

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEE

**INQUIRY INTO THE NSW GOVERNMENT'S MANAGEMENT OF
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

CORRECTED

At Macquarie Room, Parliament House, Sydney, on Monday 15 June 2020

The Committee met at 10:00.

PRESENT

Mr David Shoebridge (Chair)

The Hon. Mark Banasiak

The Hon. Courtney Houssos

The Hon. Emma Hurst

The Hon. Trevor Khan

The Hon. Adam Searle (Acting Deputy Chair)

The Hon. Natalie Ward

The CHAIR: Welcome to the sixth hearing of the Public Accountability Committee's inquiry into the Government's management of the COVID-19 pandemic. The inquiry is intended to provide ongoing parliamentary oversight to the Government's response to the unfolding pandemic. Before I commence I acknowledge the Gadigal people, who are the traditional custodians of the land that this Parliament is on and pay my respects to Elders, past, present and emerging, including the respects of the Committee and the witnesses in attendance today.

This morning we will hear evidence from witnesses from the Agriculture portfolio, including the Minister for Agriculture and Western New South Wales. Through our program of public hearings the Committee has heard evidence on the Government's response and assistance packages offered to industries and sectors in largely urban city settings. Today's hearing shifts the focus to consider the Government's response and what assistance has been offered to the State's primary producers across New South Wales. The sector is still recovering from some of the State's worst bushfires and is now having to navigate major COVID-19 challenges and disruptions. Today's hearing will explore a range of issues around impacts to the agricultural sector, including what help primary producers are being offered to navigate such challenges.

I will now make some brief comments about the procedures for today's hearing. Today's hearing is being broadcast live via the Parliament's website. A transcript of today's hearing will be placed on the Committee's website when it becomes available. I remind media representatives you must take responsibility for what you publish about the Committee's proceedings. It is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to what witnesses may say outside of their evidence at the hearing and so I urge witnesses to be very careful about any comments you may make to the media or to others after you complete your evidence as such comments will not be protected by privilege. The guidelines for the broadcast of proceedings are available from the secretariat.

All witnesses have the right to procedural fairness in accordance with the procedural fairness resolution adopted by this House in 2018. There may be some questions that a witness could only answer if they had more time or with certain documents to hand. In these circumstances, Minister, you are advised that you can take the question on notice and provide an answer within 21 days. I remind everyone here today that Committee hearings are not intended to provide a forum for people to make adverse reflections about others under the protection of parliamentary privilege. I therefore request that witnesses focus on the issues raised by the terms of reference of this inquiry and avoid naming individuals unnecessarily. All witnesses from departments, statutory bodies or corporations will be sworn prior to giving evidence. I remind the Minister that he does not need to be sworn because he has already sworn an oath to his office as a member of Parliament.

The Hon. ADAM MARSHALL, Minister for Agriculture and Western New South Wales, before the Committee
SCOTT HANSEN, Director General, Department of Primary Industries, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Minister, if you would like to take the opportunity for a brief opening statement, now is that time.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Thank you, Chair. Just briefly: Thank you for the opportunity to spend some time with you this morning and answer questions but to discuss the challenge that confronts all with the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact that has on the Agriculture portfolio. I guess the story for Agriculture you touched on in your opening remarks, Chair, is in the last few years the agricultural sector has faced three main challenges and disruptions: drought, bushfires and now COVID-19. Ironically, unlike probably a lot of sectors that you have heard from during this inquiry and more broadly across Government, COVID-19 has actually been the least disruptive on the agricultural sector out of all three crises.

In the time of COVID-19 we have seen one of the positives. I think the community has been very firmly focused and reminded of the importance of food security, the importance of supporting and buying local, and the incredible value of the agricultural sector and its contribution to the community—in fact, to the staples in everyone's lives. In terms of management of the pandemic, very early on in March at my request the Department of Primary Industries established 10 industry working groups to work across the whole agricultural sector. Those working groups comprised representatives of all the major subgroups or subsectors of the portfolio to make sure that we understand the major issues the various industries are confronting and to provide assistance through our concierge one-on-one service as well as the website hotline that was established. We had around 580-600 inquiries to that so far that have been worked through.

A number of issues that industry was facing at the time either have been satisfactorily resolved to the industry's satisfaction or are in train at the moment. By and large I think the COVID-19 pandemic remains a challenge, but for the agricultural sector it is almost as if, as soon as the pandemic started, seasonal conditions began to turn around. We saw some good widespread rain and the irony is there is a lot more confidence in the sector today during the pandemic than there was, say, just six months ago before the pandemic started. I am happy to assist the Committee in any way I can, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. The difference that a bit of rain makes is extraordinary.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: That is right—rain and hope.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Mr Hansen, for coming in today. During the lockdown there was quite a lot of media around the use of animals in entertainment and various businesses, including big organisations like Taronga Zoo. Those big organisations were very concerned about the impact that lockdowns would have on their finances and being able to provide ongoing care to the animals. Are you aware of any animals that were euthanised or who fell into ill health in these industries as a result of the income loss during the COVID-19 lockdowns?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: No. I am not aware of any that fell into ill health as a direct result of COVID-19 and the lack of income. Mr Hansen might wish to expand on issues that were at a number of zoos or exhibitors' facilities that come under the exhibited animals Act, but none that I am aware of directly relate to breaches of animal welfare because a facility may not have had any money to properly care for their animals, no.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thanks. I know about the Federal money that went into these industries but, Mr Hansen, were there other issues that came up? The Minister alluded to the possibility you might have more information.

Mr HANSEN: Thank you. There were 31 of our exhibited animal facilities that were eligible under the Commonwealth package. That obviously left a range of facilities that were not made available the assistance from the Commonwealth with regards to assistance for them for feeding and caring for animals. Department of Primary Industries [DPI] staff reached out to all of the licensed exhibited animal holders in New South Wales early on during the pandemic to take a check as to how they were faring, how they were coping. We are not aware of any animals that had to be euthanised due to ill health directly related to the pandemic, but that is something that we can take on notice and provide any data on.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Yes. That would be useful, thank you. We also had a lot of facilities reach out and say that they were concerned about income loss. On the weekend there were a couple of media articles and there was another media article this morning in *The Guardian* particularly about one facility, the Dolphin

Marine Conservation Park in Coffs Harbour, who said in the article that the impact of coronavirus has hit their facility very hard to the point where they are actually asking now for finance from the Government to build a semi-open sea enclosure. Have you been contacted about that and are you open in conversations with them about that in response to COVID-19?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I certainly have not been approached, Ms Hurst. It sounds like though, from the way you have characterised that media article, they are not so much you looking for support to maintain what they are doing but to actually undertake a capital expansion of the facility.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: That is the article says, yes.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: But, no, I am not aware of that. It is likely that they would not approach me because in the Agriculture portfolio we do not have funding programs that fund capital expansion of those facilities. They might be best to approach other Ministers within the Government who have funding programs—perhaps under the Tourism portfolio or regional development.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: I thought they were trying to sell out.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Apparently not; not according to *The Guardian* this morning.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Well, there we go!

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: It may not be a surprise, Ms Hurst, that I do not often read *The Guardian*.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Minister, given that there are a lot of these facilities that fall under the Exhibited Animals Protection Act that are still saying that they are financially very strained because of the COVID-19 lockdowns, is there any pre-planning in place in case there is a second wave and further shutdowns happen?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: What the Department of Primary Industries has done, Ms Hurst, as Mr Hansen said, is that those facilities that have not qualified for assistance through the Commonwealth Government, Department of Primary Industries staff have been in close consultation and working closely with those facilities. Obviously from this portfolio's perspective, our only concern is both from the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act [POCTAA] and the exhibited animals Act. In terms of the financial viability of those businesses, while that is a matter of concern, it is not the primary concern of this portfolio.

Our concern is making sure that those businesses are able to adhere to their responsibilities under those two pieces of legislation, which I administer in this portfolio. I have not had any formal advice nor any approaches directly from any of those particular organisations raising any concerns that they cannot meet those obligations. Obviously if there were issues that were to come to my attention that would arise because, say, a facility was to go bust, go belly-up, or there were issues, that is a situation when we would be taking more serious action to make sure that those animals were looked after.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, we heard a reduction in people reaching for domestic violence but when I spoke to both the RSPCA and the Animal Welfare League, they said that they had also seen a reduction in outreach for their services and a reduction in the reporting of animal cruelty. I think that makes a lot of sense when you consider that if people are in lockdown they are not witnessing a lot of animal cruelty and also if people are in lockdown potentially they are less likely to reach out for help. Are you aware of a reduction in animal cruelty reporting during those lockdown periods as well?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Yes. I am aware that there has been a reduction, as you said in your introduction, yes.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Do you have any statistics? Perhaps that is something that you could take on notice about that particular reporting period.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Yes. I have to take that on notice because as the enforcement of POCTAA is done by the RSPCA, the Animal Welfare League and the NSW Police Force, I do not hold that data; neither does the department. But we can take that on notice and request that and provide that to the Committee.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Do you want to specify a particular time period?

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Just when the lockdown period started.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Okay, sure.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: That would be fantastic. Did the Government take any steps to ensure that people can still report animal cruelty? Is there additional funding or support to alleviate that issue of a reduction in reporting?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: No. The normal ways of reporting are still there and un-impacted by COVID-19 restrictions. I understand people can make complaints by phone.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Sorry, but with the reduction and the highlight of that reduction, was any action taken to fix that problem in any way?

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: It might be that there were fewer events of animal cruelty.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: No.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I do not think so.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: You are a cynic.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I mean, the premise of that question is that a lower reporting rate is a bad thing and therefore Government may need to intervene. It could well be that actually there is just fewer incidence: I do not know. But certainly from my perspective I could not see that COVID-19 restrictions in any way impeded people making reports if they were aware of breaches of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act. The COVID-19 restrictions did not impact upon people making phone calls, writing emails or writing letters, which are the three primary ways that complaints are made on my understanding.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: How were the day-to-day operations of the RSPCA and the Animal Welfare League affected? Obviously they had to close down public access to their shelters. How were they affected and what support was given to them?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Well, in terms of their enforcement duties under POCTAA, I am not aware of any significant changes although I would presume that like all of the Department of Primary Industries and Local Land Services staff, staff would have been given strong guidance about distancing and putting human health and safety first, but I am not aware of any significant impediments to their enforcement duties for either of the three enforcement agencies. Certainly none has been brought to my attention. During the pandemic I have had conversations with the RSPCA and no such issues were raised with me on that occasion.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: And the shelters?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I have to take that on notice, unless Mr Hansen has the information.

Mr HANSEN: We were aware of decisions by the RSPCA and the Animal Welfare League around the shelters and around visitation to shelters. However, like the Minister we maintained a close dialogue with both the RSPCA and the Animal Welfare League during the duration of the restrictions from February through to now and have had no request or indication from them of additional assistance being required to help accommodate any downturn or any restriction on them carrying out their compliance requirements as necessary under the Act.

I certainly know that our biosecurity and food safety compliance teams really have not been impacted with probably one large exception, which is that our food safety teams' physical auditing of healthcare facilities was significantly changed in terms of how we went about that and why we do that because of the vulnerable people and the risk of our staff entering those sites and visiting numerous of those sites as part of the audit regime. But with the exception of that, our audit frequency and our inspection frequency certainly did not get impacted during the restrictions.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: What about in regards to the interaction of regulations to extend the limitation periods for the enforcement action under POCTAA? My understanding was that the RSPCA and the Animal Welfare League said, or they have told us in our consultation, that they have been affected with their investigations having to slow down because of social distancing requirements and the like. Do you plan to introduce regulations to extend the limitation period under POCTAA during this time?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Not unless the enforcement agency specifically requests a change to the status quo. I have not received any request from either of those three enforcement agencies at this stage. But if such a request came through, of course I would give it due consideration to make sure. The worst thing I would want to see is a potential perpetrator escape justice or their day in court—however you want to describe it—because of a legal quirk. Obviously if such a request was made I would consider it but at this point there has been no request.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you. We have also heard a lot of concerns that adoption rates and people buying companion animals went up during a lockdown and now we are hearing reports and early concerns that there may suddenly be a massive number of companion animals abandoned and that will get dumped in shelters. Has the Government heard some of these concerns? Is any support being considered if this does eventuate?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: You are certainly right that I am aware. I do not have the data in front of me but I am certainly aware that adoption rates have gone up during the pandemic crisis, which I for one think is a wonderful thing. The more animals that are adopted means the fewer animals that have to be euthanised but also, if people are taking the opportunity while at home to bring a new companion into their home, I think that is a wonderful thing. We all know the benefits of bringing companion animals into your home for mental health but also in a lot of cases physical health as well.

I have noticed a lot more people out and about walking their new and old companion animals and I think that is a wonderful thing. I do not see any evidence and I have not heard any reports at this stage that those higher adoption rates will mean that we will have a higher rate later down the line of people dumping those animals. A number of adoption programs—and I am most familiar with the one the RSPCA very successfully runs across the State—do not just let anyone adopt animals and they do not do it indiscriminately. There is a very robust process that takes place that tries to ensure that the person taking the animal—

The Hon. EMMA HURST: It is not so much the animals that have been adopted and rescued, but there was also an increase in sales of companion animals online and in various other situations. In the past, where there have been cheap animals or something else, following on from that there has also been an increase in abandoned animals. If we were to see the same pattern now after we have seen an increase—well, it could be an increase in adoption or it could be the animals that were bought—what will be done potentially by the Government for these shelters which are probably overrun and could see a massive influx of animals?

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: You see a black lining to every cloud, don't you?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I might ask Mr Hansen to address that, but it is hard and I certainly hope that does not happen, Ms Hurst.

Mr HANSEN: We have heard anecdotal reports that adoptions from the RSPCA have been up 30 per cent, which is a significant increase. We have not yet got to that point of getting any data that would suggest that that is leading this round to an increase in abandonment or animals being presented back to those shelters from which they have been sought. If there was, we would be quite happy to sit down with the RSPCA and the Animal Welfare League to look at what strategies, what communications or what promotional activities would be required to help people through their decision-making process around what to do with the animals. Given the fact that their decision around adoption has been made already, it is now about how to help people through that, how to look after the animals or how to keep the animals and, if not, what alternatives are available.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I have less concern about the adoption process because, as you say, there is a bit more of a process for people who are adopting animals. It is more about these impulse buyers of animals where people are buying a companion animal online, for example, and they are not going through an adoption process. Now they are going back to work after the lockdown and they did not actually consider that animal's needs when they took that animal in.

Mr HANSEN: We have no data on that leading to increased presentation of abandoned animals or animals being abandoned to shelters.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: But if the RSPCA and the Animal Welfare League did see an influx, you would be supporting them through that?

Mr HANSEN: Yes, we would sit down with them and work through what strategies are needed to accommodate that.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: This might be a question for you, Mr Hansen. Has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the time line for the Animal Welfare Action Plan going forward?

Mr HANSEN: Only slightly. We have still been able to maintain a lot of the public consultation on documentation via virtual consultation with industry groups and with the community. That time line still remains largely robust and in place, as we have outlined before. It has been one of the ones that has not been as impacted because there have been alternative ways of now receiving people's views.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Minister Marshall, in your introduction you talked about industry working groups. There was a lot of community concern during the COVID-19 outbreak around zoonotic diseases and the potential for zoonotic diseases within the country as well. There were reports in the media from a Dr Michael Greger, who was talking about chicken farms potentially being the next homegrown pandemic. Is that something that was identified as a risk for the industry in part of those industry working groups or elsewhere?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: As I said in my introduction, there were 10 working groups established and one of those was animal biosecurity and animal welfare. I am not aware of that particular issue being brought forward by industry or identified as an issue that they would like the Government, the Department of Primary Industries or Local Land Services to work on. Mr Hansen, has that come across your desk?

Mr HANSEN: That working group did not look at the potential impact or risk of COVID in terms of increasing or decreasing the risk of animal disease outbreaks across the livestock sector. I think it must have been just before the start of the pandemic that we started to see African swine fever present itself up in Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste. We kept working with the Commonwealth to keep a close watch on those kind of diseases, but actually, for most of the animal industries, and in fact for most of our agricultural industries, the reduction in people movements across different parts of the State actually act as an increase in protection in biosecurity. That was not particularly a topic. The topics that were covered by that group were more about appropriate personal protective equipment gear, the availability of PPE for staff and for visitors as well as talking about markets and market activity.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: In the industry working group for animal welfare, what were the key areas identified in that particular group?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Similar to a lot of the groups, Ms Hurst, some of the key issues that were raised were the short-term supply shocks and freight logistics. There was a lot of concern about movement of animals but also movement of product off the farm if States were going to start closing their borders. Obviously New South Wales made a decision not to close its State borders.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Sorry, was that for certain animals that would have to travel to a particular slaughterhouse, is that the sort of thing you mean?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Potentially, or even getting products, you know, egg producers getting their eggs to market.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I am just talking about that animal welfare working group.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Yes. That was an issue that was raised. All of those industry groups tend to raise key things around freight and logistics, care of staff, workforce in terms of seasonal workers and the continuation of options, whether it is saleyards or other private places.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Minister, are you aware of a letter sent by The Pew Charitable Trusts to the Premier on 26 March 2020 and to the Prime Minister shortly afterwards proposing a COVID-19 economic stimulus set of measures in conservation and land management?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I cannot say. By what institute, sorry?

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: It is called The Pew Charitable Trusts, but it was a letter proposing an economic stimulus package to deal with COVID-19 signed by about 50 different organisations including Landcare NSW and NSW Farmers. What it was proposing was a multibillion dollar package to deal with a range of measures, such as rehabilitation work in the wake of the bushfires, repairing nature trails and an awful lot of other work that seems to be necessary in pest and weed control, things that there is obviously never enough money for—

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: No, never.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: —but obviously in the wake of bushfire, drought and then the pandemic there was a proposal for a combined State and Federal approach. Are you saying that you have not seen that correspondence?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I have seen correspondence from NSW Farmers which, from your description, sounds very similar to that particular correspondence you are referring to. I have had a number of discussions over the telephone with NSW Farmers about a number of proposals that it is putting forward for stimulus.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: I think this would provide at its peak something like 24,000 jobs for people to undertake practical conservation activities such as weed control, pest control, river restoration, bushfire recovery and resilience, it is all pretty much set out. Are those the sorts of discussions you had with NSW Farmers?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Correct, yes.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Where are those discussions up to? Have you got a set of initiatives flowing from those discussions to propose?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: There are a number of measures that the Government has in train at the moment in terms of drought assistance and bushfire assistance, which covers off a number of those areas. The Government is looking to make some tweaks or changes to some of those existing initiatives, which will not only better provide I think better tailored support, given the changing seasonal conditions and COVID, but also serve to continue to provide economic stimulus. There are a number of other new measures that it raised in its correspondence which the Government is currently considering at the moment.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Okay, but since 23 March, which I think is about when the public health orders kicked in, or were just about to kick in, what new measures have you as Minister implemented in the primary industries space to deal with the pandemic and its effects?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Most of the new measures revolve around a combination of fee waivers, providing support to industry to either access new markets or to get clarification to ensure that they can continue to operate and getting exemptions or clarifying the interpretation or definitions within the public health orders. For example, every single operator within the livestock sector, both agents and producers, was most concerned that the initial public health orders actually rendered public options at saleyards for sheep sales, fat cattle, store cattle and even wool options unable to occur because of the public gathering measures. That was an area where this portfolio was immediately able to make the case that there should be an exemption to ensure that the food supply chain could continue to operate in New South Wales uninterrupted. That was agreed to.

Indeed, on my weekly hook-ups with all the State agriculture Ministers, us doing that allowed them to do exactly the same thing and use the same argument we used in their States as well, so we were able to ensure continuity across the food supply chain in other States, not just in New South Wales. The assistance that we provided is a combination of a bit of financial help, taking a bit of pressure off, but mostly just troubleshooting and using our working groups and our concierge service to virtually be guided by industry about what bits of help they want. Most of them did not want money, they do not want that, they just want guidance on restrictions so that they can continue to operate unimpeded to keep Australians fed and clothed.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Without in any way detracting from the utility of that work, I am just trying to get a sense of what new policies or measures you as Minister have put in place since the pandemic period started to help industries deal with that, outside of the troubleshooting or clarification about the effect of public health orders and what new money has been provided?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I am always considering new initiatives as industry raises issues and brings them forward. That is why we established those 10 industry working groups. As I said at the beginning, virtually every single issue that they have raised has either been completely resolved to their satisfaction or is in train at the moment. There are a few additional measures that go to your question that I will be announcing very shortly for targeted support in a financial way for particular industries in the primary industry sector that, unlike a lot of industries, have actually been negatively impacted. But broadly, across the board, most of the industries in the agriculture sector have not been adversely impacted economically, because you have to remember we are coming off a pretty low base from drought and bushfires. COVID-19 has not been able to wreak any more havoc than those first two things.

It has not had the negative impact broadly across agriculture that the pandemic has had in other spaces in the State, largely because what generally happens in the agriculture sector is essential and because of that it has been able to act or conduct itself in a relatively normal manner. Of course there is physical distancing and all of those precautions, because we need to eat and so does the rest of the world. Despite all the restrictions around international travel, we have worked closely with industry and the Commonwealth to make sure our producers still have international market access, even to the extent of chartering or getting access to chartered flights to continue to get chilled beef products into international markets in a timely way. Yes, and I will always try and be as responsive as I can to industry. But generally, and I am being general—though I can get quite specific—the industry has just been asking for logistical help or getting red tape out of the way so that they can continue to function.

The CHAIR: Is it more accurate to say, Minister, that the effect of COVID-19 has been masked by the breaking of the drought? That the breaking of the drought has had such a substantial positive impact that the negatives of COVID-19 have been masked by that?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Possibly, or counterbalanced by the two, but I would not characterise the conditions as, "the drought has broken", but certainly conditions have eased and things have got a lot better in parts of the State.

The CHAIR: No-one is suggesting it has broken uniformly across the State.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: We were coming from a very low base. But most of the activities in the agricultural sector by their nature are quite isolated, aside from processing plants like abattoirs and packaging facilities. The NSW Food Authority and DPI, working with SafeWork NSW, have been very proactive with those companies and organisations to make sure that we have safe workplaces. But, at the same time, we do not go down the path of other States where they have actually made businesses have to so dramatically change their operations that there were questions about their ongoing viability. We have to keep people safe, but we also have to keep the important work of the food supply chain going. All in all I think they have done a pretty good job so far.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Just outside of that, returning to that set of measures proposed by Landcare NSW, the Nature Conservation Council, NSW Farmers and others, you do not recall seeing that correspondence per se but you have had communications directly with NSW Farmers about those kinds of measures?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Correct.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Can you tell the Committee whether or not as a result of those discussions the Government is going to propose some or any of the measures that they have been advocating since the end of March?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Yes. I have correspondence here in front of me, Mr Searle, which I think covers off most of the issues that you have raised, but it is from NSW Farmers dated April. Yes, I have already had several discussions along with Mr Hansen and other officials from Local Land Services and the department about a number of measures they raised. Yes, the Government is currently considering those and hopefully we will make some announcements very soon about some of those measures. Obviously, as I have said to NSW Farmers, COVID-19 is not a blank cheque for a smorgasbord of initiatives that have always been asked for. Nevertheless, we will try and do what we can within the finite resources that we have and best target the funding that we can secure to support the agricultural sector, but also to stimulate it. Indeed, you could mount a very strong argument that the bushfire assistance and the \$4 billion in drought and water security assistance has also been economic stimulus as well. In fact it has put the agriculture sector in the strongest possible position it could be in before the pandemic started.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: You talked about the need for economic stimulus, and I think we can all agree that that is absolutely necessary, but just in your portfolio it sounded like most of the new work that had been done was in the area of fee waivers. This Government has announced a number of measures like that, and that is very different to actually putting new money directly into the economy, whereas these sorts of measures would, by providing direct employment, the work that is necessary, but also provide a stimulatory effect. How soon can we expect an announcement on those kinds of measures?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I cannot say, Mr Searle, but soon.

Mr HANSEN: Sorry, if I could just pick up on that. There have been four elements to the response so far. The first one has been the concierge service, the handling of the enquiries, providing assistance and literally doing everything from working with industry associations, to getting answers through to working with individuals who want to know what their rights, their rules and their requirements are. Then, in terms of economic stimulus, since the pandemic the \$310 million emergency drought relief has been announced, so that takes us through into the next financial year, there is the \$140 million Bushfire Industry Recovery Package and the \$209 million boundary fence recovery package out of the fires as well. All three of those are largely economic stimulus to purchase goods and services from local communities and to be able to provide assistance.

They have been our targeted industry stimulus, but they have been targeted at assisting by creating stimulus to help recover from the drought and from the bushfires, not so much just badged as a COVID economic stimulus package. In addition to that, however, remember that most of the businesses in our industry have also had available to them the broader package of assistance that has been made available both at a State Government

level in terms of the \$10,000 small business grants, as well as the JobKeeper and JobSeeker assistance packages, which are available from the Commonwealth Government. There has been a suite of activities that have been coming together to provide both that direct economic stimulus that you have been referring to, plus the targeted concierge service that we can provide.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I move on to a different area around the Rural Assistance Authority [RAA], Minister. That is obviously an area where there is a direct financial impact, particularly on producers who have been affected previously, not necessarily by the drought but particularly by the bushfires. They have got a number of loan repayments that are coming up. Can you tell me how many applications for deferral you have received?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I as Minister have received none. Those requests go to the Rural Assistance Authority. Do you mean how many requests has the Rural Assistance Authority received?

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Yes.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I would have to ask Mr Hansen, or we would have to take that on notice.

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

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Is it still the case that those applications for deferral are required to be in writing, they cannot be taken over the phone?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I would have to defer to Mr Hansen.

Mr HANSEN: This is deferral of principal or interest repayments—

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: That is right.

Mr HANSEN: —on RAA loans?

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: That is correct.

Mr HANSEN: I would have to take on notice the process. We normally would not just deal with a person's financial details over the phone without some verification, whether that be through email or through some other way. But let me check on that because I am not aware.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: There was a story in *NewsLocal* on 8 April that outlined the case of Mr Alessi, who is a commercial fisher in Port Stephens in Salamander Bay. He was outlining the situation where it was a dramatic increase, and this is understandably quite a significant increase, as you said, as they move from an interest only loan to a principal and interest situation. At the time the department said that it was considering a range of industry assistance measures, do you have any new information, any new approaches for people who find themselves in this situation?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: In terms of that individual case, I would hope that they have made an application to the RAA for deferral and I would have to take that individual case on notice.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I am not asking you about the individual case. The individual case highlights the problem that Mr Hansen outlined of people who are moving from an interest only loan to a principal and interest loan during a period of extreme financial difficulty for them that has been obviously started through the bushfire process, that has been exacerbated by COVID. This is one area within your portfolio—

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: That is your assertion.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: That is the assertion of this gentleman, Mr Alessi, who says that—and anyone who understands that an oyster farmer who usually sells to restaurants, that are now closed, who usually relies on tourists who come to the area, who are no longer allowed to come and particularly during the Easter period which would be a peak period of demand, that this is an incredibly difficult period for them. He and others found it incredibly difficult to deal with the RAA. Are you not aware of this issue at all, Minister?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I am trying to work out which issue. The issue of people paying back their loans?

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: The issue of oyster farmers who find themselves in a very difficult situation. It is not just oyster farmers, there is a range of commercial fishers who find themselves in this situation up and down the coast, that has been exacerbated by the COVID pandemic. You said that most areas, in fact it seemed to be all areas within the primary industries portfolio are actually doing better.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: No, that is not what he said.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: They were not finding themselves in a difficult financial situation. This is an incredibly difficult situation that was exacerbated by the fact that it took him 10 days. According to the guidelines on your website, for an application for a deferral under 12 months it should be able to be taken over the phone.

The Hon. NATALIE WARD: Point of order: Other than the very long description of the issue, I am not entirely sure what the question from the honourable member is to the witness. I ask her to clarify what the actual question is that she is posing to him, for everyone's benefit.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I am trying to provide him with some context because he said he was not aware.

The CHAIR: To deal with the point of order, a member is allowed to give some context. The context should be as brief as possible and we should try to get that rise in inflection as soon as we can, Ms Houssos.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I respect the direction of the Chair. Is it still the case that the application has to be put in writing, even if it is for less than 12 months?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I will take that on notice.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Mr Hansen?

Mr HANSEN: As I said before, my understanding is that our security and fraud settings means that we do need to take it in writing, generally by email, rather than just a phone call. But I can confirm that for you and come back with it.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Can you tell me how many you have received, if you are tracking applications or inquiries, over the phone and also in writing?

Mr HANSEN: Yes. We obviously have reached out to all of the key customers within the RAA talking about the fact that if they are experiencing financial hardship to deal with us on a one-on-one basis in terms of deferral of payments, and that is an option that is available to everyone. I understand though your question is not about the individual but about any blanket policy settings across a category of affected producers, and that is something that again I would have to take notice or will come back at a later time to better discuss.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Then perhaps you can take on notice how much has the RAA given out in the last 12 months and how many farmers have accessed that relief?

Mr HANSEN: Yes, okay.

The Hon. NATALIE WARD: Point of order: The last 12 months is not the period in which this Committee's terms of reference deal with. We are dealing with the COVID response and it is all good and well to have an inquiry about how many people have made these requests, but it is not applicable to this inquiry. That is a budget estimates question.

The CHAIR: If what the member is asking for is to see the trend over the last 12 months to see what, if any, impact COVID-19 has had I can see how that would be—

The Hon. NATALIE WARD: Were it phrased that way.

The CHAIR: I am sure that was the member's intent.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: That is how I took it.

The CHAIR: Yes, so I could see how it would have relevance.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Could I ask a question, Mr Chairman? And I am happy to take it on notice and provide that detail.

The CHAIR: Not technically, but we will allow you this moment.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I am just seeking a point of clarification from Ms Houssos, if that is permitted through you, Mr Chair. I am happy to provide this Committee with any information requests around applications and RAA, but just to be clear, do you want the full suite? Because the RAA delivers dozens of different programs to farmers. You want everything? Okay, right, you will get everything.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: That is my request, thank you.

The CHAIR: For the benefit of Hansard, the member nodded.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I apologise.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: Shifting focus—the R licence extensions. We were made aware from R licence holders that the extensions were awaiting your ministerial sign off. Can you give us an update as to where we are with granting those extensions?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Thank you, Mr Banasiak, good question. As per the Government announcement, it was my intention to give all of those R licence holders a one-month extension to their existing licences, noting the fact that they were essentially prevented from engaging in their R licence activity for a period of exactly one month. I think that documentation will be coming to me and across my desk very soon to make that instrument, then government will announce that in due course. So, very soon, Mr Banasiak. Mr Hansen?

Mr HANSEN: It will require a regulation.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Sorry, yes. I have to sign an instrument that requires regulation and then hopefully the Legislative Council will not disallow that and it will be fine.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: We certainly will not. Can you confirm whether this will include licences that are not only due for renewal this year but also people who hold multi-licences? People might apply for a two, three, five-year licence, will that month be tacked on to the two, three and five-year licences as well?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: That is correct. It is not just to cover people who had to renew their licences during that one-month period but anyone who currently held a licence at that time. They would simply have another month added to the end of that licence, no matter whatever duration they still had to go. That is just easy administratively, otherwise it gets too confusing and complicated.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: During the pandemic the Game Licencing Unit implemented online testing for the R licence accreditation. Is it the intention that that will continue past this COVID-19 pandemic, they will still allow for online testing?

Mr HANSEN: That has certainly been serving us well during the pandemic. We are happy to continue the dialogue with—one of the actual committees that was established during this to help guide our decision on this has been a hunting and recreational fishing subcommittee and we are happy to continue to take their views and thoughts on the continuation of the online testing.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: Would you be able to provide some details on the hunting and recreational fishing committee and who was on it?

Mr HANSEN: Sure.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: On notice?

Mr HANSEN: Yes.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: And possibly on notice, what has been the testing application rate during the lockdown period compared to pre-lockdown and whether you see any trend in more people jumping on that online testing?

Mr HANSEN: I would have to take that on notice. I do not have those numbers in front of me.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: When the State forests were closed to hunting it was listed as due to concerns around travelling to regions. Was there any consideration given to modifying the booking system that would still allow local R licence holders to access the forests?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: This is a really interesting area. It highlights that sometimes in a pandemic with all good will certain decisions are made that have other consequences. My understanding was—although I am not the forestry Minister who looks after State forests—that State forests were technically never closed, but there was a restriction on the hunting activity by virtue of the travel restrictions contained within the public health orders. For example, if I live next door to a State forest, which I used to do, according to all other provisions I could still utilise that State forest if I had a lawful reason to be there. The advice that we received from the New South Wales police was that due to the travel restrictions, hunting in State forests should cease, hence the Department of Primary Industries and the Game Licensing Unit did what they did. When that changed we were able to open them back up again.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: It was an all in or all out scenario.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Yes, in a way. You have probably heard this from a number of Ministers: My portfolio was impacted in this particular case, we are not the ones making those decisions or even interpreting the public health orders, that is done by the New South Wales police. Once they make a certain interpretation we all have to fall in line and make sure we administratively do the back-end work, which in this case was the Game Licensing Unit making that determination.

A lot of lessons have been learnt from this pandemic and that is probably one example of where the travel restrictions meant that—a bit like recreational fishing—you could still have undertaken that activity because the physical State forest was not closed but it was restricted because of travel. If you were very close in proximity to the State forest, could you still have undertaken that activity? Again, we have to adhere to the interpretation of the New South Wales police, and we did. In this case I would rather be erring on the side of caution than the other way around. In the end it was a month, hence because of that I made the decision that we tack another month on the end of the licences to try to do the right thing.

The CHAIR: Sorry, Minister. Did you say you asked for an interpretation of the law from the police, is that what happened?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Not the law but the public health orders in terms of the travel restrictions. Mr Hansen might be able to detail that because his officials dealt with the State Emergency Operations Centre on that basis.

The CHAIR: They are the law. They have the effect of law. Is that what happened? Mr Hansen, can you explain what happened?

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: Not to put words in your mouth but the health restrictions around travel were fairly vague and when you say you were seeking interpretation from the police, you are saying that the police were determining what would be deemed reasonable?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Correct.

The CHAIR: Central Coast, wrong; Queanbeyan, okay. For example. I was wondering where the advice came from. You were going to ask Mr Hansen.

Mr HANSEN: We consulted with New South Wales police with regards to how best to interpret the restrictions as per the public health orders, how they would be viewing and how they would be assessing non-essential, how it was interpreted for hunting purposes. We had a discussion about the fact that at that point in time there had just been a closure of the booking system for campsites in a number of public land areas, so the extension of the view for the same purpose of reducing the risk of inter-region transport or movement of people—given the fact that the vast majority of R licence holders do not live locally to a State forest—the closure of the booking system for State forests for hunters. That still allowed those hunters who lived local to private land that they had access to the opportunity to hunt without increasing the risk of people travelling from Sydney over the Great Divide, stopping at petrol stations, grocery stores and so forth with the potential spread that that might create.

The CHAIR: Could you table or provide a copy of the advice you got from police in that regard?

Mr HANSEN: I would have to take that on notice. Given the fact that at that stage a large amount of our conversations with police were via the phone, in terms of a discussion around how they were going to interpret what sounded sensible, what sounded practical and what would they support.

The CHAIR: If you could give details of those if it is in writing, that would be great. Otherwise, details on notice, including when those conversations were happening.

Mr HANSEN: Okay, no problem.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: Just shifting focus, you have already given some commentary around saleyards. Is it your assertion that there were no actual health order restrictions placed on the activities of saleyards by the Government?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Yes. I am glad you raised this subject, one of my favourites at the moment. I guess in response to, and one of the very first issues that came out of a number of those 10 industry working groups was that contained within the first iteration of the public health orders, again, a rather, to use your word, "vague", open to interpretation restriction around public gatherings and auction houses and such like. Of course their concern was: We need some clarity, because if you shut down livestock sales, how is the food supply chain going to work? Where are abattoirs going to get their stock from? Woolies, Coles, all the chains? I asked the

Department of Primary Industries and we worked through the Ministry of Health and basically got the public health orders amended very quickly to ensure that the public gathering restrictions were not in place for saleyards, which meant that for livestock sales and fibre auctions, like wool sales, physical distancing was in place—and probably nowadays I do not think we view that as a restriction, that is just part of what we do now. Aside from that, there was no restriction on the gathering at a sale.

At the same time that was happening a number of people in that industry were developing protocols, which were sent to Minister Littleproud, the Federal agriculture Minister, which has been signed off on and a number of saleyard operators have imposed their own restrictions and requirements, vis-a-vis registering before you go; temperature checking; not allowing sellers to actually be at the sale, only buyers; not allowing members of the public in. I have been quite clear in my commentary that that is their prerogative to do that if they want if they own and operate those saleyards, albeit they have to comply with national competition law, which is a Commonwealth area. But the New South Wales Government was not imposing any of those restrictions on saleyards, they were being imposed by the owners or operators of those yards. Now a lot of the yards are realising that and opening back up again, which is good.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: What about the yards run by local councils? I am aware that some local councils are imposing the same restrictions. We have also had complaints that farmers who were looking to restock were regarded as non-genuine buyers and were not allowed to attend. Then you have stocking agents trying to buy for 20, 30, 40 farmers. You can see that is not going to work.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Absolutely, it is not. It is not ideal. Those complaints that were made to you, probably the same people or other people certainly made those complaints direct to me or through my office and that is why I issued a media release.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: I saw that.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I did a lot of media around it to try to spread the word that those requirements are not imposed by any New South Wales public health order or restriction and that it is up to the saleyards operators to exercise a degree of commonsense. But also, and I am no legal authority, there are some sitting around this table, it could be construed as some form of potential market manipulation and breach of some form of national competition law.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: That was the concern expressed, only allowing large buyers like Woolworths, Coles and JBS, and not allowing the restockers would essentially allow for that price manipulation. Have you received any reports of complaints? I imagine most would go federally, but have you received any reports of complaints about price manipulation happening during that time?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I have certainly received a lot of concerns from farmers who are worried that that could potentially be happening. Indeed, later today I will be writing a couple of items of correspondence to some organisations across the State that operate saleyards, that represent saleyards agents asking them in strong terms to carefully consider the various parts of Commonwealth legislation to make sure that they do not find themselves wanting in that regard, because it is a concern. Going back to Mr Searle's point about a difficult time and economic stimulus, if mum and dad operators—if I can use that colloquial term—are locked out of their local saleyards, then it becomes just the domain of the big guys.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: Given that, as we have spoken about, we have had some decent rain and a perfect opportunity for some of these farmers to restock and put them out in good paddocks.

The CHAIR: Did you send a circular around? Do you have a contact list for the saleyards and have you sent a circular around?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: That is right, yes, I have. I have notified all those various groups and operators that, basically, the restrictions that they are imposing, whilst well meaning, just to make it clear, it is a decision for them but they are not the restrictions that are imposed by the New South Wales public health order. Virtually just to clarify to each of them what the public health orders provide for and what they do not and allowing them to make their own decisions.

The CHAIR: Can you provide us with a copy of that?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Sure.

The CHAIR: On notice and tell us when it went out?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Sure.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: Just on commercial fishing, how many commercial fishermen have accessed the fee waivers that you have on the DPI website, I think it is over \$1 million? What does that equate to in terms of the number of commercial fishermen?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I do not have that number in front of me, Mr Banasiak.

Mr HANSEN: That applied to all commercial fishers. We automatically applied that, they did not need to apply.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: That was a broad waiver. We can get you the exact number. It applied to every single one of them. I just do not have that exact number in front of me.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: Has the review into the commercial fishing regulations been delayed by COVID-19? Has that impacted your consultation?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Not to my knowledge. Mr Hansen?

Mr HANSEN: No, not that I am aware of. I think we have had over 150 submissions from commercial fishers across the State in response to the discussion paper that is out there, as well as a number of submissions from organisations and groups of fishers making comment back in. Again, there might be some slight delay purely because of the fact that they have asked for extra time to get their meetings together, but it is not going to significantly change the time frame that we have for the review.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: Are you concerned that 150 out of 1,000 commercial fishermen, you might need to extend the time frame, given that is a very small percentage?

Mr HANSEN: When you then look at some of the additional ones that are from organisations that have made submissions on behalf of their members, a combination of organisations and individuals, I think there is a fair representation across the board in that number of submissions.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: Have there been any estimates of how this has impacted the commercial fishing industry with restaurant trading ceasing, and noting Ms Houssos' examples of oyster farmers providing a lot of their produce to restaurants? Have there been any figures floated about in terms of how this has impacted that industry?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: There have been some estimates. We can provide that to you on notice. It is not just the oyster industry, the abalone industry is also one that stands out in particular. As I said, we are considering some detailed assistance measures for that sector and hopefully we will be announcing that very soon.

Mr HANSEN: If I may, Minister. We have done some work with the seafood industry with regards to financial impacts, and these are obviously just sort of anecdotal reports back in from them, but it looks as though—obviously particularly the hospitality and food service areas have been really vital markets in the past for the seafood industry and where they have felt the majority of the pain. Oysters, urchins, abalone, and lobster obviously, were hit hardest both with that downturn in restaurant trade as well as the restriction in exports, and the amount of airfreight availability too.

The oyster industry has indicated sales have been down, in some cases up to 85 per cent to 95 per cent. Prawn farmers on the North Coast have had issues with movement of staff from Queensland to run hatcheries up there. That cross-border movement of staff has been an issue for them. Co-ops are reporting in excess of 30 per cent decline in their customer throughput, and total business revenue for a number of the industry groups. They are saying their members are telling them it is between 30 per cent and 40 per cent, with some as high as 65 per cent as a result of the impacts on downturn in some of their key market segments.

The CHAIR: Those figures on the oyster industry, that is a really distressing figure to hear. You said you are about to make some kind of announcement in terms of funding. It would seem that that cannot wait. What is your time frame?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Very soon, Mr Chairman.

The CHAIR: If you have an industry like that, that I think all of us highly value, can you give an indication, is it going to be a financial package? Because a collapse in demand of 85 per cent to 90 per cent in the oyster industry must be devastating to the sector. I do not think they can wait.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: As I said, very soon. That is all I can say, Mr Chairman.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: Was there any work done during COVID-19 to investigate what would happen if we had to close the Sydney Fish Market or close co-ops if they had a positive case or a scare?

Mr HANSEN: There was certainly work done in concert with them and NSW Health about how to manage a positive detection on site, what process and what systems they would need to put in place, a bit like a detection in any other major gathering of people.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: I am more thinking about what would happen if they had to shut down for 48 hours, seafood still on the road being trucked there, or seafood needing to go to co-ops for sale? If they are closed they cannot sell that seafood and it gets thrown in the bin, essentially, and lost revenue.

Mr HANSEN: This was more about what contingencies can they put in place for handling stock on hand and stock en route to make sure that that was not at risk.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: On notice would you be able to provide some details as to what those contingencies were?

Mr HANSEN: Sure.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Can I ask Mr Hansen, or Minister, do you have any additional information? Were there alternating labour force arrangements? What was in place? It is not just fish markets, it is processing—

Mr HANSEN: Meat processors and intensive livestock industries, yes. What we did was we worked with NSW Health and in some cases we plagiarised what had been done in other jurisdictions or in other locations to be able to take the work that had been done there but basically produced a series of guidelines that can be used by facilities. Those guidelines were then tailored by each facility to suit their particular operation, their scale, their size. We can make available those standard guidelines that were produced. They start first and foremost at how do these facilities, first of all, protect the human health of the workers and the customers, then moved on to how they protect any animal welfare issues, or address any animal welfare issues, then move down to product security, and then move down to minimising economic losses.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: We were talking about the Rural Assistance Authority, if you can provide those numbers by program and month so we can see over time how they have—

Mr HANSEN: Over the last 12 months?

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Yes, that would be useful, thank you. I wanted to ask a few more questions on the specific issue about waiving and deferring the payments. Is it still the case that people have to pay the deferred money back at the end of the waiver period?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Yes, that is my understanding that is still the case, yes.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: So it is not put on to the end of the loan, or the loan period is not extended like it normally would be, right at the end of that deferral period you have to pay that amount?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Yes. There would be a payment plan entered into, yes.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: No, is there a payment plan entered into, or is the entire amount deferred to the end of the deferral period?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Well, it depends how long the deferral period would be for.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Perhaps, Mr Hansen, you can provide us with some specifics on this?

Mr HANSEN: We communicate directly—this is getting back to the category of commercial fishers. We did go out, as I said, to all of our commercial fishing loan customers with text message and email message on 22 April to advise that they could request deferrals and if they wanted to, to contact the RAA. I am advised that 19 of the 58 RAA fisheries customers have utilised deferral arrangements since March 2020.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Are you able to tell me whether that is still the arrangement that is in place, the amount is just deferred then it is payable at the end of the deferral period? Or is it then put on to the end of the loan, or are the loan repayments extended over a period? What is the arrangement?

Mr HANSEN: I do not have the individual details because it will vary by individual customer in terms of what they have sought in terms of those deferrals, but we are able, probably not by customer, but to give you the types of arrangements that they have sought. We can give you that on notice.

The CHAIR: Minister, given we are going to see potentially a whole lot of economic pain come at once if the Federal Government continues down the path of reducing the JobSeeker payments, and removing many of the—

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: JobKeeper.

The CHAIR: No—well, both are on the table, reducing the amount for JobSeeker, removing much of the coverage of JobKeeper. If those economic impacts hit us in September or October do you see how having a deferral, rather than a forgiveness arrangement for fees, if those deferrals hit at the same time we are likely to see this avalanche of economic hits? Are there considerations, given that, to instead of having a deferral have a waiver of these fees?

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: Given that not many commercial fishermen would even actually apply for JobKeeper.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Yes, they probably would not qualify.

The CHAIR: Clearly, we are coming into potentially this—I described it as an avalanche, there is probably a better description of it, but these series of things hitting at once, and if the deferrals hit at the same time that could aggravate. Are there plans afoot to waive instead of defer?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: To both of you, and I see where you are both going and you are right to do so because I guess the Rural Assistance Authority, operating under the Rural Assistance Authority Act, does ultimately have a lot of discretion, although it obviously has to adhere to the same fiduciary responsibilities and laws that every other institution like Commonwealth Bank, Westpac, whatever. But it does have flexibility to do that and in the past it has always been the policy to assess these things on a case by case basis, rather than a blanket approach. Given that in this particular category that is being asked about it is a particularly small group of people, I think we can probably get a pretty good feel.

I do not know whether there is much diversity in that group or whether a lot of them are in similar situations. That would have to be assessed, but I can assure the Committee that, yes, the Act does allow the authority a lot of discretion in this regard and I would be as Minister encouraging the authority to use that discretion, obviously in the context of the current and future—as you correctly identify— economic climate. Because it is quite apparent that if the Commonwealth sticks to its current announced time frame that we could be heading off a rather steep economic cliff in a few months time.

The CHAIR: Does that mean you will make representations to the authority encouraging them to consider waivers rather than deferrals?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I meet with the director of the authority, indeed I was in Orange just last week talking with the director and a number of the staff about a number of things. But, yes, I guess it is not as blunt as that but it is about encouraging them to exercise the discretion relative to the current conditions. We want to keep people in business, we want to keep people working, keep people in jobs and in that context they will make those decisions. Mr Hansen?

Mr HANSEN: I was just going to say, the staff at the authority are very receptive to discussions about how to implement a deferral to best suit the business needs. These are 10-year loans, so repayment of any deferred amounts in later years is going to be significantly out from the year that we are in at the moment in terms of their scheduling, or they might want to do it earlier. That is the kind of discussion and flexibility that they have. They do not have the ability at the moment to actually make decisions about waiving, because that is actually a cost that they do not have the capacity to make those calls themselves. But they can work with the loan holders on the scheduling and the deferral of those payments over that 10-year forward period, which hopefully puts us out into periods in which there are boom times, and probably more bust times, and then more boom times again over that decade.

The CHAIR: If there is not the capacity to waive, is the Government considering any necessary legislative measures that might be required to provide that capacity, for the reasons we have discussed?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: And I would be happy to consider those measures if the need arose to do that, and I think, as you have heard from Mr Hansen, the authority will work with the individual loan holders. But if there are those issues that arise I am happy to consider that, if that is required.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I want to be really clear, that there is flexibility within the arrangements that can be made by the individual with the RAA and if they choose to defer the amount to the end

of the deferral period or if they choose to put that later on in the loan, that can be the case? There is the flexibility, I just want to be really clear about that?

Mr HANSEN: We have the flexibility to work with them on how that deferral occurs. We have not as yet extended any of the terms because of the 10-year length of time. But we do have—as I said, 19 of the 58 fisheries customers have used the deferral arrangements since March this year.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: And there will not be penalties on them for seeking those deferrals?

Mr HANSEN: No.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I come back to the question around, whether it is the Sydney Fish Market or processing plants, or whatever, and you talked—or perhaps it was the Minister—about learning from other jurisdictions about what they were doing. Minister, have you advocated for asymptomatic testing of workers, particularly in these highly valuable industries, these essential industries, as we have seen in other States?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Asymptomatic testing?

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Yes, that is right.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Anyone is able to be tested at the moment, whether showing symptoms or not showing symptoms.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: But you have not advocated, earlier on during the peak of the pandemic, for workers to be tested in a more systematic way, as we have seen in other States?

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: That again contains an assertion on your part.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: No. I mean—

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: It is true. In Victoria they are.

The CHAIR: I think the Minister can deal with that in his answer.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: This portfolio through the Department of Primary Industries, the advice provided to all of industry is based on the best health advice that is provided by the Chief Medical Officer and the public health orders. We are guided with the advice that we provide to industry by the advice that we receive from the appropriate authorities, and that is the nature of the advice that we have provided on every occasion.

Mr HANSEN: The guidelines that we have sent out to the industries do recommend that staff checks in terms of their health say they should be done on a daily basis. Now, that is then interpreted by individual businesses as to what they want to do. As you would be aware with a lot of hospitals now, temperature checks on entry and so forth. Some, it is a declaration that a staff member needs to sign each day with regards to entry. I am not aware of any business that has gone to random COVID testing or collecting of samples for testing from workers that are not showing any symptoms. That interpretation of doing a daily check of each staff member's health status is being interpreted differently by different businesses in terms of setting up their requirements to minimise the risk to them and their workforce.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Obviously we have seen temperature checks here at Parliament and they are being done in a range of different avenues. Minister, you are aware that in Victoria they are testing asymptomatic workers?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: In some cases, yes, they are.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: They were doing that in a meatworks that uncovered a cluster down there. That was part of their much more proactive testing regime.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: That was in response to identification. Do not conflate the whole period with what they have had. That is not what has happened down there with that meatworks.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Victoria is doing a much more aggressive asymptomatic testing regime than has been undertaken in New South Wales. That is also the case within their essential industries, which has been identified. Are you aware of that, Minister?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: What is the point? What is your question?

The CHAIR: Minister, I think the question is: Is New South Wales going to be doing more aggressive asymptomatic testing in the industry to match what is happening in Victoria, accepting that there have not been

the outbreaks in New South Wales that we have seen in Victoria but that asymptomatic testing may nevertheless be a very sensible precaution.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I am not aware of any plans that the Government has—albeit I am not the health Minister—to mandate asymptomatic testing in any facility—

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I am not asking about the Government—

The Hon. NATALIE WARD: Hang on, let him finish the question—

The CHAIR: I think the Minister needs to be allowed to finish.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I am not aware of any plans the Government has to mandate asymptomatic testing on a daily or regular basis in any facility, whether it is an abattoir, an egg-packing facility or, indeed, Parliament. I do not know.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I am not asking you—

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Or, indeed, hospitals.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: —about mandating it. I am asking whether you as the Minister ever advocated or sought—you said you were on a weekly hook-up with other Ministers. You were looking to learn from those experiences. Did you ever advocate for it? Are you ever going to advocate for it?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: No.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Okay, that is fine.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I take the advice of the Chief Medical Officer, as I believe the Government and the Parliament do. I am very comfortable with that.

The CHAIR: That is your understanding at the moment, that the advice of the Chief Medical Officer is not to have widespread asymptomatic testing in the industry?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: No, we have not received any of that advice.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Minister, what actions are your Government taking to assist primary producers in relation to ensuring they have a sufficient supply of skilled and seasonal workers such as shearers and pickers due to the travel restrictions caused by the pandemic?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: That is a really good question. First of all, we did not impose as a Government any restrictions on our borders, which—

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: I understand that.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: —has been a huge assistance to the availability of seasonal workers within the State. As part of those weekly hook-ups with agricultural Ministers across the State, we discussed as a group of agricultural Ministers with Minister Littleproud about developing an accord or an arrangement across Australia that we could work out how we would deal with seasonal workers. Obviously when the Prime Minister announced virtually that we were not accepting people from overseas into our country and there would be restrictions on people who were currently in the country getting out, the Commonwealth had to make a decision about 140,000 visa holders—Pacific islander visa holders, 457 visa holders—who were currently stuck in Australia, could not get home and whose visas were about to expire. The Commonwealth made a decision to extend those visas by six months, which is very wise.

Then all the States got together to work out an accord or an agreement about how we would monitor or regulate the travel of those seasonal workers. Obviously I asked the NSW Department of Primary Industries to consult with the NSW Ministry of Health and the Chief Medical Officer, and we put forward a proposal which was accepted that essentially there would be no travel restrictions at all within New South Wales for seasonal workers. They could come into the State, they could travel within the State from property to property or workplace to workplace.

The only proviso was—and this was based on the health advice—that if a visa holder was coming from a metropolitan area, a capital city, into a region then they had to either do 14 days in isolation at their point of origin before moving out to the regions or present themselves for a COVID-19 test and demonstrate they had a negative test. The Commonwealth agreed. I believe they incorporated that into some of the visa conditions, so we did not see a need as a Government to issue a specific public health order around seasonal workers, because if they were found in breach their visa would be cancelled and they would be shipped off home straight away

anyway. Industry was very happy with that. Indeed industry, through the working groups, was very keen to ensure that there was not any requirement for it to fill out lots of paperwork, find accommodation for seasonal workers et cetera. In the end that was a position that was adopted by most of the States and agreed to by the Commonwealth.

It is so far, so good. At this stage it seems it has provided a sufficient workforce. Indeed, the States that have had trouble with their workforce have been those that have insisted on hard borders, particularly South Australia and Western Australia, because it did not provide for any additional seasonal workers to travel within Australia into those jurisdictions. By us keeping our borders open, we have actually had a lot of the seasonal workers who were turned away from Western Australia and South Australia stay in New South Wales and get employed here.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: You are not hearing any reports of the industries in New South Wales having any difficulty attracting sufficient workers?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Outside of COVID, there is always the challenge—particularly in the agricultural sector—of getting skilled 457 visa holders. Indeed, it has been a longstanding issue that the National Farmers' Federation has taken up with the Commonwealth about visa holders and visa conditions, and the desire to have a specific agricultural-based visa. A lot of agricultural production struggles to find skilled workers—plant operators, mechanics, things like that—just because the pay in the agricultural sector for those skills is not comparable with the pay scale in other industries that also require those skills. That has been an issue. Has it been amplified by COVID? No, not on the information I have seen. Nevertheless, it is still an ongoing issue. But at least the seasonal worker issue, which potentially could have been disastrous, has been resolved and those industries have access to those employees.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: The problems with seasonal workers are no worse than usual?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: No. There has not been anything in COVID that I am aware of. Mr Hansen might want to comment. It is just because we were able to come to an agreement with the States and the Commonwealth about how we would deal with those particular visa class holders. I think by and large it has worked pretty well.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Just before Mr Hansen commences his answer, can I raise with you, Minister—I think you mentioned visa workers and particularly those coming from the Pacific. In recent days there have been reports that workers from the Pacific who have been brought here particularly by labour-hire companies have had a significant proportion of their income deducted for accommodation, in ways that can only be described I think as fairly scandalous.

The CHAIR: I think just "scandalous".

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Yes.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: More than that, yes.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: I think there is no disagreement there.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: "Disgusting", I would say.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: What measures are you as Minister thinking of taking to combat that, let us face it, exploitation?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: The actual program highlighted an instance actually occurring in my own electorate, so as a local member I have actually already written to my local Federal member requesting him to approach his Federal counterparts basically to find out what is going on.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: He will be on that straight away.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I understand from that program—do you know who my Federal member is, Mr Khan? He is a friend to both of us.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: It would be Mr Joyce, would it not?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Like Voldemort, he shall not be named.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Not by you, anyway.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Essentially my understanding from the program is that they are here in Australia on a Commonwealth visa system and there is a Federal Government entity that is supposed to administer that scheme or essentially look after those people who come in and then get tied up with labour-hire companies.

From the surface it is all a little bit confusing. I must confess to not knowing the ins and outs of how this actually all works, considering it all happens at a Commonwealth level.

Nevertheless, I have written to seek clarification and, obviously, an investigation into the issues that that particular program raised, because that is, in my view, absolutely disgusting and scandalous and does nothing for those individual people as humans but also our reputation as a country to continue to have people from those countries come in—literally, without those people coming in on those visas a number of our industries, such as that particular abattoir in Inverell, would not exist. For a number of reasons it is very difficult to find Australians who will undertake that employment.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Minister, just as a follow-up in relation to that, my understanding is that a lot of these visa holders are actually sponsored by the labour-hire companies that bring them here, so obviously their ability to complain about that kind of exploitation and other kinds of exploitation is pretty much undercut. What actions are you as Minister thinking of proposing to your Federal counterparts to deal with that situation?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: First of all, I am trying to get some information to better understand how that all works. I must confess to not being as au fait as I would like to be about how it works—how the services of those particular employees are procured, what agreements they sign up to, the pay scale and what protections they have under various pieces of legislation to make sure that they are not being exploited in the workplace, but also in this circumstance they are being exploited with regard to their accommodation. The home that they are renting—I do not know exactly where that is in Inverell but I would be very surprised if you could not rent that on the private market for about 400 bucks a week. The amount that has been docked from their pay is scandalous. First of all, I am trying to find out and understand how that system all works, and then obviously requesting some form of formal inquiry or investigation from the appropriate Commonwealth authority, as a start.

The CHAIR: Minister, this is not the first time this exploitation of foreign workers who are brought out on those visas has been raised. It is not just limited to seasonal work in the agriculture industry. We saw the exact same case in relation to hospitality workers—

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: In the Blue Mountains, for example.

The CHAIR: In the Blue Mountains—in fact, in or about where Mr Searle resides. We saw the exact same: agreements being entered into with outrageously offensive charges for accommodation and upkeep, which took a very large proportion of what are otherwise quite low wages. If you are making inquiries, will you extend your ambit of inquiries more broadly? Because it is a broader problem—one aspect of it happens in your portfolio.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: This is the first time this issue has come across my desk, simply because it is the first occasion I am aware of where it intersects with this portfolio. I would imagine if there was some form of Commonwealth inquiry, which I certainly think there needs to be now, that it would have a pretty wide ambit. The program itself mainly focused on the docking of their pay for their accommodation, which is something that I have not had raised before. It is incredibly concerning.

The CHAIR: Yes. It is not uncommon. I would give you, as another example, that the same exploitative arrangements exist out of the hospitality industry with a particularly notorious operator in the Blue Mountains and, in fact, in the lower Hunter Valley.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: My concern is that if we allow this to become settled as the norm in perception then it has huge consequences for the agricultural sector if the word goes back, "Don't come to Australia" or "Don't come to a particular operator", because literally our agriculture sector would not function without overseas workers, seasonal workers.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: It is one of the primary sources of income for many South Pacific nations.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Yes, that is right.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: There is a two-way impact of this stuff.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Yes. They should not be exploited.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Beyond aid monies, this is one of their few sources.

The CHAIR: Yes. We clearly have a fiduciary obligation. If people are coming here for the reasons Mr Searle said they are very vulnerable, because their visa status depends upon their relationship with the labour-hire company or the employer. If it is the labour-hire company or the employer that is making them enter into these exploitative accommodation arrangements I would imagine this is an underreported problem, Minister.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: Just touching on the 457 visas and the reliance of the agriculture industry on the scheme, what is the Government doing to shift that in any way to grow our own and provide incentives for people to go into the regions and be employed by these meat processing plants? We know a lot of meat processing plants do hire a lot of these 457 visa workers. What are we doing to encourage a "grow your own" sort of mentality?

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Gee, this has been a longstanding issue.

The CHAIR: It is a good question, though.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: Is it just a foregone conclusion? Have we given up on the issue?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: No, I do not think we have given up. I do not think anyone ever should give up on the issue, but it is incredibly hard. I will give you two local examples. Since we are on the theme of Bindaree Beef at Inverell, they employ around 700 people and around half the workforce are visa holders. Around a hundred kays away at Guyra is a tomato farm that employs over 700 people. Around a third of that workforce are visa holders. My understanding is they do not get paid any less or more to work there, but it is just very hard to find locals who are willing to undertake that sort of work.

More broadly, how do we encourage people into the agriculture sector? We have got a raft of programs to do that—particularly young people. But in terms of encouraging people to take up particular jobs within the food supply chain, that is a tough thing. It will not surprise the Committee or any MP that from time to time you do get people coming through your door who unfortunately are unemployed. I have had more and more of that lately due to COVID. When you sit down and talk to those people they want a job, but more often than not the feedback I get is, "We want a job but we do not want that particular job. I want a job but I am not willing to go and pick tomatoes at Guyra"; or "I am not going to go and get trained to become a boner on the boning-room floor at an abattoir".

That is even though that company will say, "You come to us with no skills, no experience. We will pay for you to be trained, we will buy all of our equipment, all of your uniform. You do not have to spend a dollar. We will train you up and make you ready for the boning-room floor." Yet still it is very difficult for those sorts of companies to find people. I do not have a solution to that but, gee, if you have got one or anyone has got one I would be really keen to listen, because it has been a tough nut to crack for decades in the bush. Mr Hansen may add to that.

Mr HANSEN: If I might just add to that, the one thing that the agricultural industries have been doing, however—which has been their long-term strategy to address this, because this is not a new phenomenon for them—has actually been automation and the investment in technology to actually reduce the amount of the type of human labour jobs required in facilities. For example, a number of meat processing plants have gone to robotic boning. That means that the jobs that are required in that plant are actually jobs such as electricians and computer engineers to be able to set up the programs, to set up the equipment to be able to—it completely changes the nature of the workforce on site to being tech-focused roles helping to create, maintain and constantly adjust the technology on site. I think we are seeing that more and more.

Those of you on social media would see how many members of our farming community over these last couple of months have been socially isolating in tractor cabs as they have been sowing. They are using guidance equipment that allows them to do the long hours that they are doing in their cabs, because it is basically doing the driving and modifying the application rate of their seed and their fertiliser. That changes the types of assistance that those farmers need to repair their equipment, to maintain their equipment. It is far more than a toolbox these days to maintain equipment that has got sophisticated computer technology in it.

The CHAIR: But the increased automation in, say, those large glasshouse tomato facilities and the increased kind of industrialisation of the way tomatoes are produced actually means a lot of the jobs now are extraordinarily repetitive under very tight time frames. Many local people find it hard to find value in that kind of work, because effectively you are a machine in a tomato factory.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: A human machine.

The CHAIR: It is not just a question of the views of the local people; it is actually that the nature of the work is that you are a human machine in a tomato factory.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: There is not much getting away from that. The perverse thing is that the drive to more automation can have the other effect, where you actually see a reduction in the amount of employment. The cotton industry is an absolute classic example. Where everyone would once go cotton chipping

that does not happen anymore, because now we have got crops that do not require cotton chipping because of genetic modification and other herbicides. You do not have boll buggies and module makers in the cotton industry, because now you go and spend \$1.2 million and you buy a picker that will pick and bale cotton for you and you have just got someone who comes and picks up the bales.

When before you had five people employed in a paddock, now you have got one person. That has just happened in the last half a decade. It does not solve the issue of where you find those people to do the jobs that Mr Shoebridge said. They are repetitive. It is like picking fruit, citrus or whatever around Batlow or in the south of the State: yes, it is probably not a lot of fun, but nevertheless they are essential jobs. It is just hard to find Australians who want to do that work.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: Just one final question: Given the amount of seafood we import from overseas, what additional measures have been put in place around biosecurity, particularly importing those products from known virus hotspots or sources?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I will ask Mr Hansen to address this in a moment, but I know the Commonwealth Government has stepped up its funding for its quarantine inspection services at all ports and entry points into Australia. There is a number of working groups that we are part of, as well as the other States, to make sure that if there are issues that there is a plan in place for how to deal with any detections at any of those ports or places like that. Mr Hansen might have some more information on what the Commonwealth is doing.

Mr HANSEN: I just want to be clear: Any of the quarantine arrangements are purely to address already existing known risks and concerns, because there is no evidence to suggest that COVID is spread by food and therefore that the pandemic has a potential food path risk. I think that is very important for consumers to make sure we continue to reiterate that. The spread that we have seen and continue to see is human-to-human spread.

Our quarantine arrangements in terms of importation of foods remains as vigilant as always, both in terms of not just the inspection at entry but actually our work with the exporting government to set the food safety standards that they need to actually make sure their exporters are complying with before they are actually allowed to export to Australia. The same way that our exporters have to meet the incoming or the purchasing country's food safety requirements, we set standards and the Federal Government works with the exporting country's government to make sure those standards are adhered to. The partnership between the inspection by the exporting country as well as the inspection by the importing country—in this case, the Australian Government—are the two key safety mechanisms that are in place.

The CHAIR: Is there any quarantine or public health advice that there is a COVID-19 risk from the transmission of foodstuffs?

Mr HANSEN: No.

The CHAIR: Is the advice that there is not a risk?

Mr HANSEN: Both the World Health Organization and the World Organisation for Animal Health point to the fact that there is no advice at the moment that suggests that animals or animal products are potential spreaders of the disease.

The CHAIR: I assume that extends to plant-based products as well?

Mr HANSEN: Yes, one would assume so. Again, good hygiene is required. The same way that inanimate objects can be potential transmission pathways—that is why we wipe down door handles and lift buttons and so forth. Typical good food-handling hygiene procedures actually work in favour of reducing the potential risk of any spread, but those procedures are in place as much for protection of spread of any other virus, bacteria or disease.

The CHAIR: What works for salmonella works for COVID-19.

Mr HANSEN: That is correct.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: Lastly, picking up on your opening statement, you reflected on the greater consciousness about food security and buying local. What is the Government doing to capitalise on that reignited sentiment about buying local and maybe shifting the focus of our agriculture to being more domestically consumed rather than internationally exported?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: We are determined, through our various strategies and efforts, to partner with industry on a number of programs to get the word out to the Australian community—but, in this case, just in New South Wales—to think about, when you are going to your local supermarket shelf, looking on the labels at

the country of origin labelling, seeing where the constituent products that make up that product are from and thinking about supporting Australian produce or, even better, New South Wales produce if you can.

I think in a way that for the first time in a long time, particularly in the early days of COVID when all the supermarket shelves were stripped all the time—okay, it was toilet paper initially, but that soon passed and then it became staples: meats, pastas, things like that—I think for the first time in a long time people started to actually think, "Gosh, if the shelves are empty, where do these things actually all come from? Where are they actually produced?" Maybe that is just me, I do not know. We are going to try, post COVID, to capitalise on that goodwill or that focus or that memory that people will have of what it was like on the supermarket shelves and to remind people of how important food security is. But to maintain good food security you have got to support your local producers.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Minister, what assistance is your Government providing in terms of finding or funding alternative forms of accommodation for seasonal workers, not only to avoid the exploitation of a kind we discussed in the previous round of questions, but also so they do not have to share amenities with other workers as a kind of COVID-19 response?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: My understanding is the responsibility for the finding of accommodation for seasonal workers still rests with the employer or, in some instances, is for the worker to find their own accommodation. I say that because in most cases the seasonal workers are going to areas that have had seasonal workers coming into those communities for decades. It is well established. Some will be accommodated on farm or on property. Some will be located in the local caravan park or in the local hotel. All of those operators would be aware of their obligations in terms of distancing and shared facilities, and to make sure that they have those cleaning arrangements in place.

The Government has not taken a role, Mr Searle, in actively seeking out accommodation because in most of these communities all of the accommodation already exists, because they have had seasonal workers there for a long time. So far there have not been any impediments to people accessing that accommodation, either on farm or in that local community.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Sure, but we have seen exploitation of some of these workers. Maybe there is a role for Government to play in putting workers in the way of non-exploitative forms of accommodation?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Yes, sorry. There is a difference I guess between—some companies engage, in the case of obviously that example that was publicised, through a Commonwealth labour-hire firm or what have you. However, in most cases with seasonal workers they are literally only in a particular location for a matter of weeks or months and then they move on to the next property, or they move on to a different part of the State and so forth. They are not indentured, if you like. They simply move from place to place. If there is a bit of fruit to pick or a bit of work to do on that property, they will do that and then they will move on—hence the term "seasonal worker".

They are a little bit different again to those visa holders who specifically then sign an agreement to work in one particular location for an extended period of time—either for six months, 12 months or what have you—and then return home and a new group comes in. That is why in that case we have not been involved and, indeed, with that scenario that was broadcast on television, because they come in under a Commonwealth scheme and the way that they are employed and their conditions are presumably also controlled by the Commonwealth. We have not had any involvement to this point.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: But no doubt there are some things that can be learnt from this experience to try to do things better next season?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Absolutely. I am always happy to learn new things. Hopefully when I get a reply from the Federal Government in relation to that issue we will probably learn a little bit more—perhaps some things that are quite unsavoury.

Mr HANSEN: If I could add just quickly, we have provided guidance for both seasonal workers and seasonal worker employers to actually provide them and link them through to what is required in the accommodation with regards to the public health orders—how to meet the public health orders for seasonal worker accommodation. If you're seasonal worker who does not have accommodation that is provided as part of your employment we have highlighted some sites that they can go to, to help them find accommodation within regions.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: But we do not procure the accommodation.

Mr HANSEN: No. We simply act as a guide post to where they might go to be able to independently find their own accommodation, which would not have addressed the recent case that has been identified, given the fact that it was a labour-hire company that was establishing that for them.

The CHAIR: Minister, did you refer it at all to NSW Fair Trading? NSW Fair Trading may actually have some oversight if there are deeply unfair or inappropriate arrangements in place in respect of a lease.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Did I refer what, sorry?

The CHAIR: I know that you wrote to a certain Federal member about the matter.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Oh, sorry: No, I have not.

The CHAIR: Do you think it might be useful to also refer the issue to Fair Trading?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I think I might. Thank you, Chairman.

The CHAIR: Excellent.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I am sure you will as well.

The CHAIR: Well, if you are going to, Minister, I will leave it with a ministerial referral, which I think would be useful.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I will contact my colleague today, Minister Anderson.

The CHAIR: That will fix it.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Just in relation to these matters of exploitation and vulnerability, particularly the courage shown by the particular worker to speak out, is your Government or are you as Minister considering any mechanisms by which you might help people come forward with these sorts of tales of being exploited when they come here as workers, particularly in the industries that you are the steward of?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Yes. It is probably too early to say, Mr Searle, to be ultra specific. As I said the broadcast aired very recently and I am still trying to ascertain some information from the Commonwealth about how this all actually works and what has gone wrong here, or where are the gaps that these people have fallen through to be exploited in this way. It may very well be, as the Chair highlighted, if there is to be some involvement either to make the Commonwealth Government administer that program a lot fairer in a way that does not see people exploited in that way, or if there is a gap that can be plugged by the State Government, finding out where that gap is and how we can plug it.

But I cannot say what the Government will or will not do just because we are still trying to get, or I am still trying to get, some information from the Commonwealth Government about how this all works and how a situation like this can possibly eventuate, and what they are going to do to make sure it will not happen again or to anyone else in any other sector.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: As I think the Chair pointed out earlier, although this is not an unusual occurrence in terms of other industries in New South Wales so no doubt there is a continuing problem. Minister, can you outline what risk mitigation measures are being put in place by your Government or recommended by your Government to ensure that seasonal workers are safe from exposure to COVID-19, or at least their risks of exposure are assessed and addressed.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Certainly. Mr Hansen can talk to the specifics, but we have provided guidance notes to all industry stakeholders, both representative groups and direct to individual employers that engage seasonal workers to make them aware of the existing public health order requirements in relation to social distancing, testing, shared facilities and cleaning of those facilities. We have also worked with the Commonwealth to communicate those details to those seasonal workers so that they are aware, first of all, of their obligation to obtain a test that shows that they are negative before venturing out into regional areas or, indeed in lieu of that, to self-isolate in their place of origin for 14 days.

I have not heard any or received any reports from industry or any other stakeholders to indicate that has not been happening. As I said, I have not heard of any issues and we certainly have not seen any cases. Also we checked to make sure, and as part of consultation with the Ministry of Health and the Chief Medical Officer, that throughout rural and regional New South Wales all of our public hospitals are equipped with enough facilities so that we could adequately test people, if there were issues, and make sure that we have all the facilities in place, if that there was an outbreak, to cater for those people; that is, isolate them. Of course the advice coming back from

the Ministry of Health and the Chief Medical Officer was that those measures were in place. We were comfortable in providing all of that advice to all the employees and seasonal workers. Mr Hansen, did I miss anything there?

Mr HANSEN: Minister, I will just add the fact that we have made sure that we have provided to both the employers and made available to employees guidelines that complement the work that has been done by the National Farmers' Federation in terms of a workbook that they have produced for employers and employees and seasonal workers as well as the work safe guidelines that have been produced. In large part we have been acting as a concierge point for people where information sits, where it is available, and we make sure that employers and employees know their rights and responsibilities.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Minister, last year the Government announced essentially the re-establishment of the post of Agent General in London and other senior trade commissioners for locations such as Mumbai, New York, Shanghai and Singapore. Have those posts been filled?

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Point of order.

The Hon. NATALIE WARD: Point of order.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: I am going to take a point of order at this stage.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Okay.

The CHAIR: I predict the point of order.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: I think you can.

The CHAIR: I ask the member to show how this relates to the terms of reference of this inquiry, which is about COVID-19 because, on the face of it, it does not appear to.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: The question is based on a, given the pressure that all the economy is put under by COVID-19, obviously the idea of these posts, as I understood it, was to enhance New South Wales trade opportunities at this time. But, if you want to rule it out of order, that is fine.

The CHAIR: I think we can go down this very short path. I think that it is a tangential relevance. Given it is tangential we will allow short questions about it.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Perhaps I will ask the anterior question. I will ask one question about whether the person being filled.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I do not know.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Okay. Are you the Minister responsible for those?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: No, I am not.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: That is fine. That is good. Minister, what impact has your agency been monitoring in relation to the impact of COVID-19 on the wool industry? What has been the impact of COVID on the industry, if any?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I am not aware of any significant impacts on the wool industry, Mr Searle. Mr Hansen, has anything specific to the wool industry come through the industry working group. While Mr Hansen is searching there, the only issue that was brought my intention very early in the piece was the concern that in the public health orders, while livestock auctions were able to continue, as we talked about with Mr Banasiak, fibre auctions or wool auctions, which happen in a similar way to the auctioning of the livestock but the wool is actually put on display and people physically come in and look at it and buys come in and buy it, actually were excluded—and I am sure it was not the intention—which meant that they were not able to continue to go ahead. But we quickly got the health Minister's agreement to amend the health orders to cover them with the same exemption that was granted to livestock auctions so that wall auctions could continue as per normal with distancing measures in place. But I am not aware of any other specific issues in the wool industry. Mr Hansen?

Mr HANSEN: There has been obviously short-term disruption in the fact that China and Chinese processing mills are a large part of the supply chain in terms of the production of woollen garments around the globe using Australian wool—one of our largest customers. Obviously logistics have been a key inhibitor in terms of sea freight. There has been a significant sort of change in sea freight activity. In addition to that wool traditionally has been a luxury item which requires strong GDP growth within our country for demand to continue. It is seen as a luxury purchase. As such, some of those key marketplaces, not just China but markets, incredibly

important markets, in Europe such as Italy have seen a significant downturn in purchasing of that type of luxury product, which has a flow-on effect on demand along the supply chain.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: That is really where my questions were going. You have got the slowdown or the closure of manufacturing, I think including using Australian wool, in both Italy and China and other places as well. Has that lack of demand then flowed through and impacted on Australian wool producers? If so, what is the nature of that impact? Can you quantify it?

Mr HANSEN: I am not sure if I can quantify it right here.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: No. I am happy for you to take it on notice.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: We will take it on notice.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: I assume that if the wool production industry in New South Wales was hurting as a result of the cessation or slowdown of manufacture overseas they would have reached out to you. Have you had representations from the industry around that?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: I have not as yet, Mr Searle, but we can take that on notice and try to get you some information to quantify.

Mr HANSEN: There are probably a couple of pieces at play there. The first is that when we are talking about agricultural products, this is probably one of the most non-perishable products in terms of being able to be stored to manage supply and demand imbalances that appear at any point in time. But the wool industry is also—and this is probably fair across a number of our agricultural sectors—because of the worst drought in living memory followed by the worst fires, our agricultural production in this State is probably actually at one of its lowest ebbs. The volumes being produced out of a number of our industries are at a very low level, which means that market shocks like we are seeing in terms of global demand have been impacting a very small reduced supply, which actually gives more flexibility and more scope for the industry to either redirect product to other markets or to reprioritise alternative marketplaces.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Sorry, Mr Hansen, was that sort of a general observation about all of the sort of Primary Industries in New South Wales, or is that something specific about the wool industry that is also a factor there?

Mr HANSEN: The shelf life of wool is obviously very specific to wool but the ability of our sectors to withstand some of the disruption out of COVID has actually perversely been aided by a low production base that has resulted from the drought.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Do you have any information you could provide the Committee about the slowdown of production in industry of New South Wales and other sectors as well?

Mr HANSEN: Certainly we can show you the destocking and the impact that is having on the number of sheep in this State, for example, over the last couple of years.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Okay. Particularly, to offset any financial impact on the primary industries sector from COVID-19, what measures is the Government implementing or looking at to encourage value-adding in the five industry generally?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Well, the best thing we are hoping for is continued good conditions and rain, which we cannot control, but we partner as a Government with Australian Wool Innovation and a number of other industry bodies both in terms of our research but in terms of our on-ground support to try, I guess, to work with the industry to value-add. But, look, at the end of the day we can only do so much. We operate in a globalised economy and our producers will look to value-add domestically if there is some economic imperative to do so. Largely we will respond to market forces but to industry demand.

At the moment or traditionally they have looked to export their product and it is value-added overseas because, to be blunt, it is cheaper to do that. It is economics. But if that changed, and it may change as a result not just of COVID but the shocks of international trade and relations around the world, then obviously we would be looking to support industry in its endeavours. But we would not seek to lead on that. We would seek to partner with industry, if that is something that industry was wanting to do.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: What sort of partnering are you referring to there? What types of supports would be looking at in the context?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: The support could be in the form of finance. It could be in the support of leveraging our eminent researchers within DPI, who are regarded as some of the best agricultural researchers anywhere in the world. It can involve legislative change or regulatory change to allow an industry to do something that perhaps it is not currently able to do and it could be to help them potentially to access other markets. That might be in partnership with the Commonwealth or going it alone with a particular company or a particular country overseas. It all depends on what the particular initiative it is and what industry is looking to achieve. By and large a lot of the time industry is happy to keep Government informed rather than wanting Government to be involved. It just depends.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: At this time, what support is your agency providing to farmers and to industry more generally to help them get into export markets to try to offset any of the difficulties they are experiencing during the pandemic period?

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: We provide a sort of a concierge service to assist individual farmers and also industry look at other markets. We obviously work with other parts of Government that are involved in the trade space to look at opportunities and work very closely with the Commonwealth. The example I gave earlier is a case in point where we work very closely with the Commonwealth to leverage their \$110 million investment, I think it was, in a number of charter aircraft to continue to get some of our key produce for export into countries now because commercial aviation was not running and there was limited capacity on some of the shipping fleet to get product out. Mr Hansen, do you have anything to add?

Mr HANSEN: I think there are two pieces, thanks Minister. The first one is actually making sure that we maintain the access that we have to the markets in the light of increasing protectionism and nationalism in terms of support of their own domestic markets and products. The same question as we have been asked this morning about what can we do to help promote domestic consumption of domestically produced product is the same question, I am sure, that all countries are asking of their government agencies.

We are working with the Commonwealth when we identify where there are potential risks or when we start to get to reports of a slowdown of inspections, for example, a sort of increase in the red tape for our exports in the markets, we call it out early. We call it out with the Commonwealth and we are better able to go in and negotiate, using their embassies overseas. But at the same time we are looking for where a higher value-add market for us might be in alternative marketplaces.

The CHAIR: Minister and Mr Hansen, I thank you both for your attendance today. For the record, can I say that the engagement and the level of detail that you have provided in your answers, Minister—actually directly relevant to the questions—was both refreshing and helpful; and you too, Mr Hansen: We appreciate your cooperation with the Committee today.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: It has not been the universal experience.

The CHAIR: No. I am not damming you with faint praise. I genuinely put it on the record that I appreciate the engagement.

Mr ADAM MARSHALL: Okay. Happy to help, always. Thank you very much.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 12:05.