have decided to close the full-time and part-time students training at Yanco and transfer ongoing students from that program for next year to Tocal.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, I have got a series of detailed questions. It may be better, rather than talk about general--

Mr MACDONALD: I will just finish.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: You are not answering the question I asked.

Mr MACDONALD: Well, I am answering it.

CHAIR: Let him answer the question as he sees fit and then you can ask another question.

Mr MACDONALD: The question is where is it in the budget, as I remember.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Yes.

Mr MACDONALD: All I am saying is review of management systems within any department is done on an ongoing basis and it cannot be anticipated in any particular budget whether you are going to close or change or alter any particular program or organisation.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: So Minister I take it the decision hadn't been made when the budget was formulated?

Mr MACDONALD: That is correct.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: So it is a very recent, knee-jerk reaction?

Mr MACDONALD: No, it is not a knee-jerk reaction. It was a recommendation to me that this was a more efficient and effective way of managing the State's dollars and the education dollars available to Agriculture so that we reduce the costs of providing educational services, and, at the same time, there is an opportunity to then have Yanco concentrate upon continuing education short courses, which farmers are taking up in increasing numbers, and particularly with the drought I believe probably receding, there will be a lot of training that will be needed as we go out of the drought. I have announced today, for instance, at Yanco there will be a program of 12 new courses next year. These will deal with property management, salinity, soil conservation and so on, and these will be new courses offered next year to the farming sector. So we believe that the rationalisation is a necessary one which will save money but will also not reduce in any way the fine educational effort of the department to the farming community.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, you indicated that the decision was made - two questions out of that. One, when was the decision made? And you also indicated that it was made

because of a recommendation to you. Who made that recommendation and on what basis of research did they make that recommendation?

Mr MACDONALD: I will get the Director-General to answer that.

Mr SHELDRAKE: The recommendation was made by myself to the Minister and in terms of the advice that I get from a number of people within the organisation. It is something that has clearly been developing as an issue for us over the last two or three years. Student numbers at Yanco have continued to deteriorate, whereas at Tocal we have been able to maintain those numbers, even during a fairly difficult period, and so in terms of operating education and helping the extension service, Yanco has a different role to play into the future than the role of Tocal.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, how many full-time, part-time and casual positions will be lost as a result of the closure of part and full-time residential courses?

Mr MACDONALD: Let me make it clear that all staff will be offered employment in the department. They will be offered relocation. The total numbers of staff involved are in terms of education, 31.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, turning to OJD, what is the wholesale or imported cost of the Gudair vaccine?

Mr MACDONALD: I have a figure in my head, but I don't want to get it wrong so I will take it on notice.

CHAIR: Minister, in terms of the Ministers Advisory Committee on the moratorium legislation, with the impact of genetic engineering costs on New South Wales Agriculture, could you describe the effect of the actual impact of the introduction of genetic engineering?

Mr MACDONALD: I don't see that the committee would be repeating any of the work that is currently conducted by the OGTR. A national framework was put in place some years back now - I think three or four years back - in which it was clearly delineated that the Commonwealth would cover, with its committee, the environmental and health and safety impacts of genetically modified organisms. The States were given the role of analysing two features; one the impacts on marketing, and, secondly, the impact on agriculture. The committee, I believe, has that as its defined focus with any propositions that are put before it, and that will be its focus in considering any propositions that are put before it. The committee has had, I think, a couple of meetings so far that were pretty harmonious in relation to the issues that were before it at that stage. I have not received any recommendation from them in relation to any research propositions of New South Wales.

CHAIR: Will the findings of the committee be made public?

Mr MACDONALD: I will have to take that on notice. I have not considered that issue.

CHAIR: Are New South Wales Agriculture's employees or agents currently involved in any joint projects with industry involving GE plants or food crops?

Mr MACDONALD: Just back to that other question, given the composition of the committee, I think it is highly unlikely that any findings that it makes on anything will be released to the public. In relation to the other question, New South Wales Agriculture is not currently involved in GM crop field trials or in the development of GM varieties. The department has been involved in field trials of a number of GM crops under strict conditions in the past. Examples of previous trials include field trials of herbicide-tolerant GM canola, field trials of GM field peas resistant to pea weevil, field trials of GM field peas with increased nutrient added, field trials of herbicide-tolerant and insect-resistant GM cotton, field trials of virus-resistant GM potato and field trials of herbicide-tolerant GM subterranean products.

CHAIR: Can you identify the nature of each project and can you identify the parties involved, the duration, location and funding arrangements for those projects?

Mr MACDONALD: We will take that on notice.

CHAIR: How much direct or indirect funding does New South Wales Agriculture receive from Monsanto and or Bayer?

Mr MACDONALD: I will take that on notice.

CHAIR: Can you tell the Committee as to how many field trials involving GE crops are being undertaken currently in New South Wales?

Mr MACDONALD: It is a very small number. I think it was dealt with by the advisory committee and their recommendation to me at their first meeting. I will take on notice the actual number but I think it is about nine.

CHAIR: And is New South Wales Agriculture involved in the monitoring or oversight of those trials?

Mr MACDONALD: I will take that on notice.

CHAIR: Perhaps, if it is the case, you might be able to describe what environmental data is collected for those trials, and also have there been any breaches of licence conditions for any of those trials that may have been undertaken?

Mr MACDONALD: I am not aware of any but we will give you -

CHAIR: If you could indicate that and also describe any breaches or any remedies or follow-up testing that might have been undertaken, if there has been any as a result of those. Does New South Wales Agriculture have all the agronomic data of trials conducted in New South Wales?

Mr MACDONALD: Of all the trials conducted under the auspices of the OGTR?

CHAIR: Yes?

Mr MACDONALD: We will have to take that on notice.

CHAIR: Has New South Wales Agriculture conducted any audits of the trials?

Mr MACDONALD: I will have to take that on notice.

CHAIR: I am wondering if there have been steps or tests that have been undertaken by New South Wales Agriculture or its employees or agents, or others, to determine whether there has been any off-site contamination as a result of these trials?

Mr MACDONALD: I will have to take that on notice, but I have not heard of any instances of that nature.

CHAIR: And no contamination?

Mr MACDONALD: I have not heard of contamination, but I will take it on notice.

CHAIR: Are you aware of any out-crossing having occurred from those trials?

Mr MACDONALD: I will take it on notice, but I have not heard of any.

CHAIR: Perhaps if there are you could indicate any steps that New South Wales Agriculture has taken to remedy those problems?

Mr MACDONALD: Certainly.

CHAIR: Have trial licensees or New South Wales Agriculture kept seed produced during trials in New South Wales?

Mr MACDONALD: I will take that on notice.

CHAIR: Thank you, and perhaps, if that is the case, you could describe which trial seed and why it was saved. On the other side of the agriculture equation, I suppose, looking at organic agriculture, I am wondering what action you, as Minister, are taking to promote and support the expansion of organic agriculture?

Mr MACDONALD: I will take that on notice.

CHAIR: Could you perhaps indicate to the Committee how much money was allocated in 2002-03 for research and development into organic agriculture?

Mr MACDONALD: Yes. We have a research station in Bathurst that has done some work in this area, but I will take it on notice. I do not have the specific figures.

CHAIR: That is understandable, Minister, we would appreciate it if we could get it eventually. How much money is allocated in 2003-04 for research and development into organic agriculture?

Mr MACDONALD: I will take that on notice.

CHAIR: I am wondering, Minister, if you could comment on efforts to limit the expansion of environmentally inappropriate agriculture? Water-intensive crops such as rice have a self-evidently negative environmental impact when planted in areas that are drought prone, yet the rice sector is expanding in areas of western New South Wales and I am wondering what action you are taking to limit the expansion of such environmentally unsuitable crops?

Mr MACDONALD: New South Wales Agriculture's role in this has been a lot of research into varieties. For instance, one that we have been involved in and has just been released uses 10 percent less water. You might note that over the last 10 or 11 years or so there has been considerable research by New South Wales Agriculture and other organisations into varieties in New South Wales that have dramatically reduced the amount of water which rice consumes in its production and we will continue to work on improving the efficiency of rice production in our research effort.

CHAIR: Has there been any research at all, Minister, into more environmentally suitable - and appropriately profitable at the same time - crops in those areas that do not have such a thirst for water, given the fact that it is all irrigation water?

Mr MACDONALD: Well, there is a lot of debate about these issues; they are not straightforward. The rice industry in these regions employs many thousands of people and also the rice industry has a major contribution to our export markets that brings a lot of income into Australia, in the order of \$600 million last year in exports. There is a lot of research going on into alternative crops that can be grown in these areas. You have to remember one thing: You cannot rush to any particular crop and think that that is going to be the salvation. I mean how many thousand extra hectares of grapes can we plant that will be sustainable without pulling the price down and ruining many people? The same is for oranges and other citrus fruits, and the same remains for vegetables, the difficulty of being able to have massive extra production of those, so it is a very difficult area. You have to weigh up a lot of issues. As I say, there are 2,500 rice farmers and 8,000 people employed in those mills and associated industries and they provide a large percentage of the economic value to the Riverina and to the Murray region, so it is not a simple equation that one can suggest that there is a panacea in terms of an alternative crop that will bring in \$600 million worth of export income and provide \$800 million overall and employ so many thousands of people, so it is a complex issue. The department is working on water efficiency savings and we are putting a lot of effort into that area.

CHAIR: Could you describe some of that effort? We hear about the covering of waterways, irrigation channels and such like as projects that can be effective, and also drip irrigation and such like, but do you have a specific budget for research in terms of assistance to those farming communities?

Mr MACDONALD: Yes.

CHAIR: Along with alternative crops.

Mr MACDONALD: Yes.

CHAIR: Could you describe New South Wales Agriculture's efforts in those areas?

Mr MACDONALD: Yes. We have a water use efficiency advisory unit and we have a number of programs that are looking at water savings as well as in our research effort. One of the aims is to try and use less input, including water, in the production of a unit of agricultural production. We are participating with Environment and DIPNR in terms of the River Murray initiative, providing a lot of research in relation to that, and also participating in discussions in relation to catchment management authorities. We do a lot of work in this area. Our extension officers do a lot of work in this area and the irrigation areas. I can give you a fuller picture taking this on notice for some further comments.

CHAIR: I would appreciate that, Minister. I actually had the opportunity to speak to Israeli environmentalists today and I am wondering what opportunities your department can see in terms of sharing technology with a country that has similar problems and technology?

Mr MACDONALD: Our scientists are regularly communicating with other scientists in terms of more modern implementation of technology to our irrigation sectors and I am certainly looking for new ideas in this area. We have all heard of perhaps Visyboard's concepts, which I endorse. We all know about the virtues of drip irrigation and trickle irrigation and these more modern technologies we have to try and find a way of having implemented on farm and also off-farm in delivery systems and hopefully the process, this \$500 million that has been agreed to at CoAg last week, a lot of that can be implemented for water efficiency savings. I am dedicated to that, my work on the Snowy has put me in that direction and I want to see programs evolve that can utilise our water more effectively.

CHAIR: We see in those areas, and also areas in my home area of the north coast, quite radical changes of land use and, not taking away from the acknowledged good work of the Rural Lands Protection Boards in many areas of the State, but there is real concern in the north of New South Wales that the changes of land use have rendered the board, particularly in the Tweed-Lismore area, as being inappropriate and in some ways redundant. I am wondering whether your office has undertaken to look into the relevance of activities with the new farming techniques that are happening in those areas?

Mr MACDONALD: You are talking about RLPB?

CHAIR: Yes, the Rural Lands Protection Board, and there has been significant complaint that they are not relevant to the land use activities in that area.

Mr MACDONALD: Yes, I have in fact had meetings with some individual land owners in that area relating to this issue. We are just about to start a review of the RLPB, as was promised some time back, where we will be looking at the boards from top to bottom. I have an overall principle which to me is very important, and there are similar issues being put to me in western Sydney in relation to the Moss Vale RLPB which covers the Sydney Basin. They are having terrible troubles in the Sydney Basin controlling feral animals, such as foxes, and the RLPBs have responsibility in these areas and for animal health and exotic disease control. If you start to have a situation where areas opt out, you are going to have enormous difficulties in being able to monitor and control any potential for exotic disease outbreaks; you are going to have difficulty controlling feral animal pests. So, although I can see an argument for some people that they might have a query about paying their \$50 or \$60 per annum to a particular board area, I would be inclined overall to maintain a system so that we can have effective regulation and eradication of exotic diseases and pest animals. I cannot see how you can do it if you start to have opt-out clauses for particular categories of land owners. That is, as I see it, a difficulty. Because I know you are such a fine environmentalist, you would be concerned about any reduction in our effort across the State in other areas with, say, fox control or wild pig control and what have you.

CHAIR: I think, Minister, that the request often is not to necessarily opt out, although that could be the frustrated reaction of particular land owners, but the request that comes to me and I put to

you is that relevant activities are appreciated, but sometimes these boards are not keeping up with the focus that is requested by responsible land owners.

Mr MACDONALD: Well, I will be looking forward to the submissions from the area for the inquiry when it commences.

CHAIR: I appreciate that, Minister. On crown lands, I am just wondering how much Government funding has been received to manage travelling stock routes (TSRs) for conservation in New South Wales in the year 2002-03?

Mr MACDONALD: I will take that on notice.

CHAIR: And similarly the funding for 2003-04 on that matter?

Mr MACDONALD: Yes.

CHAIR: Could you also inform the Committee as to how much money was spent on weed control/eradication last year?

Mr MACDONALD: Yes. It is over \$7 million and I will get you the exact figure.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister, and also if you could get the figure for the budget allocation for weed control and eradication this year?

Mr MACDONALD: Yes, it is an increase on that \$7 million.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Minister, has New South Wales Agriculture or its employees received any donations, in kind contributions or gifts from Monsanto and/or Bayer for any purpose, including projects, research positions, technical assistance or equipment and so forth? If so, how much was each donation, contribution or gift and what purpose was it for?

Mr MACDONALD: I am not aware of that, but I will take it on notice.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Are any employees of Bayer and/or Monsanto currently working in any New South Wales Agriculture office? If so, how many and in which offices, what work is being done and what are the funding arrangements for that work?

Mr MACDONALD: Again, I am not aware of that, but I will take it on notice.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: How many employees of New South Wales Agriculture have previously worked for Monsanto and/or Bayer?

Mr MACDONALD: I would have no idea, so I will take it on notice.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: At what rate is the organic farming industry growing in Australia?

Mr MACDONALD: It is considerable, but I will take it on notice.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: How much is the Australian organic farming industry worth at the moment?

Mr MACDONALD: I will take that on notice.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: How many of the nation's organic farms are located in New South Wales?

Mr MACDONALD: I will take that on notice.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: At what rate is consumer demand for organic food increasing each year?

Mr MACDONALD: I will take that on notice.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: What, if anything, is being done to encourage more farmers to become organic farmers?

Mr MACDONALD: There is a number of publications around and we have projects in relation to this.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: On the Environmental Service Scheme, how many farms have signed contracts with the State Government to adopt environmentally sustainable farming practices under the Environmental Service Scheme?

Mr MACDONALD: I think that might be another department.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Will the Minister ban cruel and inhumane pig stalls in favour of group housing and free-range farming? If not, why not?

Mr MACDONALD: I will not be prejudging the review that will be conducted in this area next year.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: But you would acknowledge that banning these pig stalls would bring New South Wales' standards into line with those of Europe, Britain and New Zealand?

Mr MACDONALD: I would not necessarily deny any of that. I will consider the reviews finally.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Just getting back to the OJD issue again, and you have seen in the assessment that The Honourable Richard Bull has been involved in it, there is a definite timetable to implement the findings of that assessment after the final report has been completed later this month?

Mr MACDONALD: Yes. There is a program that is essentially driven by a national framework, as you can appreciate. I have asked both the OJD advisory committee and the Honourable Richard Bull to report to me by the 8th with their findings. On 19 September will be the first national discussion and then there will be a series of meetings through to December to try and reach some finalisation of a new framework. So, yes, there is a very definite program in place.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, can I turn to dairy deregulation and probably to the Director-General, but just in case he hasn't got it, there is a copy of the recommendations from a report that he made. Minister, what measures has the New South Wales Government taken to implement recommendations 17 and 18 of the report, given that the New South Wales dairy industry does not have the resources to implement these recommendations themselves due to the problems caused by the current economic climate reducing farm gate prices and the environmental impacts of the drought?

Mr MACDONALD: The first one, 17 is a recommendation that the dairy industry develop and trial, as a starting point. So not the department, the dairy industry itself to do that. And in relation to the second one, again, it is that "the New South Wales dairy industry give consideration". Do you want to say anything further?

Mr SHELDRAKE: I think the Minister's comments are correct. In terms of the recommendations, there were a series of recommendations for various organisations to undertake, including the Commonwealth, the State Government and some which the industry specifically indicated they would see as their role, and the two that you have referred to were those that the dairy industry identified that they would be undertaking.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: I note that in response to a question placed on notice, New South Wales Agriculture has advised that the State Government has implemented all recommendations that were listed as State Government responsibilities.

Mr MACDONALD: Those two, yes, those two were the dairy industry themselves.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Namely, 1, 2, 7 to 12, 14 and 16 in full. Can you provide further details on how these are being implemented and when have they been implemented?

Mr MACDONALD: Certainly.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: And can you provide the Committee with some examples of tangible benefits derived from the implementation of these recommendations?

Mr MACDONALD: Yes, absolutely. We will take it on notice and give you an answer.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, can you explain why I have still not received a formal written response to my letter dated 8 April 2003 requesting briefings from New South Wales Agriculture and New South Wales Fisheries?

The Hon. TONY BURKE: Have we just left the budget papers completely now?

Mr MACDONALD: I will take that on notice.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: It is relevant to an understanding of the budget papers, I would imagine.

The Hon. TONY BURKE: His letter was in April, prior to the budget.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Well, they take a long time to get back to him, don't they?

Mr MACDONALD: There have been two briefings, for instance, in relation to the drought which the Honourable Duncan Gay has been invited to with Mr Jeff Pyle, which he was unable to attend, and I do note that the member, I think, has visited a number of agricultural sites around the State.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: That is quite correct, Minister. I acknowledge that and my request to visit Fisheries' sites, but specifically my letter of 8 April still remains unanswered and my request still stands to be briefed by your department. Unfortunately –

Mr MACDONALD: On the drought?

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Yes, and other issues.

Mr MACDONALD: Well, we will attend to that matter in the near future.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Well, just saying yes now would be a formal answer, so you can't get - your office doesn't appear to answer correspondence.

Mr MACDONALD: I invited you to a couple of briefings. Staff were at them and they were very comprehensive briefings, but if the member wants another briefing in relation to the drought, I am quite happy to ensure that he has it.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, it wasn't the drought; it was the department. All that you shadows, and the Ministers I dare say, need is a proper briefing, so I can do my job properly as well as help you. Minister, what was the cost of producing the monthly 20 page lift out entitled *Agriculture Today* published last week in *The Land* newspaper?

Mr MACDONALD: A very fine copy of *Agriculture Today* I think that the Honourable member was referring to. I think there is an issue every month, *Agriculture Today* goes in *The Land* every month.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: That is why it is called a monthly.

Mr MACDONALD: The total cost, I am advised, for the complete round of publications is \$90,000.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: For how many publications?

Mr MACDONALD: For 12 publications, per annum. That is a per annum figure.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Thank you. Minister, I refer to the details of all air charter flights you have taken since being appointed Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries until 30 May 2003 provided to me through an FOI earlier this year. Minister, the total cost of the four air charters that you have travelled on since coming to office has been \$17,556. What has been the total cost for Ministerial air travel for the portfolio of Agriculture for the 12 months ending 30 June 2003 minus the \$17,556 you have spent on air travel?

Mr MACDONALD: I will have to take that on notice, but I might add that they were very important visits that I made in the term of my office and were very prudent expenditure indeed.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, I note that the purpose for your air charter to Orange on 9 April was to be briefed at New South Wales Agriculture's head office following the release of the latest drought figures at Warragamba Dam. When were you first advised of these briefings? If so, why was your request for aircraft charter on 9 April not submitted until 8 April, the day before the planned date of travel?

Mr MACDONALD: I will take that on notice.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Is it possible that you may have been able to secure the use of aircraft owned by the National Parks & Wildlife Service or State Forest for charters at 9 April had your request been submitted at an earlier date?

Mr MACDONALD: I will take that on notice.

CHAIR: Minister, the aquatic weeds management program on the Hawkesbury-Nepean River has to date had a budget of \$230,000 per annum, with the Department of Agriculture being its major funding source. Why has the Department of Agriculture withdrawn their funding support for aquatic weeds management on the river, putting the program at risk of being discontinued?

Mr MACDONALD: I will have to take that on notice.

CHAIR: And if you could also explain to the Committee, on notice, the Department of Agriculture's position that landowners should be responsible for funding this weed management program, given that the Hawkesbury-Nepean is used by the whole of Sydney for recreation and various amenities?

Mr MACDONALD: It would be a decision of the committee, but I will take it on notice.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Minister, what is being done to ensure that farmers are planning and preparing for drought?

Mr MACDONALD: Sorry, what is being done to help farmers?

CHAIR: What is being done to ensure that farmers are planning and preparing for drought?

Mr MACDONALD: Well, we have considerable extension services. We have a wide range of publications. We have a lot of material on the web site. Yes, there is a substantial body of information that is being presented to farmers by New South Wales Agriculture.

CHAIR: Is there specific activity to encourage farmers to change from traditional farming practices, like stripping back the land, to more natural and sustainable practices, like minimum soil disturbance and cropping alongside native grasses?

Mr MACDONALD: Yes, we have a lot of programs in relation to low tillage, use of native grass research, a wide range of programs which I could get to you on notice.

CHAIR: Minister, the first national public survey of farmers as to their attitudes towards genetically engineered crops, published on 18 August in *Biotechnology Australia*, found 74 percent of

500 farmers interviewed would not consider growing genetically altered crops at this stage. Furthermore, 41 percent said they were generally opposed to GE crops; 17 percent were undecided; and only 23 percent said they were supportive of genetic engineering in agriculture. The views of these farmers is in contrast to public support for GE from people from organisations such as the National Farmers Federation. What action are you taking, as Minister, to ensure that New South Wales Agriculture acts in the interests of the majority of all New South Wales farmers to oppose the GE policy and is not being unduly influenced by large agricultural lobby groups?

Mr MACDONALD: I think that is a very loaded question in terms of the particular member's view on life. I have seen a number of surveys that indicate that the figures on those farmers are quite different. I can only refer the member to the success story of cotton in New South Wales and the release of a new version of cotton which will have even more enhanced environmental benefits in the reduction of the usage of insecticides.

CHAIR: Minister, I am glad you raised the issue of GE cotton. I have two issues with that. One is, of course, that primarily cotton is not a true crop, so it doesn't quite rate in the same category as issues like canola and other specific food crops. Would you care to comment on that?

Mr MACDONALD: Only that the question was about farmers' alleged resistance to using GE crops, the point being that, as has been shown in a number of countries where GE crops have become available, there has been a large uptake. It is the same in terms of GE cotton. I will be acting on the advice of the advisory committee in relation to matters concerning New South Wales.

CHAIR: On the matter cotton seed and cotton seed oil production, given your espoused success with GE cotton and such like, does your department oversee the quarantining of cotton production from cotton seed oil in the food chain which is very much used in New South Wales, particularly in restaurants?

Mr MACDONALD: My understanding is that we do not.

CHAIR: Is it not worthwhile to take an interest in that, Minister, given that it is crossing over to the food industry?

Mr MACDONALD: I am advised that this issue is not our responsibility.

CHAIR: As a producer or as an overseer of the industry, would it not be of interest to New South Wales Agriculture in terms of your much reported "clean green" export credentials?

Mr MACDONALD: Well, I have not heard this raised, again, by the farming community as an issue. If you want to write to me, I will reply in due course.

CHAIR: I would appreciate it. The separation between food and non-food crops is, I think, a very important consumer issue.

Mr MACDONALD: You have to remember one thing about cotton oil is that the process destroys the DNA, so you could not detect whether it was from GE cotton or not.

CHAIR: Well, I might ask you, if someone has an allergy to peanuts, which is quite widespread in our community, is that neutralised, for example, in peanut oil?

Mr MACDONALD: I am not sure of that; I cannot comment about peanut oil.

CHAIR: Well, I would put it to you that people do have concern with the cross-over and in knowing that they do not use GE food crops or GE resourced edible oils. Minister, ongoing uncertainty surrounds the marketing of GE agricultural produce while many of Australia's key trading partners continue to state their preference for GE-free goods. Despite this, some pro-GE lobby groups have called for so-called trials of GE crops to be approved up to 5,000 hectares during the New South Wales commercial moratorium. Given the real or perceived risk of GE contamination associated with any large trial of GE crops, would you rule out allowing broadacre trials of GE crops to take place during the three year commercial moratorium?

Mr MACDONALD: The Government has not ruled out any research projects whatsoever. I will consider any propositions that are put forward to me by the advisory council. That is why it was set up.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: How many staff do you have, Minister?

Mr MACDONALD: A very modest number of staff. The department of agriculture or my personal staff?

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Your ministerial staff.

Mr MACDONALD: Eleven staff funded out of my private office allocation.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Is that including the bloke at Orange?

Mr MACDONALD: Indeed.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister, that concludes the hearing. I would like to say here that the Committee has discussed the timeframe for the return of answers to questions taken on notice at the hearing. The Committee has resolved 35 days for the initial hearings starting from when the questions are sent by the clerk to the Minister, and I would like to determine your and departmental officers' availability if further hearings are required?

Mr MACDONALD: Yes. I would like to thank the departmental staff for the work they have put in to giving the Committee good background and I am sure you will get further information by way of questions on notice.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister.

The Committee proceeded to deliberate.