

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

**SELECT COMMITTEE ON PFAS CONTAMINATION IN
WATERWAYS AND DRINKING WATER SUPPLIES
THROUGHOUT NEW SOUTH WALES**

**INQUIRY INTO PFAS CONTAMINATION IN WATERWAYS AND
DRINKING WATER SUPPLIES THROUGHOUT NEW SOUTH WALES**

CORRECTED

At Mirage Room, Wagga RSL Club, Wagga Wagga, on Tuesday 8 April 2025

The Committee met at 11:30.

PRESENT

Ms Cate Faehrmann (Chair)

The Hon. Scott Barrett

The Hon. Greg Donnelly

The Hon. Aileen MacDonald

The Hon. Cameron Murphy

PRESENT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

The Hon. Stephen Lawrence

The CHAIR: Welcome to the fifth hearing of the Committee's inquiry into PFAS contamination in waterways and drinking water supplies throughout New South Wales. I acknowledge the Wiradjuri people of the Wiradjuri nation, the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to Elders past and present, and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of New South Wales. I also acknowledge and pay my respects to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us today.

My name is Cate Faehrmann. I am the Chair of the Committee. I ask everyone in the room to please turn their mobile phones to silent. Parliamentary privilege applies to witnesses in relation to the evidence they give today. However, it does not apply to what witnesses say outside of the hearing. I urge witnesses to be careful about making comments to the media or to others after completing their evidence. In addition, the Legislative Council has adopted rules to provide procedural fairness for inquiry participants. I encourage Committee members and witnesses to be mindful of these procedures.

Dr JOE McGIRR, Member for Wagga Wagga, before the Committee

The CHAIR: Welcome and thank you for making the time to give evidence, Dr McGirr. Let's kick things off straightaway. I assume you've got a short opening statement for the Committee.

Dr JOE McGIRR: I'm the Independent member for the New South Wales seat of Wagga Wagga. I want to begin by welcoming the Committee members here today. Thank you for travelling here for this hearing. Also, thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee. I appreciate the Committee coming here after I invited you to come because of the importance of this issue to the community here. I'm clearly not an expert on PFAS—I will leave evidence in relation to that to the specialists from Riverina Water and other agencies—but the fact is that the Wagga community has had the unfortunate experience of being at the forefront of PFAS issues, thanks to the city's relation to its military bases.

We have the RAAF base at Forest Hill and we have the Kapooka base in the west of the city, the Blamey Barracks near San Isidore. Both of those bases have been found to contain PFAS, which has been found in surrounding communities. It's essential, however, to stress that Wagga's drinking water is safe to consume and is closely monitored. Apart from the excellent technical management of PFAS by our local agencies, our community has also benefited from good communications practices from those local agencies, which do their best to reassure and inform residents about the issues that have been currently occurring with monitoring levels of PFAS.

I want to make two points today. The first is that precise, accurate and timely communication is absolutely critical to manage this issue in the community. The second point I want to make is that with the new guidelines that are emerging for New South Wales, which I think will come through from the NHMRC that I think the State will adopt, there will be implications for water authorities locally, and that needs a multi-agency, collaborative approach to be successfully managed. It's just not appropriate for it to be left entirely up to local water management authorities. They are the two points I would like to make.

Just in regards to communications, I said that we do need precise, accurate communications with the community. I can't stress enough how important that is. I think there is actually scientific evidence to say that levels of psychological distress in communities affected by PFAS are higher. You can understand that would be the case because of the uncertainty around the nature of PFAS and, in particular, the ways it can be reported. Of course people have concerns about "forever chemicals". The only way to combat that, because we do have the issue, is for the communication to be up-front and precise.

In recent years, I would say that the communication has improved. The Defence bases regularly have drop-in sessions. They have produced a wide range of materials, which I am sure the Committee would have accessed, about what they found in surrounding areas. I do want to make the point that I don't think that has always been the case. I have only been the MP since 2018, and this issue predates that for the RAAF base. But the information on PFAS at the Blamey Barracks dates after 2018. When it first came out, there was clearly a lot of concern in the community.

I am not entirely sure that the initial communications were as good as they could have been with the community. I believe that has improved in terms of the Defence bases. But I still hear that Defence are slow to respond to individual communications. It is certainly a slow process, even as a MP, to receive responses from Defence. I think that is a reflection of the nature of how they operate and the high-security environment that they're in. But I do think it's frustrating, particularly for landowners who are affected by PFAS contamination and who want answers and want constant reassurance and want to be treated with respect.

It is not a situation where it is deliberate, but sometimes the bureaucracy in Defence can make those communications not as timely as they might be. What goes with that is the fact that Defence itself is a Federal organisation—and I may not be correct about this, but I just want to put this out there—and can be exempt from State regulations and State approval processes, for example. That also creates some confusion in the minds of constituents when dealing with Defence. For those reasons, it is important that Defence continues the pattern of informing the community. It is important that the community have as much information up-front as they can.

I guess the issue is that clearly PFAS has been found on those bases: the RAAF base and the Kapooka barracks. I understand those establishments have taken and are continuing to take action to remediate that. But, from practices that occurred many decades ago, this is something the community here is living with. Therefore, going forward, it's important that the community is kept informed of PFAS levels and the actions being taken by agencies in a calm, considered way, and that responses to communications from the community are prompt and accurate. That is communication.

I want to put a side note on that issue in terms of accurate information. I think the Committee would have received some submissions around concerns in relation to PFAS in renewable energy infrastructure. People, understandably, are concerned about the chemical codes that are used in renewable infrastructure and solar factories, for example. There has been mention of PFAS chemicals in relation to that. It's not clear to me that solar panels, for example, do have PFAS in them. From my research, it seems to be a different sort of chemical, not the chemicals that are associated with PFAS. In fact, if there is danger—and there may be danger from other elements in solar panels—it is going to occur when they are recycled or come to the end of their lives. Nevertheless, community remained concerned about those, and I think it is important that we continue to research those and that information about that is communicated to the community. It's not acceptable at all that that infrastructure should poison land or have an effect on communities in any way.

The second thing that I would like to make a point about is the recent proposed changes to drinking water guidelines that the NHMRC are proposing and I understand the State Government will implement later this year. Those guidelines lower what is acceptable in drinking water in terms of PFAS, and I think they are based on a reassessment of evidence in relation to lifetime risk of exposure. I'm not an expert, but that's my understanding. I'm happy to be corrected if that's the case. In this region and some other regions in New South Wales, this will mean that some of the sources of water may be above these new, more stringent guidelines. We obviously want the water to be as safe as it possibly can be, but this is a risk that relates to lifetime risk, not immediate risk, and so I think it's appropriate to take a careful approach to managing it.

You will hear later today from Riverina Water, who are grappling with this. I want to commend Riverina Water for the excellent way that they have worked with local government, myself and the Federal member, as well as State government agencies, in both getting an assessment of the problem and communicating with the community. But clearly, going forward, they will face some challenges in relation to bore sources that might not meet the new, stringent guidelines. I just want to make the point that I think Riverina Water should be supported by government and State government agencies in tackling that. It may be that they will need some financial support. It may be that they will need in-kind technical support. But the key here is that they shouldn't be left on their own to manage this without that support being in place.

They don't have control over their catchments, remember. In other words, they have a responsibility for providing safe drinking water but, of course, that water comes from a catchment source and they don't have control over their catchments. As they point out to me, removing PFAS from water supplies itself is a complicated and expensive process, as I understand it, and of course leads to the issue of where you put the waste from that. So I think the point of making sure that our catchments are managed appropriately and what is done in those areas to minimise PFAS getting into the water supply is an important part of the work here. That isn't within the remit of those organisations. I'll quote this from the Water Services Association:

The water sector did not create PFAS; rather we inherited the PFAS risk from other products and activities. The more PFAS we can eliminate from use in products and processes, the less PFAS will be present for the water sector to manage. Once PFAS are in the environment, they are hard to remove and destroy. Prevention or minimisation of PFAS entering the environment and water cycle in the first place is of the highest importance.

That's why I think other agencies such as the EPA must be involved in management, along with local water utilities. Madam Chair, I just would urge the Committee to consider that a collaborative approach to PFAS management be an essential part of your inquiry, and consider the evidence in support of that approach. You will hear from other witnesses today who will talk about communication and their interactions on this issue. It has been a mixed picture, but I'm not here to—let me put it this way. I do think the communication has improved. The material that's been produced by the Defence bases is much better than it was previously.

I do think, as I said, that there is an issue with constituents getting immediate responses and the timeliness of that, to do with the Defence bureaucracy, but I can't highlight enough the importance of sound, sober, precise communication with the community. We all know this is here; we all know it's a challenge. We do not need the challenge of uncertainty. Once we know what we're dealing with, we can then move on. But when we've got that confusion that comes from imprecise communication or delayed communication, then it just makes the problem for the community harder to manage. I might leave it there, Madam Chair.

The CHAIR: I'll kick off by asking about your understanding of the latest in terms of the groundwater plume or plumes in the area. What is the latest information that has been communicated to the public in terms of where that is at?

Dr JOE McGIRR: In terms of the technical side of that, I think Riverina Water are coming to give evidence this afternoon, and they'll be in a position to give you the precise details in relation to that. There were two readings that occurred in bores recently: one in a bore to the west of Wagga, and one in a bore to the east of Wagga. That's my understanding of the situation. The one to the east of Wagga related to the so-called plume

coming from the RAAF base. The initial reading indicated there may be some concern that that plume was moving faster towards the bore fields east of Wagga than had previously been thought. My understanding is that has been retested. The initial testing probably wasn't done at the right depth. You'll have to confirm this with Riverina Water, but my understanding is it wasn't done to the right depth and in the right way. When it has been repeated, it wasn't found to be a concern.

There is, I understand, an ongoing issue with one of the bores west of Wagga, but I would have to defer to Riverina Water to answer that precisely. They are continuing to monitor that. I have to say the response to that from Defence and from Riverina Water—its communication has been good. But that plume remains a concern because it is moving towards the bores, and the bores are an important source of water for Wagga. If they do become contaminated earlier than expected, then there will need to be work done to find other uncontaminated sources.

The CHAIR: Which is clearly a very big issue. At the beginning you mentioned that Defence was slow to respond to individual communications. We issued an invitation for the Department of Defence to appear. I'm not sure if that was responded to, but they're not here. I don't think it was responded to. It would be very useful to know how they're trying to clean up. You said they're trying to clean it up. Do you know any further details about what Defence is doing?

Dr JOE MCGIRR: I do not know the precise details. There are building works being planned at both bases in the coming years. In fact, I think there'll be almost a billion dollars spent on building works between the two bases. I am aware that work will be done at the Kapooka army base to try to mitigate run-off from the base, particularly in relation to PFAS. That will involve a range of works, including construction of detention basins. I do not have precise detail on that; that is just a general understanding. You would have to get that detail from Defence. I understand they might be producing more information on what is planned there in coming months. I would just say that I think work is planned to continue there. I also understand that work has been done at the RAAF base in relation to the runway and the removal of a large amount of soil there. Again, I'm not sure what's precisely planned to go along with the building works that are being planned there in the next year or two. I don't have the detail on their plans for those works being proposed. I'm not actually sure that the plans for those works are publicly available.

The CHAIR: That was going to be my last question before throwing to other members: What information is Defence providing to the community in relation to the extent of PFAS contamination? Is there a regular update that you are aware of?

Dr JOE MCGIRR: Yes, there are regular updates that are provided via their website. There was a large study done at Kapooka in 2021, and I think prior to that at the RAAF base. If you go onto the website, you can find the regular updates they provide to the community. I've actually brought some along here. I've got a fact sheet from the Blamey Barracks at Kapooka and an ongoing monitoring report from July to June 2023. Those are regularly updated. They have had a number of community information sessions and they provide, I think, quite readable, precise material. The message in it, say, in relation to Blamey, isn't one the community wants to hear—that there is PFAS in the run-off and in the water supply there. They have issued warnings around what you can and can't do in relation to those levels, but at least that information is out there. I don't think that level of communication is the case early on, is my point. Also, I think there are further works planned, but I'm not entirely sure what those works are and I'm not sure that information is public.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you, Dr McGirr, for coming along today and for your submission. In your submission, paragraph 4 starts with the words "I have worked closely" and I am reading that in conjunction with paragraph 2 on the second page of the Riverina Water County Council submission, which you may not have, but that doesn't matter for the purposes of this question. They, too, list a number of organisations that they have worked with and collaborated with and engaged with, as does your submission. What strikes me, when you add the two lists together, is that there are a lot of organisations, both at the local level and the State level and the Commonwealth level.

That leaves me to press you with a further explanation about the coordination and the assurance that the communication contains content that is factually accurate and is able to be ingested and understood by the community at large. The reason I say this is that we have been to some places in our inquiry—some regions and areas—where, quite frankly, there has been a catastrophising of PFAS, which has created an enormous amount of angst and anxiety and concern within the local community, and I understand that. But it strikes me that this multi-level, thorough consultation has real potential to create information that can provide detail that is understandable and digestible and brings some certainty to what is going on. I am just wondering if you could elucidate on how it is possible to get coordination of a message which has some clarity about it.

Dr JOE McGIRR: That is a really important point, and it isn't actually straightforward. I think Riverina Water have had to carry a bit of the burden of coordinating that because, let's face it, they are on the spot; it's their issue, if you like, that they have to immediately manage. But they are a local authority. It falls to them to coordinate the other agencies. In this instance, those agencies, I think, have cooperated well. I remember, when the first information came out about the plume and the reading and the east bore, I rang the water Minister and made the point that it was important that the Government's agencies fully came in behind Riverina Water and didn't leave them. I have had other incidents here where a lot of government agencies can be involved in an issue and, at the end of the day, they all leave it up to the local organisation to take carriage of that incident. In this case I was worried that that would happen again. I don't think that has happened this time, judging by the feedback that I have had. But of course you can speak to Riverina Water themselves.

As you can see, the list of organisations is quite extensive. When it crosses from local government into State government and it involves agencies across—because you've got Health involved, as well as the EPA, as well as numerous regulators in the water space, which is incredibly complicated in and of itself. You've got the catchment authorities and you've got the water sharing plans. Of course, all of this runs into the Murrumbidgee which is then part of the Murray-Darling Basin. Then to complicate that matter further, you've got the Defence bases, which are not only Commonwealth, but a special part of the Commonwealth in terms of they've got regulations and exemptions that apply to them. It's important that there's a willingness of all those agencies to commit. The feedback that I've had is that Defence have been prepared to commit, do the work and action what they need to. That's good in terms of government agencies.

I'm not sure my constituents would always feel they had the same responsiveness from Defence; I just make that point. You'll have some submissions from some constituents who will talk about tardiness in the Defence response, particularly out at Kapooka. But in terms of the point you're making, the different agencies that are involved, I just can't emphasise how important it is that they are collaborating so that there's clear communication and a clear agreement on what action is going to be taken and who is going to take that action.

The last thing you need is for different agencies to be communicating different things. That just leads to confusion. Then the other thing you don't want is for an action to be agreed and for that not to be followed through. Again, that undermines confidence. What I've seen in terms of the communication and briefings that I've received, the response from the State Government has indicated that people have recognised this as an important issue here and they've done work on it. I can't emphasise how important that is because the community continues to be concerned.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: It just strikes me—and we've seen this as we've moved around and taken evidence—it's a very rare thing to be able to get that comity of information, coordination and, thematically, the same thing being said. It's almost a bit of a miracle to have this. It appears to be operating reasonably well here. Is someone at the heart of this? Is it in fact Riverina Water? Are they the ones that we should be pressing for more detail about how to pull this off?

Dr JOE McGIRR: I think it's important to talk to Riverina Water about it. The couple of comments I'd make are, first of all, I'm not going to say it's perfect, please don't go away—and the community itself would not say it's perfect, because it's news that worries everyone. But I do think in relation to the recent issue, and this is the issue of the plume that's been coming, that there was a rapid recognition that that was a significant issue, both by Riverina Water and by Defence, and by Minister Jackson, and that enabled the agencies to quickly come together.

I think there was a recognition that they needed to be very precise and up-front about the communication on that, and that's because we've lived through a decade of varying levels of communication, and people know how sensitive an issue it is. It's probably partly a reaction to the environment. I commend all the agencies on their work so far, but as soon as I say that someone is going to come up and say, "Well, no, they didn't do this and they didn't do that," so I certainly wouldn't want you to say it was perfect. From my point of view, the point I wanted to make to the Committee is we've had this experience. Getting the communication is a really important part of dealing with the issue.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I was just wondering if you could explain what were the key lessons learnt in the Wagga Wagga response that could apply to other PFAS-affected communities?

Dr JOE McGIRR: From my point of view, having the Government act quickly through a single point—in this case it was the water Minister—to make sure that the other parts of government as well as all the water agencies are on board and they have a role to support. That direction is important. I'm not saying they wouldn't do it otherwise, but I think that leadership is important. Then I also think it's important that Defence come in actively and recognise the importance of managing it proactively, and work with those agencies and share

information and collaboration. Again, I'm not saying that hasn't happened in the past, but Defence is an organisation that has its own bureaucracy, its own legitimate security concerns and its own protocols around communication, and sometimes that can hinder effective, good communication if there is not the right leadership shown.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: In going with the multi-agency collaboration, do you think the community trust was maintained throughout the process because of, as you say, a single source of truth?

Dr JOE McGIRR: Yes, I would agree with that. I think it's important that you agree on a single source of truth, as you said—a spokesperson—and that information is as accurate as possible. It's provided in a timely way, and it's provided soberly and clearly. We're at a point now where we know that PFAS could be an issue, so people know to be alerted about it. What they want to know is what are the levels, what are we doing about it and what's the future. Having that single source of truth, as you put it, is an important part of that communication, but it has to be credible and considered.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: You also mentioned the Minister coming in very early and providing clear advice. Was that backed up with practical support?

Dr JOE McGIRR: I believe so, but you'd have to clarify that with Riverina Water. It appeared to me that that was the case, and the feedback I had from Riverina Water was that the agencies did collaborate well, including with local government. But I would ask you to get the detail of that from Riverina Water rather than me. I wasn't in the operational meetings and so on.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Now that we're at this stage where you've had the PFAS since 2017, are there any gaps in the management of PFAS in the region, particularly with Defence accountability or State agency responsiveness?

Dr JOE McGIRR: I think this is a situation where we need to be vigilant going forward because, despite work that has already been done, there is clearly a plume related to the RAAF base and there is clearly run-off to do with the Kapooka army base. We are all in a situation here—even the scientists—of knowing some things about this but not knowing everything about it. It is going to be one of those situations of needing to monitor the situation. The concern, as far as Wagga is concerned, is whether the plumes will affect the water supply going forward, but we won't know that until we monitor the plume and the concentrations and so on. What is important is that, along with the monitoring, the Defence bases continue to take action to mitigate run-off from their sources of PFAS—both the RAAF base and Kapooka. With the building works that are being done, I would hope that further work is being done to mitigate run-off and that the building works themselves won't be associated with a worsening run-off.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: You talked earlier about affected landholders. How many of them are there, and should we or could we—being someone—be looking at buying up some of that land to make the management easier and the impacts less?

Dr JOE McGIRR: As far as the RAAF base is concerned, I understand there has been a class action that has been settled with a number of people affected there. I can't give you the precise details of landholders there. I think you will be hearing from witnesses this afternoon from Gumly, who might be able to fill you in on the impact on Gumly, which is a suburb close to Forest Hill where they've had some challenges around water. If that's true and a class action has been settled there, I'm not sure the question of acquiring the land is relevant. Frankly, it would be a lot of land. It would be the entire suburb of Gumly. In relation to Kapooka, the run-off goes into another suburb of Wagga called San Isidore. Again that's a full suburb, with the Kapooka Creek running through it. There are some people more affected than others in that community. The idea of buying up the land there would be quite, I would have thought, impractical.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Coming back to the communication—and using this as lessons moving forward—you talked about the improvements. What are some of the improvements that have been made to help the communications getting out to community?

Dr JOE McGIRR: As I said, I think that the website information that's been provided and the fact sheets that have been provided by Defence have been an important part of that. My judging of them is that they are precise, they're reasonably user-friendly to read, they're readily available, they're updated regularly, and they've combined it with community information sessions. So I think that has been an improvement. The community information sessions have also been important opportunities for the community to get information face to face. My sense is that's definitely better than the communication there was previously. Whether it's entirely satisfactory would be up to the community to judge. You may hear from other witnesses today who can give you some better information on that.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: We've heard a lot about the different agencies involved. We've touched on it here today and at some of our previous hearings. You gave the example before about the PFAS in the solar infrastructure. To get that information out, who is the best organisation to do that? And I don't mean who's the best at doing it; I mean: Who does the community want to hear from to give them that sense of safety and the assurance that they're getting the right information?

Dr JOE McGIRR: This is in relation to concerns around renewable energy infrastructure?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Sorry, the communication more broadly. There's a number of organisations involved in this. You've talked about Defence improving the communications, but who is the best organisation to get that information to community? Do they want to hear from Defence? Do they want to hear from the EPA? Do they want to hear from government? Do they want to hear from the local water utilities? Who is the organisation that would give community the confidence that the right actions are being taken?

Dr JOE McGIRR: I think that's actually going to depend on the specific issue. You're probably looking for one agency but, for example, if it's the safety of drinking water, that's clearly Riverina Water, in our catchment. It would be a local authority. However, if you want to know about contamination in a catchment area, then probably the EPA would be required to provide that. Frankly, in this region, the community wants to hear from Defence on what Defence are doing and how they're monitoring it, because they see it. I think Defence has a really big role in reassuring the community, both on their ongoing vigilance and their monitoring of facilities. Riverina Water aren't in a position to be able to speak for what Defence are doing, and wouldn't be allowed to.

I'm not sure Defence would be the organisation I'd go to to know what my drinking water standards were like. So it will depend very much on what you want information about. That's part of the complexity of the issue that we're dealing with. If all those agencies are communicating regularly and sharing information, you should be able to get consistency of message over a period of time. The key is they are working collaboratively. That's the point that I come back to: That collaborative work, and the communication that comes from it, is a key element in making sure the community has the information it needs to respond to the situation.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Straight up you mentioned the psychological impacts this is having. And please don't take this as a dismissive question, but are the psychological impacts being met, balanced out or equalled to by the actual medical issues that are occurring as a result of this?

Dr JOE McGIRR: I've delved a little bit into the medical issues in relation to this. I would think the psychological impact on the community is probably what hits people first and foremost. That's partly because, from my understanding of the medical impacts of this, it can take some time to appear. It can be not straightforward, in terms of immune function, for example, or kidney function or uric acid function. I suspect, for any one individual, there might be a range of factors in addition to PFAS that might impact on their health immediately.

I think what people experience is the psychological impact of hearing that there's PFAS, or that the PFAS levels are high. That's my sense of it. I'm not dismissing the medical claims at all. Clearly there's a lot of research on that. Clearly they've changed the guidelines now because people are concerned about lifetime accumulation of that, and I suspect there's a lot that we don't know about the long-term effects of these forever chemicals. But there's no doubt that, once news reached this community that we had PFAS, over a number of years there has been a high level of concern in the community about that.

The CHAIR: In terms of the health of the local community, what studies have been undertaken and by whom? Have there been any publicly funded studies, including blood levels over time? Has Defence done any?

Dr JOE McGIRR: Not that I'm aware of, and I'm not actually aware of any local studies on our population in that regard.

The CHAIR: In the ANU study that the Government quotes a decent amount of time on this, I think with their PFAS-impacted communities it was Williamtown was one of them. Wreck Bay was another. So Wagga hasn't—

Dr JOE McGIRR: Not that I'm aware of.

The CHAIR: Are there people in the local community who are asking that?

Dr JOE McGIRR: Again, not that I'm aware of.

The CHAIR: In terms of the agencies involved—and I'm coming off a question that was asked previously—there's Defence, there's the council doing a lot, Riverina Water of course, government agencies and

recommendations from the State Parliament committee. Do you know which government agencies are involved? Is there a committee working group?

Dr JOE McGIRR: The precise agencies—again, I think you might ask Riverina Water for the precise details. My understanding is you've got EPA involved, Health is clearly going to be involved, WaterNSW would be involved, and the different catchment authorities that link to that in water sharing plans—that's just to start with—and obviously Riverina Water, local government and then Defence. That's what comes to mind straightaway. Riverina Water, there may be other agencies involved in that as well. Clearly you've got an impact on agriculture, so you'll have primary industries involved and the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development would be involved. Then you'll have DCCEEW, of course, which includes environment and water. So it's quite a lot.

The CHAIR: That is quite a lot. Thank you, Dr McGirr, for agreeing to give evidence today and the ongoing work you do for your community.

Dr JOE McGIRR: Thank you very much for visiting the community on this important issue.

(The witness withdrew.)

Mr THOMAS HUGHES, Local Resident, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome, Mr Hughes.

THOMAS HUGHES: I'll get organised first. You might have to stop the clock for five minutes until I find what I want. I'm pretty well sorted. Anyway, you can have a look at what's going on. Can somebody pass these around, or do you want me to?

The CHAIR: No. Mr Hughes, if you take a seat, the secretariat will hand them out.

THOMAS HUGHES: All right, good. It saves me walking.

The CHAIR: Yes, it saves you walking, and it saves you getting up. You have an opportunity to make a statement to the Committee. The floor is yours.

THOMAS HUGHES: Well, in that bag there, for a start, there's six years of information. Some of it is by freedom of information. A lot of it is from Melissa Price, Richard Marles, Mr Thistlethwaite, Michael McCormack and also gentleman Dr Joe McGirr. Six years and \$800 million later, here we are—\$800 million plus, here we are again. There has been five Jacobs company meetings in Wagga, Wodonga, and Albury in relation to your drinking water and the creek water and the dam water—five. Each one of them cost approximately \$172,033. Shine Lawyers in 2020 paid out \$212 million. At that time, the Hon. Michael McCormack was the Deputy Prime Minister and member for Riverina, representing Wagga. This is Wagga where he is, right? In 2024, there was \$224 million paid out to Shine Lawyers by the same Department of Defence—oh no, by all you people sitting here, and me. Taxes—\$220 million paid out to Riverstone, Richmond, Wagga RAAF Base, Albury-Wodonga Army Base and Air Force bases in Victoria.

When they flew over the RAAF Base out at Wagga, they forgot about Blamey Barracks out here—one of the biggest Army camps in New South Wales and one of the most highly polluted with PFAS, PFOS and a million other things mixed together. I only live approximately one kilometre from the boundary of the Army Base. I'm the second house from the Army Base. There's a third dam in our property—a five-acre block. I'm the third dam, polluted with PFAS and God knows what else. All the carp fish—when we bought the property where we are, one kay from Blamey Barracks, you could go down and rake carp fish out of the dam with a garden rake. You could put a yabby net in and catch a nice feed of yabbies. Well, they're all dead. You can come and have a look. I don't tell lies and I don't talk BS. If you know what BS is, well that's it—right? You get straight from here, not from all this, but anyway. But we've got people in Wagga—that's just a brief outline of where they money's going, right?

I would say it's up to over a billion dollars, if you want to put it all together, because in that bag and here there's freedom of information, the full book there from Jacobs, the first people that done the investigation for the PFAS at the RAAF Base and Blamey Barracks, which is Kapooka, right? It shows, on the east of Wagga, you've got two creeks: Kyeamba Creek and Marshalls Creek. To the east—remember that. To the west of Wagga, you've got Kapooka Creek, which runs through the back of our little property of five acres. Beyond that you've got Sandy Creek. Here in the middle—right in the middle—what do you reckon is there? What do you reckon runs along the back of Wagga here? It's the Murrumbidgee River.

But there are highly paid council employees and waterworks employees who would say to the public of Wagga—like Dr Joe says with his freedom of information. He's pretty bloody right—excuse the English. Because everyone you talk to—Peter Thompson, the CEO of the Wagga city council. If you don't believe what I'm saying, it is all here in letters. You wouldn't have time to read them, otherwise I'll be here all day. Peter Thompson, the CEO of the Wagga city council—I wrote a letter to Dr Joe to the Wagga city council inquiring. All of the ovals and football grounds in Wagga, or a big percentage of them—and I just swore an oath—are watered with what they call re-treated water. It's treated effluent from the sewage treatment works and the wetlands that they call the settlement ponds. They are sewage settlement ponds. It's not recycled water; it's recycled sewage, and they water mostly every football ground and sporting ground where our grandchildren are going to play. So I wrote a letter to Dr Joe, and he wrote a letter to the council.

The council wrote back and told us what Dr Joe tried to tell you but he didn't know, apparently: Wagga city council tests the water frequently. Wagga city council and Wagga waterworks have no equipment whatsoever to separate PFAS from drinking water or the water they are watering all of the football grounds with. Blamey Barracks out here to the south has got approximately 100 acres or 80 acres that they water. It's all beautiful green grass. The only thing that goes on the green grass, thankfully, are kangaroos, probably a few possums, a lot of galahs—there's a fair few of them out there—and white cockatoos, because it's watered with water from the

treatment works in Blamey Barracks. It's from the treatment works down behind the security gates at the front entry.

They pipe treated effluent into a dam probably as big as this area that we're sitting in. They pump that out and water that 60, 80 or 100 acres. I don't exactly know how many acres, but that doesn't matter—or hectares or whatever you like to call them. They water it. What happens when it rains? Kapooka Creek runs through the middle of the army base—or the southern side and through it. They've got dams in there. In one of the photos that you're going to have a look at, there's probably a 15- to 18-inch culvert pipe that runs from the dam behind the guard house out the front into Kapooka Creek. Included in that are more outlets from Blamey army barracks. This photo—is there something wrong?

The CHAIR: No, I am just saying that somebody—

THOMAS HUGHES: If I'm talking too loud, let me know. I'm a bit hard of hearing. I left my hearing aid at home. I left it with my dog; she's a bit deaf.

The CHAIR: Mr Hughes, someone will come and get that photo from you so we can circulate it to the Committee.

THOMAS HUGHES: I'll tell you what they are. This photo here is of the main bridge driving into the Blamey Barracks army base. It's full of rotten water because underneath the bridge there's an area about as big as this square. Under the bridge it's got a 300-millimetre surround around the outside of it. When it rains, that area in the middle fills up with water and then it overflows that way into Kapooka Creek. When it stops raining, which it has done here for a couple of weeks or more now, that water—300 millimetres deep—is rotten, stinking and breeding millions and millions and millions and millions of mosquitoes, probably carrying Ross River virus. I wouldn't know.

Three times on three occasions I have brought up that pipe and the water under the bridge. If you don't believe me, drive out tomorrow and have a look, if you're going to be here tomorrow. As I say, I just swore on this and I believe in that, right? On three occasions I have brought it to the notice of a nice lady. Wendy Frankham is her name—beautiful lady. She is in charge of external goings-on and works on Blamey army barracks. The third time I brought it up at Jacobs meeting at the motel in Tarcutta Street in Wagga, she actually laughed at me. I went to bring it up to the chairman of Jacobs and many other highly official, well-paid people there. She said, "Oh, Tom, you're not going on about the water under the bridge again, are you?" Well, here I am going on about it because it is still there. They have done zero—nothing.

I am not only a witness; I'm also a victim, as you can probably gather by now. My hobby when I was made redundant from Telecom and PMG—I was there for 40 years—was breaking in the little trotting pacing ponies for the children. I am now a victim. This is to do with your drinking water, your dam water or your creek water. Between us, me and my grandson used to race pacing horses, and I was quite successful at doing it. Every one I bred finished up in your metropolitan area racing. One of the first horses my grandson had that I broke in, trained and drove, broke the track record at Menangle trotting track. You probably know where that is. I had a 400-metre trotting track, jogging track and breaking-in track around the bottom of my property—or my wife and my property. I'd better not leave my wife out. If it goes on TV, I won't get any tea tonight.

Anyway, 400 metres and three lots of sand I put on there at approximately \$600 to \$800 a load. Down came the water from Kapooka Creek through the army barracks and it all washed down probably in the Murrumbidgee River—the same water that runs into the dams that's full of PFAS. I can't do that anymore. I haven't been able to do it since 2018, when we found out about PFAS because if you, Chairman, were my neighbour and I made a dust on my jogging track and you got affected by PFAS, you could sue my pants off, couldn't you? Imagine that. I could, because my neighbour would, I know.

The CHAIR: Mr Hughes, are you ready for us to ask questions? If you can finish up in the next couple of minutes, because I'm sure we want to ask some questions. I just wanted to check.

THOMAS HUGHES: No, I don't believe in the next couple of minutes because there are six years of problems there.

The CHAIR: Okay. Keep going then. That's fine.

THOMAS HUGHES: There are letters in there for Richard Marles, Melissa Price and Mr Thistlethwaite, who got up out at the motel in Tarcutta Street, threw his arms up on the platform—the stage—and said, "I apologise to the people of Wagga for the trauma and anxiety that this PFAS is doing" in November 2024. The Commonwealth Federal Government asked us for a submission. I put one in for three pages; I probably could have used six, but I did it with three, right? What did Mr Thistlethwaite do with the submissions? I'll tell you what

he did: He got another consultant, Dr So-and-So or Who-Flung-Dung or whatever his name was from Sydney, AO. Righto, I respect him. The submissions closed in December 2024. I imagine I wasn't the only one that put it in. The consultant handed the submission—there's letters there to tell you—back to Mr Thistlethwaite, who wrote me a letter through Michael McCormack and said, "Oh, we've received your submission. Thank you very much for writing your submission. We received it from the doctor," whatever his name was. "This will help the Government in future decisions." Well, big deal, because they haven't made any.

My soil, my dams were tested in 2018. There has not been one Defence person or a consultant person knock on my front door for permission to come on my wife and I's property to do any further testing, and yet, as Dr Joe said, "We're having an ongoing investigation into PFAS." What about PFOS? PFOS is more dangerous than PFAS. We're all talking about PFAS; PFOS is more dangerous than PFAS. In the letter here, briefly, there's a letter here—no, sorry, it's in the newspaper, the one in my hand. In 2022, Visy board at Tumut released some poisons, or chemicals, not poisons—I don't know whether they were poisons or not—into the creek at Tumut. What'd the EPA do? Visy board could have been fined \$4 million.

Righto, here we have PFAS in my property and 19 other properties along Kapooka Creek from Blamey Barracks. All our dams, we cannot water our vegetables and eat them. We cannot raise chooks and eat their eggs. The lady next door to me, Cheryl Balkwill, sold her house six, seven or eight months ago maybe, right? The house was worth about \$2.5 million; she sold it for \$600,000. I think she got a solicitor to get the Department of Defence make up the difference of what she got for her house than what it was worth. It's a two-storey, beautifully built home with an imported-from-Italy staircase in it. Her property is rotten with PFAS because she's my neighbour. She is the closest house to Blamey Barracks. Hers is the second dam on Kapooka Creek, which runs into the Murrumbidgee River, which the Wagga waterworks gets the water from.

Dr Joe was asked a question about the proceeds and that by the honourable gentleman sitting over there, of what are the authorities at Wagga doing. Well, I can tell you something: I rang Mr Crakanthorp, who is the CEO of Riverina Water. The question I asked Mr Crakanthorp in relation to all of the ovals being watered with treated effluent from the sewage works in Wagga, down on Narrung Street—I asked Mr Crakanthorp on the phone, "Mate, I've got one question to ask you." I said, "Can you tell me, is the Wagga sewer contaminated with PFAS?" He said, "I'm sorry, Tom, I don't know." I just swore on that. That is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me.

I have spoken to the EPA. You ask Mr McGirr—honourable Dr Joe, a good bloke. He gets off his rear end and does things for people. I asked Dr Joe about the EPA. I got their phone number and I rung them up. Do you people realise that the EPA—the Environment Protection Authority—has no authority over the Department of Defence? They have no authority over the Department of Defence and yet they could have sued Visy board for \$4 million. The people along the valley in San Isidore—20 of us—haven't got 40 bloody cents, let alone \$4 million, and yet people of Gumly Gumly that are adjacent to the Wagga RAAF base—there are two cattle breeders out there. One is Blake's cattle agents and cattle sellers. Hardwicks¹ are the other property owners on the other side of the highway going out to the airport, where you will probably go to catch your plane home. They are both cattle breeders. Marshalls Creek is out that way and their cattle probably water from them and they are probably being sold out of the Wagga abattoirs contaminated with PFAS, PFOS, Roundup and whatever else you like.

A gentleman opposite Blamey Barracks out here in Kapooka had approximately 30 head of Hereford cattle breeding cows on Kapooka army base, the Blamey Barracks army base. In one of the reports in there, Kapooka Creek on the Blamey Barracks is a skull and crossbones—it's poison. So he moved his cattle across the road to his property. Guess what? The same creek that comes through Blamey Barracks feeds his dams. They're breeding cattle with calves that are probably sold out at Bowman's cattle sales. And you are worried about the water?

East Wagga water bore—sorry, West Wagga. One of the bores, as Dr Joe—I couldn't hear. That's why I talk loud. I'm a little bit hard of hearing and I left my hearing aid at home, as I said. The West Wagga water bore, as I explained to Mr Crakanthorp—on Blamey Barracks at Kapooka, they had a dugout. It was probably 30 metres long by 2.5 metres deep. Jacobs bored two metres deeper at the base of that cutting where they had old troop carriers, old rusty cars and old drums that the PFAS come there in. They sprayed it with dieseline and set it alight and put it out with—guess what?—PFAS. Jacobs got a bore done two metres below that trench, that huge dugout, and found that there is PFAS in the aquifer. West Wagga water bore, if you take a direct line, is probably not far out of line with that trench where they bored down two metres deep into the aquifer that has PFAS in it.

¹ By telephone call to the committee secretariat on 28 April 2025, Mr Thomas Hughes, local resident, clarified that the name of the property owners is Brunskill, not Hardwicks.

The Federal Government, the EPA and the Wagga city council—I could name half a dozen or more—tell us in reports that it will take 50 years for the PFAS plume which is in the aquifer from Forest Hill to get to the Wagga water supply. Well, wait a minute. The East Wagga water bores are out here on the other side of the river at Gumly. How I know is because I jointed all the cables, me and a mate of mine, on weekends for a few extra bob to educate our children. We joined all the cables between Gumly and Temora on a huge water main that runs from the East Wagga bore. What about the Temora people? It takes 50 years but it's out here at the West Wagga bore. Again, at Kapooka army base, they built a car park adjacent to the existing car park. They took metres and metres of soil away to build a car park. Guess what they did with the soil?

Also, they demolished a brick pumping station here, probably last year. They demolished it, right beside Kapooka Creek. They carted the overburden from that site, including old bricks, out here on the Narrandera Road on the Olympic way to Robbo's tip. They took it out there. That's three kilometres closer to the Murrumbidgee River. You're worried about water. That's closer to the Murrumbidgee River than Kapooka army base. They should have left the dirt there because you have to leave it for so many years for the PFAS to dissipate out of the water. They didn't leave it there for three years. They did it last year. How I know is that I pulled up one of the truckies at my back gate on Kapooka Road. I said to him, "Hey, mate. What have you got on board there?" I knew what he had on board. I had already been up and had a look. He said, "Bricks and dirt." I said, "Where are you going, mate?" He said, "Out to the tip. Out to Robbo's tip." Robbo is a general supplier of soil, bricks, garden soil and the works, out at the quarry.

The army base have also been using unlined cells. If you don't know what a cell is, a cell is a cutting into a hill where you put rubbish. Out there three kilometres closer to the river—we might not drink it in this water from Wagga Wagga, but what about the Narrandera people? What about the Collingullie people? What about the people beyond there? Also, talking about dumping things, there's the Wagga tip. We've got a beautiful lake out there. It is called Lake Albert. Most summertimes it's closed. The reason it's closed is because there's blue-green algae and God knows what else in it, polluting it. What educated engineer would build a rubbish tip in the hills above the lake? Am I boring you or not? If I am, say so.

The CHAIR: No, this is all very interesting.

THOMAS HUGHES: It's very interesting.

The CHAIR: But it would be great, Mr Hughes, to get to some questions.

THOMAS HUGHES: It's interesting, all right, because it's all the truth, so help me God.

The CHAIR: Mr Hughes, we've got some clarifying questions at this point. That's what an inquiry is. Can we ask you some questions to clarify a few things?

THOMAS HUGHES: You can ask what you like. You will have to talk up because I'm a bit hard of hearing.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your evidence. It's very clear that you've collected—

THOMAS HUGHES: There are some more photos here. You welcome to keep that one and this one. There's another outlet—

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Hughes, I wanted to ask about a few things that you were saying. With the yabbies, you said the yabbies are all dead in the dam that you talked about. What year, roughly, did this all start happening, when you noticed changes in the water on your property?

THOMAS HUGHES: I'll be brief if I can, but I'm not used to being very brief. I've been in San Isidore, which is a village seven kilometres from the CBD. We're treated like we're the leprosy squad by Wagga city council. You'd reckon we were 700 kilometres away. We have no infrastructure. We have no street lighting. Four years ago we were getting the sewer on to stop this pollution with septic tanks et cetera. It's in relevance to your question. This month we're getting the sewer on. The Wagga city council had about four or five meetings at San Isidore in relation to the sewer. They said, "All right, you're getting it by December at the end of the year." I think that was about March or April. You had to make a contribution. I won't go on and on about it.

Righto, everybody, other than a couple of older people at San Isidore, disagreed to having the sewer. The reason is the developers will move in out here. In November—or it was one month. There are letters here too—or at home, because I didn't think it involved this, but it does—of the council. In November of the same year we get another flyer in the letterbox that council are having a meeting in relation to the sewer. At the previous village meeting to that at the church hall—the mayor and half a dozen councillors were there—we were going to have

the sewer by December. Well, the next month the flyer comes around the letterbox that council are having a meeting Monday night to decide whether the sewer goes on at San Isidore.

By the way, they got \$1.43 million off the State Government—I think it was the State—for the project. That \$1.43 million was still left in the kitty because they'd already done Ladysmith and Collingullie, which are villages outside Wagga. They already had their sewer out of a grant that was got from you people—not you people, but the people before you—from the State Government. They got \$400 million or something like that and had \$1.4 million left to do San Isidore. But guess what? At the Monday night meeting on a certain month they decided, it's not going to happen. No reason was given at all for it not happening. That would have got rid of a lot of the pollution, but that didn't happen.

I wrote a letter through Dr Joe McGirr to the council—the communication that Dr Joe was talking about—complaining no reason whatsoever was given that the sewer didn't go on to San Isidore. I wrote to *The Daily Advertiser*—which that notice was in—in relation to it. A nice young lady put it in the paper. A week later, one of the councillors, Mr Michael Neeves, answered and said that PFAS in the ground at San Isidore is not the only reason why the sewer didn't go on. That was the only answer we got.

Now the yabbies and the fish in the dam—as I said, when I brought that property 38 years ago, and it rained, you could drag the carp fish out at a run-off with garden rake. My friends used to put them into 44 gallon drums and took them down to Canberra to make Charlie Carp for your garden out of it. Last summer, or two summers ago or more, with a week of hot weather at 34 or 35 degrees, the dam fell roughly half a metre or more. At every layer of that dam where that water evaporated there were dead yabby shells and claws all the way in the mud, on the dam wall. I found that back four or five years ago at least.

The CEO of the Wagga city council—if you'd like to read the letter, it's right here. I wrote a letter in relation to the poisoning of the fish and the yabbies et cetera. The CEO of the Wagga city council, in a letter here—you can read it—wrote back to me and said, "The department of health and half a dozen of other authorities say that the pollution in your dams are of low readings. They are able to be used for recreational purposes like boating, fishing and"—guess what?—"swimming". I invited the CEO, who you'll be talking to this afternoon, Mr Peter Thompson, to put his bikini on and come out and go for a dip in the dam. I don't think he'll do it, because what you put on here finishes up in here. I'm insulted, for a CEO who is not elected like you people are—he's not elected; he is employed by the Wagga Wagga City Council—to tell me, my grandchildren and great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren that they can go swimming in the dam. It's on paper. I don't talk rubbish. It's all on paper right there. You're welcome to come and swim in the dam if you want to. Thank you for listening.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: You talked about the millions of dollars that have been spent and that sort of stuff. We understand it's a big problem. We're not dismissing that. If you were the Premier of New South Wales, what would you like to see done? What is the solution? Is it compensation or remediation?

THOMAS HUGHES: I've been on this planet for 87 years this year. I worked at communications for 40 years, plus other jobs also. I've done the milk run and I've done the bread run to buy a house for my wife so we can have children in this beautiful country. Put it this way: Everybody I ask—probably half of you people would tell me the same thing—says, "Go and see your solicitor." That's what everybody needs to do who is affected by this. But a lot of people can't afford it. Probably I can't either unless I go and pick up a few more Coke bottles. Communication—as Dr Joe said, nobody has been to my place since 2018. "Oh, it's on the internet." Well, I haven't got the internet. I don't possess a computer. I don't need one. I've got one up here. I don't need it. "Read the internet."

If a nuclear bomb goes off one kilometre up in the atmosphere, it wipes out all your communications except the underground cables. When transistors first came out, it was in the paper: If a nuclear bomb goes up one kilometre above the Earth, above Sydney, it wipes out the whole transistorise and all the fancy technology communications, bar the old underground cables. If you don't believe me, check it out. My answer to that is the Department of Defence or the Federal Government and you people and me and everyone else paid out \$600 million to go to solicitors.

You can answer me this one if you like. The Department of Defence, on at least two occasions, admitted liability. The Federal Government admitted liability on two occasions. So why did people like me and every other person along Kapooka Creek have to go and get a solicitor when the Federals have admitted liability at least twice? And stupid Tom knows about it. At least twice they admitted liability. So why should I have to go—not me; the other people involved—and pay a solicitor a few thousand bucks? Because the only one who made the money out of the first lot was Shine Lawyers, anyway. What would you suggest you do? What would you do if I put PFAS—if you've got one; maybe you haven't—in your swimming pool and PFOS in your front lawn? What would you do, if I was working for the Federal Government?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: We're here looking for those answers.

THOMAS HUGHES: Go and get a solicitor. That's what everyone did. Anyway, sorry. I've come here to tell you and I think I've told you.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you, Mr Hughes, for your very detailed evidence. I've just got two questions. You said that in 2018 Defence tested your site, your property. Is that correct? In 2018 the Department of Defence checked your property?

THOMAS HUGHES: In 2018, we received a letter in the mail requesting permission for Jacobs to come onto the property—various people got them, right along the creek—permission to come onto your property and take samples of your water, the dam and your soil.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Did that happen for you?

THOMAS HUGHES: That happened. I was there. I give them the permission to do that.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Can I ask you then, what result came back to you? What were you told after they had got—

THOMAS HUGHES: Nothing.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: You heard nothing at all?

THOMAS HUGHES: The only thing I was told—I've got a large magazine or a large folder in here. It's 20 mm thick. I've got that through the freedom of information. But the answer is this: That told me that there's PFAS in my dam and PFAS in my soil. That's how I found out. Nobody came and knocked on the door and said, "Mr Hughes, we want to do some more testing because we've proven there's PFAS in your dam. There's PFAS in your soil." I was there when the young lady took the samples. She took half that amount of water out of the dam, and she scraped up a bit of soil in a bare patch into a plastic bag. In 2018, that's the only thing I've seen. The only thing I've heard, "It's all on the computer." Well, I ain't got a computer, sorry, and I'll probably never need one. But that's the answer to the question. No communication, only, "We're having an ongoing monitoring." They put down bores. But there's been nobody back to communicate with the 20 people. A lot of them don't want to be communicated with. I got to say this.

I went around all the people affected along the creek. Half of them do not want to divulge that there is PFAS in their dams and on their property because, "If I sell my house, I'm going to lose the value of the house." That's their prerogative. They can do that. But there is PFAS there. My next-door neighbour, who bought the house in July 2022, wasn't told that there was PFAS in his dam and PFAS and PFOS everywhere, and he is adjoining, almost, the Army Base. He bought the \$600,000 house that's worth \$1.5 million. I said to him, "Mate, were you told about the PFAS on your property?" He said, "No. No problem. There's none here." I said, "Well, I've got news for you because I have a letter from the previous owner that had it privately tested." I have got it somewhere—probably in here. I had a letter from Mrs Balkwill, who owned this two-storey house, that her hens' eggs, some of the chickens had four legs and two heads in their hen's eggs. That's in writing. That's not me thinking; it's in writing.

The previous owner to Mrs Balkwill was Gino Boetto and his wife—two lovely people. They're now up here with God. Their fruit trees, their vegies, their chooks, they got rid of them. On the report for is the address if you want to know, everything in that property—fruit, vegies, chooks—was polluted. told me that they— was his name. They moved into that house next door to me, but he had to go back to Junee to his original house because he got that bloody ill out there, apparently, from the dust. By the way, the road at the end of my property, for 1½ kilometres down to the Kapooka army base, is dirt. It's dirt into the main army base in Wagga. When the road closes on the highway at Silvalite, which is where the Albury road turns off and goes to Albury and the Narrandera road goes straight ahead—I've lost my prop now.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: That's okay. That's been very helpful.

THOMAS HUGHES: What's your other question?

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: That's the key one.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hughes. We are out of time. We will maybe take a couple of those letters that you referred to. I will talk to you afterwards in terms of handing some of those in, if you want to, so we can have a look at them. We will be in touch if there are any further questions. We really appreciate you giving your evidence today.

(The witness withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

Ms DONNA ARGUS, Local Resident, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome back. We will commence with the afternoon session. Ms Argus, would you like to make a short opening statement? We will proceed to questions after that.

DONNA ARGUS: I very quickly want to set the context of the Gumly Gumly community. The Gumly community are mainly a community of quite elderly people, although we are starting to get a number of younger people in now. It's a community that has a lot of market gardens and hobby farms. People are breeding sheep and cattle, and they do sell that for additional income. We belong to a very old-fashioned irrigation scheme. We are not in any way linked into Riverina Water, so all of our drinking water and water to our stock and on our pastures comes to us via a bore.

That is water taken directly out of the river. That is our drinking water and water for stock and pasture. That model is a model whereby, under the Water Management Act, a volunteer community committee runs everything from infrastructure, testing of water, billing and making sure it's financially viable et cetera. I think it's important for me to be able to give you that context. The other thing is we have no mail delivery in Gumly Gumly. We're situated between the CBD and the airport, and the postie drives past us on a regular basis. We have to go to the shop to collect our mail. I just want to set that context because, by your terms of reference, I think those details are important.

The CHAIR: Ms Argus, was that the end of your statement?

DONNA ARGUS: No, I just wanted to give you context. Essentially, I have great concern—I hope I'm not wasting anybody's time here. We have been told that our water doesn't have significant amounts of PFAS for us to worry about. However, three of my neighbours recently received in excess of \$100,000 each in compensation because of PFAS. Essentially, I want to know why. If there is nothing in our water, if there is nothing to be worried about, why have they got all that life-changing money? The next piece is that, because we are run by a volunteer committee, it is up to the New South Wales water department to ensure they are abiding by their charter and due diligence to support us as a community in everything I mentioned before, including water testing.

Only three days ago I was made aware that water testing was being done since 2020—three days ago. I'm not going to name names, but the president did not communicate in any way, shape or form with anybody about a concern about PFAS or that there would be testing—nothing at all. The Federal Government felt they only needed to communicate with one person in our community and that was it; that person did not communicate with his community at all. There were no community consultations; there was nobody sending us information. In fact, the only information we got was a letter from Shine Lawyers to say, "You could be entitled to compensation for PFAS." Not everybody in the community got that. Only a few of us did. Basically, we all thought it was a scam. What I'd like to know is: Why is something like compensation from Shine Lawyers being put before government departments getting on the ground and talking to my community about potential PFAS contamination in the water we drink every day?

None of that has happened. We've had no Federal Government or State Government representative come anywhere near us, write to us, tell us anything—just a letter from Shine Lawyers to say, "You might get compensation." We then heard on the news that there is no PFAS in our water. We then had to knock on the door of this president and say, "What's going on?" "Nothing to see here. Don't worry about it." Through freedom of information with the Feds, we then find out that communication was only done with that president solely and that he had signed a piece of paper to say that we had given him permission to talk on our behalf, to represent us. None of us knew that happened.

Then, "Okay, what's going on here?" Write a million letters to the New South Wales water department, "Please tell us what's going on. Please give us information." Can't get a single thing. The Feds write to us and say, basically, nothing to see here. "We've talked to your president of this volunteer community committee. We've done our due diligence." Too bad, too sad, moving on. So we go, "Right, okay, you haven't had any community consultations." "Yes, we did." "Well, when did you advertise those?" None of us got anything in our email that there were community consultations and apparently they were all held up in Forest Hill. None of us got information to say that, if we had worries, there was a website. We all found this out last year because it appeared that people in our community were about to get some pretty serious compensation.

The other thing is that, in that whole process, if you then decided to go on to that civil action and you were a part of that action—and my neighbour Tracy Burt is happy for me to use her name. She was then given the privilege to go to Canberra and go into this locked vault to read all this information about PFAS contamination. She was one of those people that then received \$120,000. My question to her was, "But there's nothing in our

water. We're being told there is no PFAS contamination. What's to see here?" "No, I got that money because of the worry that it caused me." I can tell you now, there is more worry in my community now than there ever has been because of that compensation action.

The other thing for me is that, as I said, three days ago I finally found out when the water testing was done between the president and the Feds. It started in 2020. You couldn't go into this civil action unless you had been a resident of Gumly from 2016. So where is all the water testing and results from 2016 to 2020? Nothing. Yet my neighbours have had life-changing money compensation because of PFAS. The end of my statement is, "What the hell is going on and what is being hidden?" What is happening? Should my community be worried?

The CHAIR: You mentioned you wrote to WaterNSW. You said you couldn't get a single thing. Can I clarify what you are asking for? Did they respond to you saying they couldn't do it or did you not get a response at all?

DONNA ARGUS: I haven't received a response at all. I know that Tracy Burt has, but that is hearsay and I can't talk about that. I haven't received any response, but can I say that the request for information about the efficiency of the committee and PFAS was embedded in a long list of things. We wanted testing results and reports. We wanted financial audits. They went into a full inquiry and the deputy secretary only wrote back to say, "There have been some things that they haven't done under the Act, but it appears that it's not been intentional." That's the only response I've got.

The CHAIR: Just to clarify, was that State—WaterNSW—or Federal?

DONNA ARGUS: State.

The CHAIR: When you said you were asking them for data, is that water—

DONNA ARGUS: We're directly asking for reports of our water testing, which we haven't got. But my neighbour Tracy Burt has called on the Feds and they gave us, through freedom of information, all of the testing results, finally. I got that three days ago from Tracy. That's what we'd asked the New South Wales water department to provide, because it's our belief that they are the department that monitor and oversee the water board because it's under that New South Wales management Act. We got nothing from them; we've just got this from the Federal Government to say what the testing is. We've received that information now.

The CHAIR: I was wondering if you could possibly table that for the Committee so that we can have a look at it. We can give a copy back. Is it a lab report or is that a report from Defence?

DONNA ARGUS: There's a fair bit in here. No, it's just purely—hang on, sorry.

The CHAIR: They're very difficult to read.

DONNA ARGUS: They really are. I apologise for that. I don't want to waste your time.

The CHAIR: That's okay. We can have a look.

DONNA ARGUS: Go through it and take of it what you will.

The CHAIR: You said about your neighbour that they went into a locked vault to read about PFAS contamination and then were given \$120,000. Who took them into the locked vault? Who was that with? Was it with a government agency? Was it with Shine Lawyers? Who facilitated that?

DONNA ARGUS: Shine Lawyers, I believe. It was done on Anzac Day last year, or around that time. But she can't give me details because she's not allowed to.

The CHAIR: Yes, they also signed something, I assume, like a non-disclosure agreement to not talk about it?

DONNA ARGUS: I'm assuming that. I guess I'm raising that because why the smoke and mirrors?

The CHAIR: Of course.

DONNA ARGUS: If we're being serious here about government looking after us and disclosing things and giving us information, why is compensation happening when there's nothing to be afraid of in our water from the testing that I've just given? And why, if you participated in this action, do you get some privilege to read a lot of information about the PFAS contamination in your community? It's just caused so much angst because we know nothing.

The CHAIR: That you then have to sign a non-disclosure agreement about and can't talk about. It's concerning, isn't it.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Ms Argus, I'd just like to get a better understanding of how your water scheme works. It's run by a committee of volunteers?

DONNA ARGUS: Correct—that we are supposed to vote on. But a vote hasn't happened for the past 20 years.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: That must fall under the responsibility of someone to manage.

DONNA ARGUS: NSW Water.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: That is for stock and domestic and household water?

DONNA ARGUS: Yes.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: And it's run from a bore?

DONNA ARGUS: Yes.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: That is fed by the river?

DONNA ARGUS: Yes.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Outside the PFAS concern, is there regular testing done on the water quality?

DONNA ARGUS: I'd like to tell you yes. I hope yes. But we don't have a committee that's effective enough to—they've not communicated that to us for a very long time. Again, we asked the water department last year to investigate a myriad of things. They have no documentation to give us.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: So it's been the same president for 20 years since you've had the vote?

DONNA ARGUS: No, there have been two in that time.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: How was the transfer of power?

DONNA ARGUS: Basically, "Who wants to be on the water board? Only five of us—well, we're only going to fill five positions. Don't need to vote—we're in."

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: How many people are on this scheme?

DONNA ARGUS: It's 63 households.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I'm just trying to get a handle on it because we see that, obviously, testing happens on our larger water facilities.

DONNA ARGUS: Absolutely.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: There is going to be some concern about who manages the testing on some of our more local-run council ones, and this is another stream of that that is going to need to be tested.

DONNA ARGUS: Can I tell you, there was an occasion when a government official that tests water approached me and said, "Can you please, please get your president to return my calls and return my emails? We have to test your water", of which I facilitated. They have to abide by the Act. There is only one department that can make sure they are abiding by the Act.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Sorry, so these would come under a water New South Wales Act?

DONNA ARGUS: Yes. The water management act 2018.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: I just wanted to follow up by asking some questions on the same issue. You said you had some results that you recently got three days ago or so. Who was it that did that testing? Was it State water that did that testing?

DONNA ARGUS: The email is gone. Whatever was on that piece of paper, that is who did the testing. My understanding was that it was facilitated by someone in the RAAF.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: So it was Defence that did the testing?

DONNA ARGUS: It could be here, sorry. No, it was in that email.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: So at the moment there is no regular testing done either by your committee or by State water?

DONNA ARGUS: I can't answer that because the committee will not talk to us and tell us that. I'm sorry that I'm in that position, but that's why we have sought support from NSW Water.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: Where testing has been done in other areas, we heard, for example, evidence when we were in the Blue Mountains at a committee hearing like this where State water is publishing regular updates on their website about PFAS levels and areas that they are monitoring. Do you think the same sort of thing should be happening in relation to your water source?

DONNA ARGUS: Absolutely, if we had somewhere to go. If it does exist, apologies. But I don't know that it exists. If we were able to access something where we knew the New South Wales department of water was making sure this volunteer committee was doing their job and we could go in and go, "Water testing is great"—I had my grandson have a horrendous time on dialysis because of E. coli poisoning, and he lived with me. We will never know because we don't get results, even if there is E. coli.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: If there was an outbreak of bacteria, then that would probably be happening.

DONNA ARGUS: Correct.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: You just want the same thing to happen in relation to PFAS. Is that right?

DONNA ARGUS: Everything. Absolutely PFAS because that has caused me a lot of angst and my family. I live in a community—I am Donna Argus and I live on the corner of Argus and Graham avenues. I have aunts, uncles and very elderly cousins. I have got the capability to get across my whole community and talk to them. PFAS was a real concern, but by god it's a concern now when they know that people in our community got life-changing money as compensation. Yet we are being told, "Nothing to see here."

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: That's the second area I just wanted to ask you some questions about. You mentioned an amount. I think it was \$100,000 of life-changing compensation. But you are saying you don't know why people have got that compensation and yet you keep being told that there is nothing wrong and there is no PFAS in the water. Why is it you can't find out why they have got compensation? Have these people signed non-disclosure agreements? Are they prohibited from telling you or they just won't tell you?

DONNA ARGUS: No. I think the reason I know about one person—and I can use her name because I got her permission—is because she was happy to talk to me about the process from start to finish. She told me that she got that compensation because of the worry that the PFAS contamination would have caused her. The community is very close-mouthed, except for two others who I know also got that money—one being the president on the water board and another water board committee member.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: What you are looking for, really, is more transparency so that if people are being given compensation, the community should know why and what it's about.

DONNA ARGUS: That's right. If we could get facts, we could stop rumours going around in community. One of the rumours is about buying a house on Governors Hill. The real estate agent told a friend of mine who bought up there that you've got to build up your veggie patch because there's PFAS in the ground up there. That's Governors Hill and I'm in the village.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: You're on a low level.

DONNA ARGUS: It's all rumour. Can someone give us some facts here?

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: Who do you think is best placed to manage that—to be the reliable source of truthful information in relation to that? Do you think it's the defence department or should it be State water or a New South Wales government agency? What's your view about that?

DONNA ARGUS: I feel very strongly about this. It's the New South Wales government. I think they're DPIE now. They changed their name so many times. That New South Wales water department, in my view, has a responsibility because there is a model and a recent model. They're trying to transition us now into a corporation. They're heavily involved in making sure that that model works well across the board—infrastructure, finance et cetera. With water testing and PFAS, they should be the ones making sure that the committee, firstly, is effective and, secondly, is even in place. We've got people that are claiming they're on the committee but no-one has ever voted them on. It should not be taken for granted that "it's just this volunteer committee" or "it's community".

Be frank with us. Get on the ground with us. Doorknock and make sure that people know what the facts are. Don't say, "I get to tick a box now because we've communicated with the president of a so-called committee

that nobody knows the effectiveness of." You're playing with people's lives. We drink this water. So why aren't you making sure that it is tested and that we are getting the thorough results? I shouldn't have to get those results three days ago from a neighbour who did a freedom of information request with a government department because she was lucky enough to get \$100,000. It's ridiculous. It's a bloody disgrace.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you very much for coming along. I can well appreciate the anxiety and uncertainty that this is obviously causing yourself and the community. Can I ask you this: I may have misheard you. Correct me if I'm wrong but I thought that you said, in response to an earlier answer, that you facilitated contact with the president.

DONNA ARGUS: Yes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Could you please elucidate on that? Just give us the timetable, who was involved and what came of that.

DONNA ARGUS: I should have written the time down. I didn't think it was a relevant matter.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Just roughly.

DONNA ARGUS: I actually work for the State government myself.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Are we talking about the calendar year 2025?

DONNA ARGUS: It could have been 2023.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: That's fine—continue.

DONNA ARGUS: Through my work, I'm connected with NSW Health. There is a person there that does the water testing. That person approached me in a meeting and said, "I am really, really struggling in getting your president to answer my calls or to respond to me in email. He has said to me, 'We are just volunteers. Stop harassing me. You can test the water when I'm good and ready.'"

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: May I ask you this question: With respect to the five people who are on this voluntary committee, are the names of those five people, including the president, in the public domain? In other words, it's not a State secret, presumably.

DONNA ARGUS: It's not supposed to be but because the New South Wales government do not follow up on monitoring that, nobody has any clue. The last election was 20 years ago. That's supposed to be given to the department and then the department make that public.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: But in terms of how this should be operating and with your knowledge of these voluntary committees, their structure and how they're meant to operate, are the members of the voluntary committee meant to have their names known in the community?

DONNA ARGUS: Yes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Can I ask you this—and, Chair, you might say if this is unwise—if that is so, what would be the problem in mentioning here today the name of the person who we understand is the president? You might say that's best not raised.

DONNA ARGUS: I guess because I feel uncomfortable about that.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: You feel uncomfortable about that?

DONNA ARGUS: It's a voluntary committee. This person is my neighbour.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I press no further.

DONNA ARGUS: I'm happy to do that on the side—and certainly we have written to Joe McGirr with the name included—if you feel there's a need to do that. I just don't feel that's appropriate for me to do.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I respect that decision. That's perhaps something we may take up. Surely, though, there must be some deep frustration in the community below you, in terms of how this is all operating, is there not? This is a dysfunctional arrangement, is it not? There's a deep-seated sense of "This is problematical and we need to get this resolved." Is that a fair statement?

DONNA ARGUS: Absolutely. Deeply.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: You may have said this. I missed a part of your opening statement. You're a primary producer?

DONNA ARGUS: No, not myself.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Did you say the name of the committee that is overseeing this? You don't have to name the president.

DONNA ARGUS: No. It's the Gumly Gumly private irrigation district committee. There was a by-law back in '97 around what the Gumly Gumly private irrigation district was about. We were under the water management Act of 2018. They've made adjustments to that because they're transitioning us now, under legislation, into a corporation.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: You said three days ago, you received this information—

DONNA ARGUS: From a neighbour.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: This is in relation to her property or the whole of the 63 properties?

DONNA ARGUS: The whole of the 63 properties, because the question asked was, "What interaction have you had with our president?"

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Have you had to change your behaviour, like buying bottled water or avoiding certain produce, as a result? I know you only had that three days ago, but you probably thought "I could have PFAS." Have you had those concerns and changed your behaviour as a result?

DONNA ARGUS: Yes, and so have my—as I said to you, I live right next door to my mum. My sister's behind me. I have aunties and uncles. We are buying in water. We're filtering water. Full disclosure: It's not just because of PFAS. It's because we don't have a committee that we can trust, nor a government department that will monitor it, that we are getting the testing done. So we buy in water and filter water. I have to say, with the number of breakages that we have, the other thing is we have to buy in water because—that's just another issue I don't need to be worrying you guys about.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: How would you describe the impact on your life and your family's wellbeing, whether it's emotional, financial or physical?

DONNA ARGUS: Massive. There's huge emotional tension. The compensations that happened even has caused great angst among community. I think that's why people are being really quiet. Nobody wants to tell anybody whether they did or they didn't—not that it's any of our business. However, there's a lot of speculation of why is it that a couple of people on that board received that compensation. One person is that person that absolutely did not divulge in any way, shape or form that testing was being done, that we needed to worry—and it appears we didn't need to worry. The angst, the social rip in my community is felt very deeply. We wonder why we don't trust government: We just feel that we have nowhere to turn. PFAS is one of those issues. Where are we going to go?

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Your sense of safety or trust in public institutions is severely diminished?

DONNA ARGUS: It is for me. Maybe I shouldn't be sitting here talking as if other people do that, but for me, deeply. But I can categorically tell you that that's the way my own family feel. And just that whole piece—like I said, why is it that people who went into this action get to go to this closed vault and sign things and we know nothing about it and she can't talk to us? And she got a lot of money. The angst that that causes is unbelievable. And it's financial impact because many people in my community are growing market gardens. If we've got nothing to worry about PFAS, this very compensation now has, what, devalued our property? For us to try to get money into our water—we have got failing infrastructure, and we're thinking we'll sell water to try to get money in so that we're financially viable to get a basic need: water. And now people have got a compensation, there's all this stuff happening around PFAS, how are we going to sell the water? "No, here's the test. It's all okay." But, jeez, people who are drinking it have got \$100,000 in their bank. Why? Because "nothing to see here, sorry for the worry."

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Has there been—it's hard to know. With communication, it's all been through this committee rather than to the 63 residents.

DONNA ARGUS: We've received nothing directly at all from RAAF. I haven't. Many people I've spoken to haven't. And I've got a letter here that's signed to say that there is approval being given to the president that they only have to go through them. In fact, I think you've all received that information. You'll see that I've underlined a section that says, "We're basically just going to go through the president." I've underlined it in there.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: So you would say that your voice as a resident hasn't been heard or respected in this process.

DONNA ARGUS: Correct—until today. I've finally got a say.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Do you believe the communication has been reactive or proactive?

DONNA ARGUS: From?

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: From anybody.

DONNA ARGUS: When I read all of this, I think the communication has been purely to tick a box and hope for the best and to get rid of the whole issue.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: To me it doesn't appear that, apart from the committee, residents were afforded the opportunity to ask questions—

DONNA ARGUS: Correct.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: —or provide feedback.

DONNA ARGUS: They ran committee consultations in Forest Hill but nothing for us at all.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Looking ahead, what do you think should happen to address the issue effectively, from your point of view?

DONNA ARGUS: We need a strong committee. We need support from the New South Wales Government to get a strong committee in. We also need to have the assurance of our safety, and the confidence of that committee, with an overarching government department—even in this corporation state. I have to say that even the Government pushing for corporation is to distance themselves again even further from private irrigation districts. If we have a PFAS issue again and the New South Wales Government keeps pushing and pushing away, how do we know that we are getting the right information? And I would like to see that strong committee be made to report, as they should under the Act, financial reports and all testing done of all our drinking water.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: What message or recommendations would you like this Committee to take back to the New South Wales Government on behalf of the community that you're here to represent today?

DONNA ARGUS: I think I've said it a few times. I would like, very clearly, the New South Wales Government to take community seriously and understand that water is such a critical part of our community. It's a social issue. It's a financial issue. I want them to take seriously—this is a utility that you make Riverina Water and every other utility jump through hoops, yet you don't give a damn what's going on for us in our community. This is our drinking water. We went and met with Riverina Water and said, "Look, can you take us over?" They said it would cost us between \$30,000 and \$50,000 a household and we would have to foot the bill.

I want that Government to know that that is not achievable; that we have bought into this community, into a scheme that has been ongoing for many, many, many years, and for many, many years the New South Wales Government has failed to make sure that this community has got that essential asset, and that there has been due diligence and a committee that has looked after us. We are in a lot of trouble financially now. This PFAS issue just highlights all the weaknesses. I'm all for community looking after community, but government sometimes needs to give us a leg-up. We've looked after our community and we've looked after this whole situation for 50-odd years. When things like PFAS come across, that highlights the issue that you've bloody well forgotten about us.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Of the 63 residents, how many acres does each person hold, or what's the biggest landholding there? I'm trying to get a sense of the area you're talking about.

DONNA ARGUS: Yes. There's five-acre properties. There's less than five-acre properties. There's 10-acre properties. My sister has 20 acres. It doesn't go much over that. As I said, they're hobby farms. But they are people that are utilising that area for market gardening and selling vegetables and produce. Cattle is raised on there. Sheep are raised and sold. But to my knowledge—sorry, I can take it on notice and get you further information—I think the largest property is just a bit over 20 acres.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I have a couple of quick questions, again for my clarity. I'm on one of these localised schemes as well. Is the inference that there are others who want to be involved but are being shut out of that process?

DONNA ARGUS: Yes. We're going through it right now. We're trying to get an election happening—not that I want to bore you with it, but we have a returning officer that is—look, it's a very long story. We're all

trying to get a committee in now that has been voted in. Again the returning officer's not doing as they're asked, and again we've had to go to the New South Wales department of water and again ask them to support us.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: The second question that I have, just for clarity for myself as well, you suggested the bore that feeds this scheme is fed from the river directly?

DONNA ARGUS: Yes.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: For PFAS to be in your water, is it being delivered there from the water that's coming down the Murrumbidgee?

DONNA ARGUS: Yes, on my understanding. I think that detail is in the information you've got in front of you.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Because that's a—

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Concern.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: —another massive issue.

DONNA ARGUS: Yes, sorry. I don't know if this is allowed, but I have my husband there and I'm not as au fait with it. If that's not the case, I need to take it on notice and get back to you, please—

The CHAIR: Yes, take it on notice.

DONNA ARGUS: —because that's my understanding of it, yes. But do you know what? That just symbolises I've been in that community for that long and still can't work that out either, because of lack of communication.

The CHAIR: Ms Argus, can I ask in terms of the compensation, just having a look at the documentation that you provided to the Committee and just trying to think of whether there's any—

DONNA ARGUS: I haven't got mine back, by the way.

The CHAIR: That's okay. It's just a question about—the people that you know that have been provided compensation, do they live within the PFAS management area, for example, compared to the PFAS monitoring area? You know the difference in defences—I'm sure you do.

DONNA ARGUS: Yes. There was a map there that showed that.

The CHAIR: Is there any difference like that to justify why one household would be offered something and another wouldn't, that you can determine?

DONNA ARGUS: I would have no clue. I think I would have had to be part of the action for me to understand that. But I am aware that Tracy had to put in the value of her property, and that that sum was based on the value of her property. But I can't answer that because I wasn't part of the action.

The CHAIR: Do you know if there are any other independent IOs—irrigation organisations? Are you aware of any others in New South Wales that are dealing with similar situations? Would you have that knowledge?

DONNA ARGUS: No.

The CHAIR: Do most of the people who are part of the community in Gumly Gumly feel the same way that you are feeling today? Are they frustrated at the lack of support and frustrated at the committee and the way in which it is being managed or not?

DONNA ARGUS: Yes, absolutely. Why do I know that? Because, like I said, a number of people in the community are my family, and a number of other people that aren't my family will gravitate to me and ask me questions about things they don't understand. I am quite vocal in the community, with respect to what I think should be happening in terms of governance of that committee. I have emails, texts and a number of bits and pieces to show that absolute angst. What is even scarier now is that we're going quieter because we are not empowered, and what more can we do? We've gone to the government officials and we've asked for help. We get nothing.

The CHAIR: Are you aware of any independent water testing that's been conducted?

DONNA ARGUS: No, none at all.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I tried to ask this question before: From whom would you like to get a flyer in your letterbox that says either the water is safe to drink or the water is at this level? Who do you trust to provide that information to you?

DONNA ARGUS: At this very moment, the New South Wales Government. I'm not really sure what you're trying to get from me, but we don't have anybody in place who I can trust would be able to give me the right information to assure my safety and assure me that the right things that are supposed to be done for my safety are being done. I don't have that in my community, and I would imagine many of us are hoping for the best. That's why we are making representation to the New South Wales water department to say help us.

The CHAIR: Could you expand on what you mean by safety?

DONNA ARGUS: PFAS and E. coli in our water. This isn't my area, but I don't get the luxury, like most residents do in Wagga Wagga, of knowing that there is a utility that is working its guts out to make sure that potable water—we don't have potable water. We've accepted that. We have to; we've got no choice. Who else can—it could be the health department. To go back to your earlier question, sir, if they reported to directly to us, then I would feel confident that the testing was being done, that the testing was being done of the right stuff that we need to be worried about, and that we're getting the reports.

The CHAIR: I did want to ask about the local health district as well and whether there has been any communication—it's Riverina, isn't it? Has there been any communication with local—

DONNA ARGUS: Yes, I have. I guess that's why, as I said to you earlier, I facilitated. We are connected with the president, and I said, "Can you please contact the health department? You've got to test our water." I've even got that in an email, and I've got his emails that have said, "I'm just a volunteer. You can't make me do anything."

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: This is the president?

DONNA ARGUS: Yes.

The CHAIR: With that, we are out of time. Ms Argus, thank you very much for making yourself available. Thank you, obviously, for being a champion for your community and being their voice today. I am sure they really appreciate it. We will see what the Committee can do.

DONNA ARGUS: Thank you. I need a chance to answer that man's question properly, if I could.

(The witness withdrew.)

Mr TIM KOSCHEL, Chairperson, Board, Riverina Water County Council, affirmed and examined

Mr TROY van BERKEL, Director, Engineering, Riverina Water County Council, sworn and examined

Mr PETER THOMPSON, General Manager, Wagga Wagga City Council, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome. We'll get our next session started. Do you have a short opening statement to begin with?

TIM KOSCHEL: Firstly, thank you to the Committee for having us share our experiences in dealing with PFAS. Riverina Water is a New South Wales local government water utility responsible for providing safe, reliable and cost-effective drinking water to a population of around 77,000 throughout four local government areas—Wagga Wagga, Lockhart Shire and parts of the Greater Hume and Federation councils. Riverina Water is working with government agencies and key organisations, including the NSW Water Directorate and WSAA, to address PFAS contamination from the Forest Hill RAAF base and other unknown sources. Since 2017 it has participated in the Wagga PFAS RAAF project reference group with Defence, the NSW EPA, DCCEEW, NSW Health, Wagga Wagga City Council and Goldenfields Water to monitor and help manage contamination.

PFAS contamination from the Wagga RAAF base poses a risk to Riverina Water's East Wagga bore field, which supplies up to 25 megalitres a day to Wagga Wagga. Managing PFAS has proven complex and resource intensive, requiring proactive multi-agency coordination. Recent detections above the proposed PFAS health limits at the West Wagga bore and the Tarcutta village groundwater source added significantly to this challenge, as the source of contamination remains unknown. This is currently being investigated and funded by Riverina Water to identify potential PFAS sources, PFAS pathways and available options moving forward.

With proposed changes to PFAS health limits, PFAS detection at lower levels still has significant costs and resource impacts to manage. Options to manage remain similar, such as a new water source or, more likely, treatment if the source water cannot be guaranteed. Investigating the source of any contaminants at these low levels is required to assess available options and determine responsibility. However, this is extremely difficult if it is left to those impacted, due to limitations in jurisdiction and control, complexities in the particle tracing of PFAS, and the costs involved for communities to burden.

Riverina Water remains committed to providing safe drinking water for our communities. However, effectively addressing PFAS requires prioritising prevention—shifting to source-based prevention across all exposure pathways as a more sustainable and holistic approach to PFAS management; strengthening monitoring—enhancing and coordinating PFAS monitoring to support evidence-based decision-making and track the effectiveness of protection measures; improving collaboration—establishing a clear multi-agency framework for long-term PFAS management grounded in science and transparency; protecting public health—reviewing and updating protection measures in line with proposed PFAS health limits to safeguard public health and environment; supporting local water utilities—providing financial and regulatory support to affected communities, recognising that local utilities cannot manage PFAS risks alone; and enhancing communication—delivering clear, consistent public messaging to build trust and address information gaps.

PETER THOMPSON: Firstly, thank you for the opportunity to be here today and to speak on behalf of our community and answer any questions you may have. I apologise for my mayor, who would dearly have loved to have been here as an advocate for his community. He has a very good excuse: He is having surgery as we speak. In terms of seeing us in context, the gentlemen to my right are with Riverina Water, which is a specific-purpose county council charged with the responsibility of sourcing, treating and then reticulating potable water not just to our local government area but to a number of local government areas that surround us. Wagga council is the general-purpose council, so we sit here as advocates for the community generally. We also manage the wastewater treatment systems so we come across PFAS in biosolids and, to the extent land is contaminated, we are the advocate group for that.

Without wishing to dictate where your questions might lead, the one thing that I'd say on the positive is that we've had, as Wagga council, every opportunity to participate in this process as a commentator and at meetings. We're not a decision-maker but we have had every opportunity to participate in meetings. I feel we've had good disclosure in terms of the testing results that have been produced. The single thing that I am most aggrieved about on behalf of our community is that, in any pollution event—in New South Wales certainly and I'd suggest probably Australia—the first actions in that are always containment and removal of the pollutant. In relation to the Wagga PFAS issue, I'm still not aware that the actual polluting contaminated soil at the RAAF base has been removed. It has now been more than seven years. I think that question, which we've raised directly in meetings, is entitled to a much better answer than what we've had so far.

The CHAIR: It would be good for us to be able to get that answer from Defence, to be honest, in terms of what they're doing to clean it up, but they didn't respond to our invitation to appear before this Committee. So you don't know whether the Department of Defence is cleaning it up? Dr McGirr said at the beginning of the day that he hears they might be, but that was a might be. But your council and Riverina Water—is there anything confirmed that any of you know about in terms of what the Department of Defence is doing?

PETER THOMPSON: I'll go first. We're not aware in relation to what they're actually doing in relation to clean-up. Riverina Water—and I jumped ahead of them to give them a moment to collect their thoughts. But they're much more at the coalface of the impending pollution of groundwaters issue and they'll provide a better answer. But my short answer to you is that when the issue was initially identified—I believe there was a tank at the RAAF base which was still full of PFAS chemical and that has been removed. But, to the extent that the PFAS contaminating material is in or around the surrounds of the RAAF base, I don't believe and I have no knowledge of any attempt yet being made to remove that contaminating source which, in all likelihood—as a general manager; I'm not an expert—is leaching into the groundwater as we speak.

The CHAIR: Yes, it's definitely spreading in terms of the groundwater plume. I've seen emails saying that to that effect. I assume Riverina Water probably receives that information as well. Is that correct?

TROY van BERKEL: Correct. I'm not aware 100 per cent that everything is being remediated. I know that some work has been carried out by Defence. They continue to monitor and try and trace PFAS contamination in the groundwater. With the proposed new PFAS limits, they're also seeing what impact that is happening in further baseline results and installing additional Sentinel balls to find out the extent of that PFAS plume.

The CHAIR: Does Riverina Water have the equipment to treat PFAS, or do you just block it off at the source if you know that there is PFAS over the drinking water guidelines? Have you been treating it as well?

TROY van BERKEL: Our existing treatment technologies are primarily—we have a combination of bore supplies and also some surface water that we also treat. It's, typically, conventional treatment, where we do have treatment, which isn't able to treat PFAS, which would require further treatment such as reverse osmosis, or you might have heard of granular activated carbon and iron exchange, which are treatment technologies that help remove PFAS but don't actually get rid of it. Then you have away stream which needs to be managed as well. So at this stage we don't.

The CHAIR: How much is it costing Riverina Water at this stage to deal with PFAS as an issue? Do you have that information available or can you provide it on notice?

TROY van BERKEL: Yes, I can probably have a fair estimate of cost. There are probably two parts to it. We have the current plume with what's been spoken about with the RAAF base. That's a very known issue where we've got a lot of support in our project governance group, working with multiple agencies, which has a number of streams to it in terms of the strategy committee in terms of looking at short- and long-term options, and then also the comms stream to it. That issue, at the moment, we're being supported well in. We're carrying out PFAS testing of our East Wagga bore field sites. We've got a risk-based approach where it's looking at what are some of the factors that would rely on us testing more frequently in those areas? So our East Wagga bore sites, knowing about this plume, we've been testing monthly for some time now. Then we've got another issue, obviously, with the National Health and Medical Research Council revising the proposed health limits for PFAS.

We've actually conducted further testing with NSW Health, which then identified that we had some levels above the proposed guideline limits for PFAS but below the current *Australian Drinking Water Guidelines* limit. Primarily it's for PFOS. That was at Tarcutta, which was mentioned, and also at West Wagga bore fields, so at two sites there. One is, with East Wagga, a 25 meg a day bore field site, so that would be quite a considerable cost when that does potentially start to get impacted with what we do in terms of treatment options. We've got a short-term option with a special-purpose access licence where we can get more river water. For Tarcutta and West Wagga, I think the costs have been around that \$40,000 mark; I can get more specific costs on that. But that's been with additional testing getting access to further salinity sites in Tarcutta. We've actually engaged a hydrogeologist. They've carried out a report looking at potential pathways for PFAS so we can try and actually understand where it's coming from and what options we do have going forward.

The CHAIR: If you could take that on notice in terms of what it's costing and if there's anything further. You get some funding from the Department of Defence to deal with this, I'm assuming?

TROY van BERKEL: Not at this stage. Defence isn't responsible for the Tarcutta issue. For East Wagga, we're looking at a piece of work which is looking at potential options going forward. I would imagine that Defence would be responsible, as the polluter, for those works.

The CHAIR: Are other government agencies working with Riverina Water to help identify other sources? I think that's what we're increasingly seeing across the State. Historically, it's been Defence and fire stations, really. It's starting to become quite apparent, whether it's terrible accidents where firefighting foam has been used or whether it's landfills, the application of biosolids or other things. Is WaterNSW or any regional New South Wales department working with you?

TROY van BERKEL: As you alluded to, when it's a known situation, it's much more structured and easier in the approach. With the proposed tightening limits, which are significantly lower, I think we're going to see a lot more of the situations where this occurs. I think it's a little bit too organic at the moment. At Riverina Water we're quite lucky with some of the technical expertise we have in house, but for a lot of other local water utilities this would be quite a significant issue. We definitely need more support with an issue like Tarcutta where we're trying to investigate the potential sources and it's often outside our jurisdiction or what control we actually have.

We do have support; it's just more when we ask for it. We've got DCCEEW and Jane Shepherd who provide a lot of support, but I think there can be more from other agencies to look at how, with these timing limits, that's still considered contamination. Just because previously it wasn't considered contamination—it is considered contamination now when it's affecting drinking water. How we best come to that solution is always when it's a collaborative approach and people have clear responsibilities and are working together to provide consistent messaging to communities, because it's a pretty emotionally charged issue. If it's not driven through facts and a coordinated consistent message, it leaves our communities pretty unsure and other communities with just getting a reactive approach to the situation.

The CHAIR: Mr Thompson, have there been any health studies or anything offered, whether it's by the health department or universities, to Wagga residents, particularly those residents who live closer to the contamination area? Has there been anything offered or anything undertaken—blood studies or other studies of the extent of diseases or health conditions or what have you?

PETER THOMPSON: Not to my knowledge, no.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Mr Thompson, has the council consulted with Aboriginal residents or local land councils about the impact of PFAS on Country and water sources for traditional practices?

PETER THOMPSON: No, we haven't consulted, but in the engagement between government and stakeholder groups, we are a stakeholder rather than someone who is actually undertaking the consultation that comes from the Department of Defence.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Are there groups in the community, such as primary producers—and we did hear from the witness before—relying on bore water who require additional support?

PETER THOMPSON: Again, not to my knowledge but that's not a sphere that, as a local government authority, we actively regulate. We're not a water authority for raw water either, and no-one has asked us to advocate on that particular issue.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Has the PFAS contamination influenced how you now approach land use planning, rezoning or environmental assessment?

PETER THOMPSON: It has in relation to Forest Hill where the RAAF base is located. We do take into account the understanding that the stormwater channels in that area have PFAS contamination in relation to planning decisions, and we have refused applications on the basis of that in the past. I'm not sure about currently. One of the biggest impacts on our decision-making in that area is that the wastewater stream from the base is received by us at our Forest Hill sewage treatment plant. That treatment plant has two parallel systems—a series of treatment ponds in parallel. One of those systems receives the water from RAAF base. Since the time the issue was first identified and PFAS was identified in that wastewater at elevated levels, we have contained that wastewater at that treatment facility and it is not discharged.

Prior to that, it was made available for irrigation or discharged to river. We currently rely on the second parallel system to treat the other wastewater streams from Forest Hill. Ultimately we will need to augment that system, because we have lost half the system in order to contain the RAAF base wastewater stream. It continues to be contaminated with PFAS, we believe—I think with some level of accuracy—because they are older pipes in the RAAF base. It's not uncommon for older pipes to receive underground stormwater flows into them, because they are normally lined with gravel or a similar permeable structure. That is the ingress point for the PFAS contaminated groundwater into the sewer lines. They will be replaced with the RAAF base upgrade, but that is scheduled for a decade from now.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I imagine that PFAS contamination would be a standing item in your council's risk register or long-term community strategic plan.

PETER THOMPSON: The biggest element of risk for us is actually the Riverina Water risk, in that our potable system relies on those groundwater resources. At the moment, all we know for absolute certainty is that there is a plume of PFAS moving through the underground water system and it's heading towards our potable water supply.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: We've heard about property values. Has that impacted investment confidence, tourism or housing in the LGA?

PETER THOMPSON: Not to my knowledge.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Has the council advocated on behalf of affected residents in seeking, say, blood testing or property value protection or compensation?

PETER THOMPSON: No, we haven't.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I'll ask the Riverina, if I can. Do you believe that State and Federal agencies are doing enough to coordinate and fund a whole-of-system approach to PFAS management?

TROY van BERKEL: Like I said, with the current revised guidelines coming out, I think existing frameworks and strategies for protecting the environment and drinking water need to be looked at, because there are going to be a lot more situations popping up, like Tarcutta, West Wagga and other local communities that you would have heard from. I think it needs to be reviewed on how it can be a more coordinated approach, whether through monitoring programs and transparency of results where agencies can actually validate the existing frameworks that are in place and say, "Are they actually effective? How do we make sure that we are building community confidence and public trust?"

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Should local water utilities be held financially responsible for PFAS monitoring and treatment, even though the contamination is historical and outside your control?

TROY van BERKEL: Generally we carry out monitoring for a range of contaminants. In our drinking water management plan and under the *Australian Drinking Water Guidelines*, there is a role that we play in terms of that monitoring program. Anything above and beyond, in terms of coming up with new technologies, which are quite expensive and far above conventional treatment, I don't think local water authorities and their communities should bear the cost. Rather it should be looking at the polluters and then focusing on how we have more thorough source protection across not just water but a range of areas where PFAS can actually impact human and environmental health.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: What would you recommend as best practice governance for PFAS oversight between councils, utilities, government departments and State agencies?

TROY van BERKEL: The actual project governance group has actually worked quite well, when there's that collaborative approach where people are clear on their responsibilities and what accountabilities they hold. Also, getting rid of politics and just working together to say, "We've got this issue. How do we all play a role?"—we've got a lot of experts and expert bodies in Australia getting together and saying, "What's the best approach going forward?" That collaborative approach—where it's not just organic and left to individual, affected communities—is a much better approach.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: The situation in Tarcutta that you've talked about is they're supplementing water from other sources. Am I reading right on that?

TROY van BERKEL: It's an independent system. It has two bores. At one bore we've had readings that are above the proposed PFAS guidelines for PFOS. The other bore has been free. We've actually just had one result above, but we're still carrying out baseline testing. It's an independent system.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: If you do need to supplement water in places like that—and I'm using the experience in Walcha—how would you go about doing that? It's now sort of okay. In the late 2010s, when we were very short of water, how was that system managed?

TROY van BERKEL: That's a good question. There are water sharing plans that can often restrict local water authorities from putting in another bore supply, or it could just be the same aquifer, so you could be very limited by what options you have. It could also be not very cost effective or may present other issues if you pipe long distances to somewhere like Tarcutta. They're some of your options. Or it's a case of if you put in another

bore supply or looked at an alternative source, which you can't guarantee, then you look at treatment options. Obviously it's quite expensive for a small community to wear that cost.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: In any of the long-term testing that you've done—obviously we've found a spread of the area that it covers—are you seeing any change in the concentration of PFAS in any of the waterways?

TROY van BERKEL: I don't know if we've been testing long enough to see that. In an area like Tarcutta, I don't think we've got a good enough baseline of data to see that. With the new limits, we've had to change the test methodology to have lower threshold limits. That's also presenting a new baseline to say we're seeing "detects" that previously were non-detected results. I think we're still at a stage where it's very difficult to get good historical baseline data, which makes it difficult with pending changes in health limits for PFAS. We have to work out what are the best options and how quickly we need to try to move forward without having all the answers.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: How quickly are we moving ahead with our knowledge in this space? For instance, 10 or 15 years ago, were we talking about PFAS at all? Are we learning quick enough? Is there enough work going on to understand the issue?

TROY van BERKEL: I think it's been talked about for a long time. In the last few years there's been a rapid increase in testing and it's probably been a little bit too reactive. But, like anything, we do it on a risk-based approach. We don't test for absolutely everything. We say, "What are the factors?" That's under the *Australian Drinking Water Guidelines*. Historically, while there's been not a lot of reasons to test in some of these more remote areas, we've been testing in places like Wagga because of some of the more known risks around there. I think it is going in the right direction and knowledge is definitely increasing. It's just making sure the solutions that we come up with, across the board, are the right ones. I think looking at the end rather than the start is definitely not the right approach, because it's far more costly and far less effective. You still have to deal with the waste stream and treat it again through biochar. You don't want to end up in biosolids, and we can't re-use those.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: We have heard—and actually, quite honestly, seen—a bit of the anxiety that this is causing in this community and other communities throughout this inquiry. What do you need from government to help quell that anxiety to—again, I don't want to dismiss it—provide that assurance, the safety and the calm that is needed from State government?

PETER THOMPSON: I think there are two probably separate issues here. One is the sources of PFAS, which are unrelated to the Defence bases in Wagga. I think the community would benefit from unequivocal research or health advice that puts a limit on "If PFAS is at this level, you should not be concerned." And, if the level that that statement is true at is zero, then that should be the statement. I suspect it's probably not zero. It's probably got a number next to it; it's just a very low number. I think that would give the communities some comfort in relation to the general PFAS issue.

In relation to the contamination of the groundwater from the RAAF base—and, to a much lesser extent, Kapooka, which is a different site and different mechanism—at the moment I don't think the community has any grounds whatsoever to have comfort from that because, as we sit here right now and as I said in the introduction, we have a known contaminant discharging a plume of PFAS into a significant groundwater resource in the Riverina, and there doesn't seem to be any answer to what will be done about that. We're, at the moment, simply watching that plume move in the test results. I'm not sure if you're aware but one of the initiatives was to set up two monitoring bores for early detection—canary bores—and both of those tested positive when they installed them. It's akin to putting the canary into the mine and pulling it out dead in the cage. That happened twice.

What ultimately was found to be the case is that they didn't flush the bore properly, I think, and that the test results were not reliable. Nevertheless, you've had these two incidents where these two bores have been put in for detecting, in the long-term future, when the plume gets to that point, and you get that quite alarming result, yet we don't have an answer to that. I have raised, I think it was two years ago now, at one of the meetings that Defence have had carriage of how this issue is being addressed for six years, and we still have the soil contaminated in the ground and nothing is moving. Isn't it time that, as government agencies—and we're all sitting around the table—take charge of this decision and actually remove it from Defence and actually start setting some KPIs on what we expect them to achieve?

The answer I got to that question was that no New South Wales government agency has the power to direct Defence in relation to this issue, and I assumed that to be true. I marry that to the communication I got on 8 April 2025, where Defence has declined to even appear in front of this inquiry. From an Australian perspective, that's fairly alarming. You've got an entity that is responsible for a dramatic pollutant that is about to have an extraordinary impact on a regional community, and they're not answerable to the New South Wales State

Government and they're not answerable to New South Wales State government agencies charged with securing the health and security of its people. That can't be good enough. If you could address that answer, I would be very much grateful.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I think our response to that last statement would be "Hear, hear!" I speak on behalf of myself, not the whole Committee, but I think we're in vigorous agreement. First of all, thank you, gentlemen, for coming along and please pass on our best wishes to Mayor Tout for his surgery. I hope he has a rapid recovery. Thanks for the work your respective organisations are doing. I've just got something that I'll read to you. There are no names or pack drill here. It's just some email correspondence. It is a response back from the email address PFAS.comms@defence.gov.au. In terms of who it's back to, or who it's from, sending this is a person in the position of PFAS communications, PFAS investigation and management branch/infrastructure division, security and estate group, Department of Defence.

It's an example of a response back to someone—I won't name them—in regard to a query, which sort of makes me wonder, thinking out loud or rhetorically, how serious is the Australian Department of Defence, the ADF, really taking some of these very significant matters? In terms of your respective organisation's engagement with the Australian Defence Force, specifically, who is your line of contact with? Is it at a level of some meaningful height to push out a request for information and have it come back, or do you just send it off to some behemoth called the ADF and just hope someone reads it and sends it back? That question is half tongue-in-cheek, but who are you able to contact and engage with?

TROY van BERKEL: For Riverina Water, as part of the project governance group, we've got members of Defence who are on that group. My understanding is that they're at director level, so we've got contacts who we can readily contact in relation to issues and updates.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Forgive me, in terms of director level, you're satisfied that that's a level of standing of individuals who can sit across the table and deal with you, and then take that off and engage with superiors for decision-making purposes?

TROY van BERKEL: I believe so, yes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: That's good to know because my great fear, and I have seen this before, is that they're going off to some email address. With great respect to the individuals who are at the other end, I do wonder about their capacity to really provide detailed responses. On the issue of the various organisations across this community at large involved in tackling this issue, yourselves two of them, but in your submission on the first page in paragraph number two, you list quite a few of them. Dr McGirr, who gave some evidence this morning, as you're aware, even had some additional ones. It strikes me that's quite a complex tapestry of organisations from the local government level through to State and to Commonwealth.

I'm still curious to find out how you appear to be extracting some reasonably good level of cooperation, it appears to me, and working across both laterally and vertically these organisations to prosecute the issues that need to be prosecuted to deal with this issue. If I can compare it, without naming any specific other parts of the State, some haven't seen—at least in my opinion—the same level of strategy and organisation running both vertically and horizontally. I wonder if you'd like to say how you've come to this, what appears to be a reasonably competent way of working both up and down?

TROY van BERKEL: I think in 2017 there was a project reference group that was already established, so we were quite fortunate that when those monitoring bores, where there was a positive detect and it was escalated up, we already had some of those key contacts where we could establish that group relatively quickly. Probably quite lucky in the organisation that we have some longstanding members who are quite across PFAS contamination and some of the issues, so they were able to enact that pretty quickly. I think we've got someone I mentioned before, Jane Shepherd, from DCCEE who I think has played a big role in that as well in helping set up some of the terms of reference, having both clear groups for strategy and looking at options going forward. There's a piece of work that is being looked at at the moment and then a comms group.

It's definitely not perfect and I think some of the changes with the National Health and Medical Research Council with the updated *Australian Drinking Water Guidelines* limits have sort of put some of that work on the back foot because of waiting to see, I guess, what's the impact, what sort of time frames are we talking about. It definitely needs to get re-engaged. As Peter mentioned, there still needs to be a considerable amount of action taken to mitigate this risk going forward. It's not perfect. As I mentioned, where it's happened more organically, they're still—if you're a local water utility, you've got a lot of skin in the game to make sure that you're on the front foot because, I guess, we're in the issue with our community. It takes a lot of drive at times. I think that's where we need to make it a little bit less organic and more structured in how we deal with these issues.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: If you don't mind me circling back, that individual you mentioned, what department was she from?

TROY van BERKEL: DCCEEW.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: And she, in effect, brought to you for consideration an operating model that was being proposed as one to enable this better communication and engagement with the community. Is that what you're saying?

TROY van BERKEL: Yes. I think it was already established, but one of our experts—one of our managers of operations in the stands there—Jason, reached out to our regulator in DCCEEW and basically helped fast-track this and get on the front foot with the issue. Then our CEO proactively went out to the community and, even though we did not have all the answers, tried to bring the communities along for the journey, which is something that I think has worked really well. We've tried to provide updates when we do get new information.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: In regard to the new ADWG framework that's coming down the line and, in particular, what I might speculate are financial challenges, potentially, for the likes of Riverina Water and others in terms of being able to invest in what is required to meet the new standards—not just the new standards, but what will be the manifestation of water sources and supplies that may themselves not meet standards and therefore require new infrastructure and investment. Would you care to take this opportunity to talk about what might be required in terms of, dare I say—and I do not speak on behalf of the Government. I'm sure the Treasurer will box my ears when I next see him—financial support or support in kind that may be required to deal with this coming down the line?

TROY van BERKEL: For some of those smaller systems, off the top of my head, if we looked at treatment options for a one-meg-a-day plant and looked at whether it's reverse osmosis or some other technology, we could be looking at something in the vicinity of—and this is just high-level. It could be \$2 million to \$4 million, if you look at some of the technology that is around, which is a lot for a small community. In terms of the East Wagga bore fields and some of the impacts, that's a 25-meg-a-day system. It's not just about treating it. We can't just move that resource to the river, because that's been in our long-term planning. That's for growth, so any extra water that we need will come from the Murrumbidgee to actually facilitate growth in the future. If we lost a bore supply, it's considerable cost, which is a lot. With any changes in regulations across the board with the *Australian Drinking Water Guidelines*, whether it's health-based targets or whether it's PFAS, having a broad understanding across the State and Australia about the regulatory impact statement and what it's going to cost but then what the benefits of that are as well, because we are talking about some extremely low levels, I think is a wise thing so that we're all on the same page with what that looks like going forward and then what roles we all play.

The CHAIR: Mr Thompson, you spoke at the beginning about biosolids, and I think you said something about how you advocate when land is contaminated with biosolids. Is that correct?

PETER THOMPSON: No, I said that Riverina Water is responsible for treating the rural water for a potable water supply. Where we fit into the equation as a local government authority is, we accept the wastewater, we treat the wastewater, and PFAS is often a contaminant in the biosolids which are currently land applied.

The CHAIR: How do you know what level of contamination that is? Is that just something that is known?

PETER THOMPSON: Yes. We measure that in the biosolids, or our contractor measures that in the biosolids, before they are disposed of, and there are limits above which it can't be land applied in agriculture. It's a risk management tool to make sure that, if it does appear at all, the level of PFAS in that biosolid material is below the level that can be land applied.

The CHAIR: What happens when it's tested and it's over?

PETER THOMPSON: We would probably take that to the landfill. That's not happened yet. Because our landfill has leachate barriers in place, I imagine that would be the contingency for that but, at the moment, the levels in the biosolids are well below the limits that can be land applied.

The CHAIR: We could go on, but we are out of time. Thank you for appearing today. We appreciate your evidence. If Committee members have anything further, the secretariat will be in touch with supplementary questions.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 15:15.