

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

STANDING COMMITTEE ON STATE DEVELOPMENT

**INQUIRY INTO THE GAME AND FERAL ANIMAL LEGISLATION
AMENDMENT (CONSERVATION HUNTING) BILL 2025**

At Macquarie Room, Parliament House, Sydney on Friday 8 August 2025

The Committee met at 9:30.

<p>CORRECTED</p>

PRESENT

The Hon. Emily Suvaal (Chair)

The Hon. Scott Barrett (Deputy Chair)

The Hon. Robert Borsak

Ms Sue Higginson

The Hon. Emma Hurst

The Hon. Stephen Lawrence

The Hon. Aileen MacDonald

The Hon. Peter Primrose

PRESENT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

The Hon. Mark Buttigieg

The CHAIR: Good morning and welcome to today's hearing of the Committee's inquiry into the Game and Feral Animal Legislation Amendment (Conservation Hunting) Bill 2025. I acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora 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 Emily Suvaal and 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.

Ms TARA BLACK, Acting Deputy Secretary, Fisheries and Forestry, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, affirmed and examined

Mr RICHARD VARVEL, Director, Forestry and Hunting Regulation, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, affirmed and examined

Mr ROB KELLY, Executive Director, Delivery, Local Land Services, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Good morning and welcome to our first witnesses. Thank you for making time to give evidence today. Would any of you like to start by making an opening statement?

TARA BLACK: Yes, thank you, Chair. We've just got a very brief opening statement. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the inquiry today. We just wanted to get on record before we get into questions a couple of things to clarify some of the key aspects of how the bill would operate if it is passed by Parliament, because there has been a bit of discussion in the media, particularly in the last week, and I think some confusion and misinformation out there.

Just to kick off, the Premier has made it clear that the Government does not support this bill making changes to firearms or prohibited weapons legislation and the Government has tabled amendments to remove the bill's proposed changes to the Weapons Prohibition Act. The bill does not propose any other changes to weapons and firearms laws in New South Wales. Secondly, the bill would not provide the Conservation Hunting Authority with any regulatory functions, so the licensing, compliance and mandatory education and training functions will remain the responsibility of the department. The bill will establish the Conservation Hunting Authority with an advisory role, and this advice would just be one of several sources of advice available to the Minister.

Finally, the bill provides a pathway for additional Crown land to be made available for hunting, but it does so with several checks and balances: plans of management would be required; written permission from the Minister would be required; and land managers would be able to put in place exclusions, closures and other conditions on the use of that additional Crown land for hunting, which is consistent with how the regulatory framework operates now for hunting on other public land, like State forests. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Black.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Thank you very much. Ms Black, when did you guys provide advice to the Minister on this legislation?

TARA BLACK: I think the Minister has been clear that the Government has been working collaboratively on the bill. I think we first became involved late last year on early drafts of the bill. We have had some involvement. We've provided advice and input into it, so some of that advice has informed the bill that was introduced.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Apart from the aspects you just spoke about, not changing the Weapons Act, was it supportive of all other measures in this legislation?

TARA BLACK: Yes. In earlier versions of the bill, there were some elements that the department did not support, and provided advice to the Government in that regard. Those parts were taken out of the bill.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Are you aware of any other ministerial position that is legislated?

TARA BLACK: I'm not, but if I could just clarify. I think you're referring to the creation or reference to a Minister for Hunting and Fishing. The bill creates a definition of a Minister for Hunting and Fishing, but it doesn't create the portfolio outside of the context of the bill. The Premier would still determine what the portfolios are and how they're allocated. The bill has references in it to a Minister for Hunting and Fishing, but it's also clear that if the Premier and the Governor don't appoint a Minister for Hunting and Fishing, then the definition is the Minister administering the Act, which basically means status quo in terms of—it would be the Minister for Agriculture in the current portfolio allocations.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Are you aware of any other bills that define what a Minister should be?

TARA BLACK: Not to my knowledge.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Are you aware of any other recreational activities that have a legislated right?

TARA BLACK: I think a key point on that is that hunting is a legitimate recreational activity, and it does have economic benefits, particularly for regional communities. In terms of the right to hunt that is set out in

the bill, there are important caveats around that, including that it's not an absolute right, it doesn't override other laws in New South Wales or the Commonwealth and it doesn't overtake other decisions that the Government would make. I'm not aware of other rights to other activities. There are important caveats in the bill.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I just need to state that I don't disagree that it is a legal activity and it does provide economic activity. So does amateur beekeeping, but we have no legislation that prescribes a right to keep bees or to ride horses or anything like that, do we?

TARA BLACK: That's my understanding.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Despite those couple of discrepancies, the department still suggested that those aspects be supported by the Government?

TARA BLACK: If I can say, we didn't oppose them.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Mr Kelly, did LLS provide direct advice on this legislation?

ROB KELLY: As part of consultation with the broader Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, we were consulted through Tara's team around aspects particularly relating to TSRs and if they were included as public land available for recreational hunting, how we could make that work and what that would look like.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Apart from hunting, maybe in order, what are the top three or four recreational uses of TSRs?

ROB KELLY: TSRs under the Local Land Services Act, recreational activities are permitted without a permit on that. Recreational activities are passive. The legislation that we operate under, the Local Land Services Act, allocates passive recreational activities such as bushwalking, birdwatching—these are examples; they're not specifically listed in the Act—mountain bike riding. Anything that's a passive recreational activity is currently permitted.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Is there a legislated right to any of those activities?

ROB KELLY: The Local Land Services Act allows those activities to take place on TSRs.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Do you think that the biosecurity aspects of this bill, or the conservation aspects of this bill, align with Government policy?

ROB KELLY: If you're referring to the recreational hunting for conservation or pest control activities—recreational hunting or conservation hunting, as it's referred to in the bill—we consider that part of an integrated package of pest control activities. Of and by itself, it would not be considered the panacea of pest control. But recreational hunting does have a role to play in an overall coordinated pest control campaign.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: The standard operating procedure specifically—I'll use the pigs one—says shooting should only be used in a strategic manner as part of coordinated programs, as a secondary control method and that, it actually says, can disrupt normal pig feeding activity and may cause temporary dispersal of pigs into other areas. How are you going to coordinate people going into these areas with other programs? How are we going to assure that those two things tie together?

ROB KELLY: I think there are two parts to that question. One, at the moment, the bill hasn't been passed and it's still to be determined whether TSRs would or would not be included in the bill if it's passed. In terms of the generic process of coordinated pest control programs, one of the key functions of LLS is to coordinate multiple landholder public-private nil tenure pest control programs. In our normal processes, we would seek approval from landholders, whether that be public or private landholders. We would develop the pest control program, which primarily, as you've already mentioned, Mr Barrett, is primary and secondary control mechanisms. When we design those programs, we design that in mind to ensure that we start with a primary control and then a secondary control comes in after that.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Ms Black, schedule 5A of the legislation lists a number of lots of lands. Are you aware what those lots of lands are?

TARA BLACK: The parcels of land were identified by Crown Lands so it's a different department. We can try and answer some of your questions, but we may have to take some of the details on notice because it's not our responsibility. I'm aware that there's a list of parcels of land, but I couldn't give you the details of where each one is or how big it is or anything like that.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: When you provided advice on this bill to the Minister, did that come with—at the moment they're just numbers in the bill. Has that been defined as to what these lots of lands are?

TARA BLACK: Yes. That was part of the advice that Crown Lands provided to Government. But it wasn't advice from our department.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Finally, Mr Varvel, with the current existing game hunting that does happen, have you got some evidence of where this has had a significant impact on populations of feral animals in any of those areas?

RICHARD VARVEL: That's not really something that, as the regulator, we then monitor the actual animal numbers. So the answer is no, we don't look for that because that's not part of my function.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: With regard to, say, the policy rationale and evidence, what evidence or modelling underpins the bill's assumption that recreational hunting will actually deliver measurable and sustained pest population reductions?

TARA BLACK: Thanks for the question. It's probably just important to clarify, it's not a Government bill.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I know that.

TARA BLACK: In terms of the kind of rationale and evidence that underpins its introduction, we probably can't answer those questions. We can explain to you the effect that the bill has, and the advice that our department has provided in response to the Government when they were considering the bill. But I'm not sure I can answer that question specifically.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: On that then, say if the bill is passed—can you hear me?

TARA BLACK: Yes. Now I can.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: How often, then, would the department review the program's effectiveness, and will there be public reporting?

TARA BLACK: One of the amendments that the Government has tabled for consideration by the Parliament is that there should be an annual report from the Conservation Hunting Authority on its activities. Rich, I might throw to you on any other reporting we do about the programs that you run.

RICHARD VARVEL: Currently, there isn't reporting up. But we do monitor, for example, if a hunter is booked into a forest, they'd need to provide a return after to provide how many animals they may have shot. We capture that data—noting that's just on public land. We don't have any figures for private land, due to the nature of private land hunting. On public land we capture a lot of data, and that's often in estimates or provided up through those means, but there's not a specific annual hunting report, for example, that I think you're inquiring about.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Will you have performance indicators that would trigger a policy change if, say, the outcomes aren't being met?

TARA BLACK: I would say that we, the department, continually keep our legislation under review and often seek input from stakeholders on whether our programs and legislation are effective. There's nothing specific in the bill that requires a review at a particular point in time, but it is something that we would keep under review.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: How would the department ensure that, say, increased activity is managed safely and without environmental harm?

TARA BLACK: I'll let Rich speak to some of the details about how we assess safety risks, because we have a strong process for that. I'd just say that we've allowed hunting on public land, in State forests, for quite some time and there hasn't been a serious safety incident in over 20 years. It is a safe program that we currently run, and we would be looking to apply the same rigour and assessments where additional public land is made available for hunting. Rich can go into detail if you're interested in what that process is, but it is something that has been working well for a number of years.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Have you thought about enforcement mechanisms that you may need to introduce to ensure compliance? What do you have in mind?

TARA BLACK: We already have a strong regulatory framework. We're responsible for issuing licences and as part of that there is mandatory training and education that is required. And then, if there are offences that occur, we can cancel or suspend a person's licence, we can issue fines and we can prosecute for serious offences. So, there are no changes proposed to any of our existing regulatory functions or approach as part of the bill.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: How will you monitor animal welfare outcomes, say, particularly for non-target species or companion animals?

RICHARD VARVEL: Under the current legislation—and it doesn't change in the proposed bill—you can hunt "game animals" as defined in the bill or in the legislation. If you're shooting or hunting other animals, for example, if you were to shoot kangaroos, it's not legal under a recreational hunting licence, so you would then have enforcement action. If we were to become aware, or someone made us aware, we could then investigate it. With the enforcement side of it, we've got our side, my team. Also, we work very closely with the police and, if it's animal welfare related, we will regularly transfer information and intelligence reports across to Animal Welfare League or RSPCA to look into and investigate anything to do with actual animal cruelty or animal welfare.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you for your time today. Did anybody in the department ever provide instructions to Parliamentary Counsel's Office in relation to aspects of the bill?

TARA BLACK: The process for developing the bill was mostly—well, there were elements where we were dealing directly with Parliamentary Counsel and there were other aspects where we were providing advice through to our Minister's office or through to Crown Lands, so there was a bit of a mix. I think that's partly because the bill touches on a few different pieces of legislation which affect different departments, and so, at different times, the focus of what we were reviewing shifted between who was the lead department.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Was the department of environment also involved in any part of instructions to Parliamentary Counsel's office, to your knowledge?

TARA BLACK: I'm not sure if they provided instructions to Parliamentary Counsel's Office, but they were consulted as part of the Government's consideration of the bill.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: How did it come about that funding to establish the Conservation Hunting Authority and support the regulation of additional hunting activity was included as a material measure in the 2025-26 budget?

TARA BLACK: The bill was introduced, I think around May, and as part of our or the Government's consideration of its position on the bill we also considered or assessed what the costs of implementing the bill would be. The funding that was set aside in the budget this year was contingent on the bill passing Parliament. That funding has not been provided to the department at this point because the bill hasn't passed. It's just, I suppose, a provision at this stage.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Is it common for the department to allocate funding in the budget for private members' bills that haven't passed? Has that ever happened before, to your knowledge?

TARA BLACK: I wouldn't say it was common, but in this case the bill, if it is passed, would create additional statutory requirements for the department, so the department thought it was important that, given the Government had indicated it would be supporting the bill, the funding was set aside, if the bill passed Parliament, for the department to be able to execute its statutory obligations.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Has that ever happened before in regard to private members' bills, to your knowledge?

TARA BLACK: Not to my knowledge, but I think the additional context here is that the bill was introduced at around the time that the Government was making funding decisions and the amount of money that is set aside in the budget papers is not something that the department would have been able to absorb ourselves, and so, yes, we pushed that, at around the time that the Government was deciding its position on the bill, a decision on funding should also be made.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I know other MPs like myself were told we had to make a budget submission back in December 2024. Did Mr Borsak make a budget submission to the department regarding this funding for the Conservation Hunting Authority as part of the bill? If so, do you know when that was submitted?

TARA BLACK: I don't believe so.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: There was no budget submission; this was an action by the department?

TARA BLACK: That's correct. I might take on notice to confirm, but to my knowledge I don't believe that there was a submission from Mr Borsak.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: I can answer that question: No, there wasn't.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Okay.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: That's the question you wanted an answer to.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: You're not a witness.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: How much has been allocated in the 2025 budget as the funding for this authority? What's the actual dollar amount?

TARA BLACK: Over two years it was \$7.9 million, which was for, you know, the creation and operation of the Conservation Hunting Authority and then also some funding for the department because the bill does propose hunting on additional public land and so there was funding set aside for additional compliance and enforcement activity to support that. That was based on the assumption of two full financial years. We're obviously part-way into the current financial year now and the bill hasn't passed, so if the bill is passed that dollar amount would reduce.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Are there plans on how to use that funding if the bill isn't passed?

TARA BLACK: We won't get the funding if the bill isn't passed. We wouldn't need it.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Why is the funding listed as a material measure in the budget?

TARA BLACK: I think that would be a question for Treasury or the Treasurer. I'm not sure.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: When it says "material measure", does that mean the funding allocations above a certain amount?

TARA BLACK: I'm not sure.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: My question is going back to this whole idea of this really extraordinary turnaround. We've got a bill that was introduced on 28 May and it received allocation into the budget on 21 June, just one month later. How was the department so sure that the bill would pass when it hadn't even been considered by either House?

TARA BLACK: As I said, the funding is a provision and, if the bill isn't passed, the funding won't be provided to the department.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Can you tell me a little bit more about the process within that very short month that had that money allocated in such a short period of time? Was it the department that approached the Government or did the Government approach the department and ask for that money to be put aside in the budget for this?

TARA BLACK: As part of seeking advice from the department on the draft bill, what the effect of the bill would be and whether we had concerns about elements of the bill, the department also explained to the Government that if the bill is passed, it would require funding to support the Conservation Hunting Authority and it would require funding to ensure effective compliance and enforcement on the additional public land. So it was the department who, I suppose, raised that with our Minister's office. In terms of the process and timing, the ordinary process is a private member's bill is introduced or provided to the Government and then there's a Cabinet process where the Government considers its position on each private member's bill. So that is the same process that happened in this case.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you all for being here. Earlier you answered a question and you said—I think it was you, Ms Black—you collaborated. Who was involved in that collaboration?

TARA BLACK: A number of people. Across government agencies, each of the relevant portfolio departments were involved, so advice was sought on the effect of the proposed amendments on their legislation and what their position on that was.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: And who were they?

TARA BLACK: Crown Lands, National Parks, Police, our department, Local Land Services. I think that is everyone.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: During that collaboration and those discussions, was it guided by a view that this bill will pass—this scheme will be introduced: What will it mean for you and how will that happen? Was that the tone of the collaboration?

TARA BLACK: I think the questions that were put to other departments were, "What is the effect of this bill on your legislation and what's your position on it?"

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: And were there any views from anyone, "This is not a good idea"?

TARA BLACK: I would like to answer the question, but I might have to take it on notice just because this is part of the Cabinet process and the Cabinet consideration of the bill, so I'm not sure if I would be breaching Cabinet confidentiality if I answered that. But I would say it's usual for different departments to provide views to

Government and for the Cabinet to ultimately make a decision, whether that's a policy issue or a private member's bill or something else. But in this case, I might just take on notice the specific question you've asked.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you, if you could. It's quite important. And, obviously, this is a bills inquiry, and it is a rather unusual one in the sense that this is a private member's bill that will create a new part of the scheme. Is it your view, or any of your views, that the current Game and Pest Management Advisory Board is not currently adequate as a scheme to deliver programs and provide advice on invasive species control in New South Wales?

TARA BLACK: I'm not sure if it's appropriate for us to give a view, but just to say that it's not a Government bill and so it's not the department who have proposed changes to the current framework.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Are you not prepared to say you believe that advisory board is a good functioning board that's providing relevant advice in the delivery of invasive species control programs?

TARA BLACK: I think I would characterise the department's position on it as neutral, in that we've got an existing board that is operating pretty well, but we're also okay with the proposed new Conservation Hunting Authority and its proposed functions, so we think that either option is an appropriate one. There are lots of different models for the way these kinds of advisory bodies are established, what their functions are, who's on them. So, yes, we don't have strong views about one is better than the other. They are broadly similar in terms of the kinds of skills and backgrounds of the people that are on the existing board versus the proposed new authority. The functions are broadly similar as well.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Up until the point when you were presented with this bill, or this change, was there any advice internally that the current advisory board needed to change or needed to be reformed, or was this bill the trigger for that discussion?

RICHARD VARVEL: Not that I'm aware of.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I'm just curious about the right to hunt. There's some submissions that talk about the right to hunt will help recreational hunters feel good. Is it your view that that's a necessary component within the scheme as it exists now, given recreational hunters have access to land and they're going along their way recreationally hunting?

TARA BLACK: As I said before, the department's view is that hunting, or recreational hunting, is a legitimate activity and there are economic, social and environmental benefits from that.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: But do you see any kind of additional need at this point given—

TARA BLACK: I can again characterise the department's position on the right to hunt as neutral.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Is recreational hunting, in your expertise, consistent with the New South Wales Government's current codes of practice and standard operating procedures for pest control, and is it consistent with those coordinated pest control programs?

RICHARD VARVEL: Recreational hunting and pest control are two different things. Recreational hunting and the pest control codes are separate. Recreational hunting will fit within an integrated pest management program, but still as recreational hunting. You could use recreational hunters as pest controllers. It comes down to the intent that the person is going out there. Are they out there recreationally hunting? Within an integrated pest control program they might be acting in a more pest control fashion, which are two different sort of intents in reality.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: How do you reconcile the NRC's report that doesn't recommend the scheme that is presenting in the bill as a way of controlling invasive species in New South Wales?

ROB KELLY: From LLS's perspective and pest control programs, recreational hunting or ground control, if it's done as part of an integrated control package, as I've mentioned before—so you have a primary control and then a secondary, which would be ground hunting; recreational hunters can fill that need for ground control programs—it will meet the needs of a coordinated pest control program, which is the recognised process to try and control or eradicate or manage asset protection for pest control programs.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Following on from Miss Higginson's line of questioning and your answers, does the bill propose in any way some sort of bounty system? Is that what we're talking about here?

TARA BLACK: No, it doesn't.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: It doesn't envisage it, it doesn't involve it, it doesn't require it?

TARA BLACK: It's silent altogether.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: That takes out all of my questions.

The CHAIR: Can I ask a question for all of you. How long has hunting been allowed in State forests in New South Wales?

RICHARD VARVEL: I couldn't tell you exactly because it did occur before the Game Council and the current framework is my understanding.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Since February 2006. That's the answer.

RICHARD VARVEL: Under that framework, and I think before there were also permits within State forests but not under the same regulated fashion.

The CHAIR: What's the process for a State forest being designated for hunting?

RICHARD VARVEL: Within the current Act, there's the process for the declaration. It's called the declaration of public lands. I won't step through the exact process because it is legislated how the procedure works, but just because a parcel of public land is declared, doesn't mean they're also open. So as soon as they're declared, doesn't mean that hunting is then available within them. For example, in the State forest at the moment I think there's 351 declared State forests but currently hunting is only available in approximately 230 of them, for various operational or environmental reasons, be it still recovering from floods or fires. The process to open versus declare are two separate processes. Just because it's declared doesn't mean it's open.

The CHAIR: If the bill is passed, is this how you would see it working for any Crown land that could be designated?

RICHARD VARVEL: In the proposed bill, it looks at a different pathway, for example in the Crown land, because it lists already a schedule and it puts designators around what might be suitable. So it is slightly different but still ultimately the same process. There would be no hunting available or no new parcels of land would be available for hunting until they'd gone through a process of assessment of that parcel of land and then a process to actually open it to allow hunters to get a permit and to be able to go in.

TARA BLACK: If I might just add, as I said in my opening statement, the checks and balances that are proposed through this new pathway under the Crown Land Management Act are consistent with our current approach to hunting on State forests. Under the proposed changes to the Crown Land Management Act, if land is either listed in the schedule that we were talking about before, or meets the criteria that are set out in the bill, there are then additional steps. Then it becomes designated public land, but then there are also additional steps spelled out in the bill around the requirement to develop a plan of management, which must consider hunting but can also prohibit hunting. The plan of management, if it is one of those declared pieces of land, must consider whether hunting is suitable on that land. It can also say no, it's not, or it is but with all of these conditions associated with it. Then there are other steps as well around requiring—you obviously need a licence to hunt on public land, you need to make a booking through the hunting team. There's quite a few steps, checks and balances, to ensure that hunting is safe, which is the Government's ultimate priority. It's the department's ultimate priority to keep hunters and the public safe where hunting occurs.

The CHAIR: Is there any way that the department or LLS currently acknowledge the role that recreational hunters may or may not play in managing invasive species across public and private land?

ROB KELLY: From the LLS side, irrespective of land tenure—we're land tenure blind—as I've mentioned, coordinated pest control does cover all aspects of pest control, whether that be ground hunting, recreational hunters, baiting, aerial shooting. As an integrated package, it is the most appropriate way to get effective pest control.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: I suppose this is a question to all of you, but perhaps to Mr Kelly primarily. Would you characterise the invasive species control programs run in New South Wales by your department as successful?

ROB KELLY: In terms of our current programs, yes I would.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: What's your definition of success?

ROB KELLY: In terms of where we're at with pest control programs, given the availability of funding and resources we have, we identify areas where there are primarily high pest populations. We target those that look at different asset protection, whether that be an environmental asset, whether that be an agricultural asset, and then we develop coordinated programs around effective pest control, which includes follow-up programs as well.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: What tools in those programs do you use?

ROB KELLY: In terms of the pest control activities, we use a combination of tools. It depends on the type of program, the area and the asset. So we cover everything from aerial shooting to ground baiting to ground trapping. Then we ask, particularly for private landholders—in an integrated program they also have, under their own general biosecurity duty, to undertake coordinated or control on their properties as well. If they choose to use ground shooting or ground baiting or ground trapping, that's up to them. We don't have a preference. We support them, and they choose the most appropriate technology.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: What role does the Centre for Invasive Species play in developing policy for your departments?

ROB KELLY: For Local Land Services?

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Yes.

ROB KELLY: To my knowledge, they don't.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Who actually lets the contracts for aerial shooting in New South Wales?

ROB KELLY: When we undertake aerial shooting, so our FFAST program, LLS is responsible for the management and letting of those contracts. We use the State Air Desk. They have a provider panel that is run through the Rural Fire Service that has all the appropriate checks and balances around safety and all of those sort of things. And then we choose and piggyback off that to select the company.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: So which company gets most of the contracts?

ROB KELLY: I'd have to take that on notice. I don't have that at hand.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Does Local Land Services periodically, or other, overfly and shoot declared public lands in New South Wales?

ROB KELLY: When we do our pest control programs, it is a nil-tenure approach. So when we do aerial shooting programs, we can only shoot on land that we've been given permission by the landowner or land manager to shoot.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: So, do you get permission to shoot State forests when they're declared for public land hunting?

ROB KELLY: We will approach State Forests. If they provide approval to do that, then we will shoot. If they don't provide approval, we won't.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Who gives that approval?

ROB KELLY: State Forests.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: How do State Forests know whether they should be having a problem with invasive species when they don't do any work themselves on that?

ROB KELLY: You'd need to ask them that question.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: We probably should have had them here today. The New Zealand Department of Conservation and New Zealand Game Animal Council engages hunters in pest control programs across the whole of New Zealand in a variety of programs, including predator control, removal of deer, pigs and goats on both private and public lands. Would DPI and Local Land Services support a structured conservation hunting program similar to the models in New Zealand?

ROB KELLY: From Local Land Services' perspective, we will look at all available processes, technologies, approaches that give us the effective pest control.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Would you contemplate—and maybe this is to you, Ms Black—reporting annually on all of the game and feral animals taken on public land, as part of an annual report?

TARA BLACK: Yes. As Rich said, we do collect information from hunters about—I'm not sure what it's called.

RICHARD VARVEL: Yes, the harvest return.

TARA BLACK: The harvest return.

RICHARD VARVEL: That is then made publicly available.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: The harvest returns used to be available online. Are they still available online?

RICHARD VARVEL: They're available online for licensed hunters, yes.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: For licensed hunters?

RICHARD VARVEL: Yes, within the portal.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: What form would this annual report take, if it comes about?

TARA BLACK: I'm not sure that we can probably speak to that in detail. That's not something we've probably—

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: You haven't applied your minds to it yet?

TARA BLACK: Not yet, no.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: I suppose that's logical.

TARA BLACK: It is a proposed Government amendment, so it's not something that's in the private member's bill. It hasn't been debated yet. So if and when the bill passes and if that amendment is in it, that's when we'll start work on a detailed implementation plan for the bill.

RICHARD VARVEL: Purely if you're asking about the reported animals harvested on public land, then that's a very straightforward report, I would say.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Yes. There's probably a lot more detailed analysis of hunter effort in terms of reporting and relative success that could be reported. I suppose that could be developed in the longer term. There are criticisms from the usual suspects in this space that not many animals are being killed on public land so therefore it's not a successful program. I think there's some work to be done in that area to show that it's actually the long-term success of the last 20 years that actually makes it difficult for hunters sometimes to turn up in State forests probably half a dozen times before they're even able to kill an animal. But, anyway, that's another issue. Are there any legislative or regulatory impediments whatsoever stopping hunters hunting deer on private land—by landowners, paid hunters or licensed conservation hunters?

RICHARD VARVEL: No.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Are there any areas, apart from national parks, where deer are protected?

RICHARD VARVEL: Not that I'm aware of.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: There's no protection afforded to deer on State forests; is that true?

RICHARD VARVEL: Correct.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: On Crown land? Moving stock routes?

RICHARD VARVEL: Correct. Yes.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Thank you. I think that's me for the moment.

The CHAIR: Given it's after 10.15 a.m., we might just call that time. Thank you, witnesses, for making time to give evidence today. The Committee secretariat will be in touch if there are further questions on notice and in terms of the questions on notice that were taken today.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Mr JACK GOUGH, Chief Executive Officer, Invasive Species Council, affirmed and examined

Mr ROB BREWSTER, Rewilding Program Manager, Invasive Species Council, affirmed and examined

Dr TONY BUCKMASTER, Principal RD&E Manager, Centre for Invasive Species Solutions, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome and thank you to our next witnesses for making time to give evidence to the inquiry. Would any of you like to start by making an opening statement?

JACK GOUGH: Yes, I've got one. Thank you so much for the opportunity to give evidence for this inquiry and for setting this inquiry up. The Invasive Species Council is an independent not-for-profit environmental organisation. Our role is to advocate for laws, policies and programs to keep Australia's incredible biodiversity safe from weeds, feral animals, diseases and other invaders. We know that protecting native species and ecological communities from the threat of invasive species, and animals in particular, is one of Australia's most difficult, expensive and important challenges. It is essential for stopping extinctions of our native wildlife and essential for reversing landscape degradation. In New South Wales, invasive species threaten more than 70 per cent of threatened species and endangered ecological communities. We know that the New South Wales agencies responsible for frontline invasive species management and biosecurity are understaffed, underfunded and urgently need extra support.

In particular, recent natural disasters—including fire, drought, floods, COVID and the varroa mite responses—have seen hundreds of staff pulled away from normal roles. The recent wet weather has seen an explosion of pest animals and weeds across the State. We know there are more disasters around the corner, with problems accelerating due to climate change and diseases, such as bird flu and fire ants on our doorstep. The cumulative effect of these pressures means that frontline agencies including the National Parks and Wildlife Service, Local Land Services, the Department of Primary Industries and local councils are rapidly running out of capacity and facing staff burnout. It is clear that we face a crisis and that current measures and resources in New South Wales are insufficient to halt and mitigate the impact of those feral animals and prevent the arrival and spread of new invasive species.

In this context, I understand that it seems every little extra bit could help and would be welcome, and I understand why there would be confusion about why the Invasive Species Council is opposed to the bill and thinks that it is not only an ineffective response to the problem but that it will actually make the pest animal crisis in New South Wales worse. To understand this, there are two important considerations for why we are in this mess. The first one is that feral animal management has been, and continues to be, under governments of all stripes underfunded, ad hoc and not strategic. The second part of it though is that the shooting lobby has wielded enormous and disproportionate power in New South Wales politics for two decades, and they have used this power to stop attempts to fix this. That is the context that this bill has been brought in. This bill is doubling down on that failure.

Instead of backing the Natural Resources Commission, the New South Wales Biosecurity Commissioner and government agency advice, the bill is setting up a government-funded, taxpayer-funded propaganda unit for the shooting lobby and is locking in the mismanagement of our State forests and Crown lands as effectively game parks. The evidence you just heard from the Government there was shocking. The Local Land Services were telling you that State forests are rejecting aerial shoots on their land because—and what we have always been told is the advice coming through—it is not compatible with hunter amenity.

This is an abrogation of the General Biosecurity Duty, and this bill makes a mockery of the General Biosecurity Duty. It sets up a system that will allow government agencies to let a few weekend warriors go onto their land and then claim they have discharged their duty. Under that context, how can governments possibly expect private landholders to take serious action on pests and weeds? How can they expect to hold them to account for this when millions of hectares of government land are being left as game parks? This is undermining the Biosecurity Act in New South Wales and is a shocking abrogation of government responsibility.

The Government's own documents say ground shooting is rated as ineffective for controlling foxes, pigs, goats and rabbits, with limited or variable effectiveness for feral deer and cats, and only when those numbers are low. I understand that this is a political deal. We know what is going on here behind the scenes, but I want the Committee and the Parliament to be aware about the implications of passing the bill. It does not have anything to do with effective feral animal management. We have a statement from a senior official in Forestry Corporation that was given to us yesterday, which we have taken down. It was provided to Rob Brewster, which he can read out to you and which we would like to table. It talks about how the political implications of the mismanagement

of State forests are playing out in New South Wales State forests. I can read it out, but it was given to him so it might make sense for him to. I have copies.

ROB BREWSTER: I have supporting statements for what you just heard from Jack. I've worked very closely with LLS, NSW National Parks and State forests staff for well over a decade, so I really know what's going on on the ground. Unfortunately, pest management in New South Wales is not working. It's not effective. It lacks coordination. I have five quotes that were given to me yesterday by a senior staff member who is deeply dedicated to the New South Wales Forestry Corporation and has been working with them for a long time. He said:

Pest management on State forests has always been woeful. Post-bushfires, we were prohibited from doing aerial culls. We were told that our hands were tied and that this is what we need to follow. It was the perfect time to do them, as the country was open. This decision was communicated to us by our stewardship branch, and we assume that it was a response to decisions made at a political level.

Another quote:

Sadly, how we—

New South Wales Forestry Corporation—

tick our environmental responsibility and compliance box is to let a few weekend hunters in, when we know what they're really taking is a pittance and that they're mainly targeting stags.

Another quote:

We're hamstrung by a lack of funding.

And the final quote:

Really, invasive species management should be tenure-blind, and we should have a coordinated interagency approach with mechanisms for accessing long-term funding and funding streams. Anything else is pretty insulting, to be honest.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Who are those quotes attributable to?

The CHAIR: Order!

JACK GOUGH: A senior member from the New South Wales Forestry.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Can we have a name or are you just inventing it?

ROB BREWSTER: No. No.

The CHAIR: Order!

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: You're just inventing stuff?

The CHAIR: Order! Order!

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Because, like Mr Gough, you're probably—

The CHAIR: Order!

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Point of order—

The CHAIR: Order, Mr Borsak.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: —a liar too if you don't want to repeat the names of people here.

The CHAIR: There's a point of order. I'll hear the point of order.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Propagandist and a liar.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Point of order—

The CHAIR: A point of order has been taken.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Chair, the member is a participating member, and he is interrupting the proceedings. It's not his time. It's disorderly. And I would ask you to call him to order for the first time.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Higginson. I will remind all members that interjections, particularly while witnesses are making opening statements, are disorderly at all times. I might just hand to Dr Buckmaster now, if you wish to make an opening statement, because I'm mindful that you haven't had the opportunity to do so.

TONY BUCKMASTER: Thank you very much. Yes, I would like to make an opening statement.

The CHAIR: Please proceed.

TONY BUCKMASTER: And thank you for the invitation to give evidence to the standing committee for this inquiry. The Centre for Invasive Species Solutions is one of the world's largest pest animal and weed RD&E collaborations. Our current collaboration involves the Commonwealth and State governments, industry and research partner providers. The centre plays a leadership and enabling role in relevant national biosecurity collaborative RD&E initiatives, developing new knowledge, tools and practices to continually improve best practice in invasive species management.

We currently facilitate 40 collaborative research- and management-based projects involving environment, community and agriculturally based invasive species issues across the entire invasion curve. The centre is maintaining the knowledge and innovation momentum gained through the national collaborative research pursued by the Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre and its participants. The centre is a strong advocate for best-practice strategic management of invasive species at a scale that is appropriate to mitigate their impact.

The most invasive species management action needs to be taken at a landscape scale to have measurable, sustained impact. Similarly, best practice requires that the focus of any management intervention be on minimising the impact of the invasive species, rather than simplistically on reducing the numbers present. This outcome-based approach allows effective integrated landscape-scale approaches to invasive species management, resulting in greater reduction of impact across all environmental, agricultural and community sectors. The centre is active in enhancing and developing best-practice management for invasive species and maintains openly accessible best-practice management toolkits for invasive species, which include codes of practice and standard operating procedures. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Dr Buckmaster. We'll now move to questions. The committee has resolved to have allocated time for questions, so I'm just going to hand to the crossbench members first.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you. Thank you very much for your evidence so far from your opening statements. Can you perhaps try to explain to us, as a committee, the sorts of differences between recreational hunting across public lands and the difference between a coordinated program, with volunteers or paid staff, and how that might conflict?

JACK GOUGH: Yes. So, look, it can be a bit counterintuitive that just killing an animal doesn't necessarily make a difference to the numbers on the ground, and that's because invasive species tend to be animals that are highly fecund. They breed very quickly. They often tend to have a lot of what's called waste juveniles—ones that will not make it to full age—and so if you take them out, you're actually not making a difference to that final population. Also, it is very often difficult to get, with a lot of invasive species, above what's called the population growth rate. For deer, you need to remove about 35 to 50 per cent, depending on the species, every year just to stop that population growing. Similarly with pigs, around 85 per cent of pigs have to be removed to stop that population growing. That means that you can do a whole heap of work killing animals and actually see the population the same or continuing to grow.

I quote here from the Local Land Services; their own document on aerial and ground shooting, where they say, "People need to be careful with feral pigs as they can be easily frightened and scared away from a site if disturbed by hunters and shooters. If pigs are disturbed, they move into new areas, cause more damage and often become more difficult to control." So we have this other issue, which is that, often, recreational shooting can be the driver of the spread of feral animals. We know, for example, that in a 2004 analysis, more than half of feral deer herds in Australia appeared to have arisen from illegal translocations. Genetic testing of feral pig populations in southwestern Australia found about one in 20 of the sampled pigs were illegally shifted from populations that were up to 400 kilometres distant. So we have this combined issue with recreational hunting of where it can actually disturb populations of animals and move them into new areas. Also, we do get illegal translocations of animals from recreational hunters and, unfortunately, the levels of removals don't get anywhere near that population growth rate.

I heard some questions in the previous section about how many are being removed by recreational hunters. In State forests in New South Wales, with about 250 or so open, 1.8 million hectares of New South Wales land—where aerial shooting and baiting is effectively banned because of the impact on recreational hunting and doesn't take place. In 2023-24, the hunters that were out there—this was from 68,000 hunting days—removed 3,000 deer. They removed 4,982 pigs. These are tiny numbers compared to those populations. They are nowhere near the population growth rate, nowhere near the numbers that, for example, New South Wales national parks and LLS—not on State forest land—were undertaking. In 2022-23, from aerial shooting, they removed 131,000 feral pigs and feral deer.

We don't pretend that those aerial shooting programs are great either. We've been very critical in the media that the current approach is very ad hoc, single-year funding, and is mainly based on trying to get a press release out at the end of, you know, 100,000 animals killed. If we're going to do it properly, we need to be strategic.

We need to identify what are the assets we're going to protect, what are the range of control tools that we're going to use, and how are we going to do it with upfront investment to crash populations rather than just slow harvesting of populations over time that just leads to more animals being killed, no impact on the ground, and has these other perverse outcomes.

TONY BUCKMASTER: From the centre's perspective, recreational hunting is a legitimate pastime. There is no doubt about that. However, it does not work as the primary pest control method. The evidence shows, as Mr Gough has said, that the population needs to be reduced below the rate at which it can reproduce itself. Recreational hunting alone cannot do that. It can work, however, as part of a strategic sustained management program and has been shown to, for example, for Operation Bounceback in South Australia. But as the primary control tool, it is completely ineffectual.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Were you surprised to learn that the Government was allocating \$7.9 million over two years to this new authority that is proposed, and your views on this authority?

JACK GOUGH: I wasn't surprised. Since January, I knew that there'd been a political deal set up with the Shooters and Fishers Party and the New South Wales Government, and that was going to involve setting up a new bounty scheme. I was surprised about this legislation that's come out. That's because it seems a big step to go towards having a right to hunt to be setting up a new authority that will be used—let's remember how the Game Council was used—as a taxpayer-funded propaganda unit for the hunting lobby to pretend that there is some conservation benefit to their work. Just as with the Centre for Invasive Species Solutions, we think that we need to distinguish between the shooting lobby and hunting and, in particular, the volunteer shooters. They can be a really important part of feral animal management programs. As I said, there's South Australia's Bounceback program. There is work going on in New South Wales national parks as well.

The issue that we have is that we have seen this play out over the past two decades. This is about locking in mismanagement of State forests and Crown lands. If there was a clause in this bill, which I've suggested to parties, that made it very clear that nothing in this bill was able to undermine the use of other control techniques, that it couldn't be used by any agency to wriggle out of their general biosecurity duties, to do what we heard in that last bit of evidence, which is to have State forests say, "No, we're not going to undertake aerial shooting or baiting", that would do some mitigation for this bill. It wouldn't deal with some of the other issues around conflicts with other land uses. But we do need to make it absolutely clear: State forests are being mismanaged right now. This will be locking it in forever. That is our concern.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you for your time today. I'll just start with a few questions for Mr Gough from the Invasive Species Council. We heard that there was very little consultation on this bill, and it seems that there was no consultation with environmental groups or biodiversity or animal welfare. Are you concerned that there was no actual consultation with the experts in this space in regard to introduced animals?

JACK GOUGH: Certainly, and I've heard from many people within the departments that they were very concerned about how they only found out about these things just before it came to the Parliament. This was something that was not engaged deeply with departments, it wasn't engaged deeply with stakeholders. As I say, this is a political deal. We know that the numbers on this Committee are going to mean that the recommendations will be for it to go forward. We know that the numbers in the Parliament may see it go forward. But you should be absolutely aware that you are locking in the permanent mismanagement of millions of hectares of New South Wales land and that this will cause enormous headaches for farmers, for conservationists, for communities going forward, and that two decades of making deals like this is the reason that feral deer are quickly spreading across New South Wales and that, in many places, we cannot eradicate them anymore.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: A follow-up question from Ms Higginson in regard to the Shooters and the New South Wales Government claiming that the new Conservation Hunting Authority is not a return to the former Game Council, can I get your response to their claims around that?

JACK GOUGH: Certainly the Game Council had a whole heap of regulatory powers, which this doesn't have. That's important because it was found very clearly that having the fox in charge of the henhouse led to a whole heap of mismanagement and abuse, and that is why the former Government shut it down. We can see in this bill that conservation hunting is not a real thing, just in terms of weekend warriors going out and removing a few animals. Yes, you can have volunteer shooters doing really important work, engaged with strategic pest control programs that can be really important augmentation, not as primary control methods.

But this is setting up a four-three voting body funded by taxpayers that is going to be out there doing research, doing public education, doing promotion and engagement on the benefits of hunting for feral animal control when we know there aren't any in terms of recreational hunting. Let's be clear: That is a taxpayer-funded propaganda unit for the shooting lobby, which is exactly what the Game Council was. We remember those posters

with the photos of people who ended up running for Parliament on Game Council material. This is what this will be used for. We are sure of it. And that is going to undermine the effective management of huge areas of New South Wales land.

I'm coming across as angry, because we are. This is mismanagement at a large scale, which is impacting the environment of New South Wales and the persistence of some of our native animals. It goes to who we are as a country, as communities, whether or not we can protect our native wildlife, our native landscapes, over feral animals, which should not be there, where we have good techniques and control methods to stop them spreading. This bill will lock in that mismanagement.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I was recently sent some YouTube footage of a hunter releasing baby piglets, saying that they were going to release them out into the wild so they could hunt them later. Is there this real risk that if we start to promote recreational hunting, we may actually increase the number of introduced animals, because of videos like this shows releasing introduced animals for more hunting?

JACK GOUGH: Yes, the evidence has always been that, unfortunately, there is a small number—we don't pretend that it is the majority—of people who do increase and spread feral animal populations because they want them for their sport, and this has been documented all across the country. There's a quote that I was trying to find in our submission specifically on that, where people essentially are saying:

We caught these sows, and the sows looked like they were pregnant, so we quickly let them go so that we've got something there essentially for next year.

So that happens. And opening up more land, making hunting much more of a cultural—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: A right?

JACK GOUGH: —sort of recreational hunting, a cultural right, we're going to probably see more of that. But we also know that often less experienced recreational hunters are the cause of inadvertent spread of these invasive species as well, so it's not just deliberate that's a problem. There's inadvertent spread.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: You've said that the label of conservation hunting to describe recreational hunting is deeply misleading. Can you expand on what you mean by deeply misleading?

JACK GOUGH: It's based on a premise, and quite clearly within the legislation and also within the public comments that we've seen in the media, that recreational hunting is effective for controlling invasive species and therefore will have a net positive conservation benefit. Recreational hunting isn't effective. We know that, as I said, some volunteer shooting programs working in conjunction with other government programs can be effective, but just taken on its own, we're talking about small numbers harvested at an ad hoc level across the landscape, not done in a strategic fashion, not responding to seasonal conditions, and so not actually having a net impact on the numbers of those feral animals that we're trying to get down, or the protection of those assets, whether they're environmental or industry assets.

This isn't about conservation. This is about promoting recreational hunting. We probably could support a conservation hunting licence that was there for people who met very specific criteria of skill, of capacity, and were directly involved under that licence in particular programs, working with other effective control methods. It may be that it's really appropriate for someone to say, "I've got a conservation hunting licence because I'm meeting a whole heap of these criteria of effective control." Handing that out just to anyone—I mean, the numbers are pretty clear. It takes about three days of hunting effort at the moment just to remove one feral animal, and the majority—the plurality, sorry—of those that are being removed in State forests have been rabbits. We're not talking about huge numbers of pigs, huge numbers of deer. We're talking about rabbits and hares and foxes and deer and pigs removed at a very thin layer across the entire State not making any impact on those populations, but at the same time governments are abrogating their responsibilities because of that hunter amenity principle in that Crown land.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I'll just give you a bit of notice. I'm going to come back to you in a little while and ask how you would spend \$7.9 million over two years on pest control. Can I just start with you, Mr Gough? You've been consulting with this Government for quite some time on invasive species. Would you say that support for this legislation aligns with its approach over the past two years and also in the lead-up to becoming the Government?

JACK GOUGH: We've had really positive engagement with the Government, and I think that we saw in the previous election that both sides of politics committed to a significant inquiry into invasive species management. That was delivered with the Natural Resources Commission. They just came out with a very significant document after—my understanding is—expenditure of almost a million dollars in terms of a really serious look at what is needed for invasive species management. Under that they have put together a whole heap

of really important recommendations of how we can have a more strategic, better funded, more responsive system for managing invasive species.

In that, they have some pretty strong criticisms of current government approaches that have been across all stripes of politics. In particular, one-year funding models for managing feral pigs where money has to go out the door, gets divided by 11—by the number of LLS regions—we use totally different tools and techniques, we're not really quite sure what our strategic aim is, and we have to get it all spent in seven months to get the press release out at the end. NRC have said that is not how you do invasive species management. I think there is some really important work going on behind the scenes in government about trying to shift those things. We just saw, in this budget, the shift to four-year funding for the Weeds Action Program. That's fantastic. That is something that we've been working on for years with governments to change to long-term funding with strategic aims that works with councils. That needs to happen with feral animal control as well.

There are definite moves nationally, actually, to shift to how do we do this more effectively. This work flies completely in the face of this. The Natural Resources Commission nowhere recommended that recreational hunting or bounties should have anything to do with changing the way that feral animal management is done. The Biosecurity Commissioner that was set up by this government has not made recommendations about that. This is not something that the DPI have been recommending. It's not something that the Local Land Services have been recommending. Unfortunately, it's the way that we've gone. We know that for the past two decades there has been this outsized influence of the shooting lobby because of votes in the upper House of Parliament which has undermined effective feral animal control. This is the latest iteration of that legacy.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Mr Buckmaster, when we talk about wanting landscape-wide control as the most effective method of controlling invasive species, how big a scale are we talking for that landscape?

TONY BUCKMASTER: It really depends on the species that you're looking at. You need to make sure that you manage the population down to a level where it can't increase above its reproductive rate. For rabbits, that could be on the scale of multiple tens of square kilometres. For larger invasive species that have a wider range, say for example wild dogs, you may be looking at several hundred square kilometres as single management units. You would be looking across the entirety of their range to prevent immigration coming into areas that you're actually doing the management in.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: How big an issue is it when there's lots of land, be it private or public, within that landscape that aren't involved in those coordinated approaches?

TONY BUCKMASTER: It does become problematic because what you have is land managers, whether they be government or private, doing effective management and control of pest animals. Then you have sinks. They become sinks where you have sources, which are the ones that aren't doing it, where the animals are able to breed up and then move out into those areas. It does become problematic, which is why we prefer a nil tenure group approach where all parties become involved.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Mr Gough, you touched before on the make-up of the authority being good at lobbying for hunting. What are your views on the expertise of the make-up of that lobby when it comes to biosecurity control?

JACK GOUGH: We're going to have four people who are essentially from the shooting lobby and three people that are not, and a person appointed by the secretary who doesn't get a vote, which is nice and convenient for those numbers. That is not a committee that has expertise in terms of effective management of feral animal control programs beyond recreational hunting. It's not a committee that has deep environmental expertise that understands broadly what is required to manage invasive species. But a step back from that, its terms of reference are just about recreational hunting, anyway. This is not about looking at the breadth of what is needed to manage invasive species and feral animals in particular. This is a propaganda unit. That is what it is. It's set up 4-3, you have your numbers, here's your money, go ahead, get out there, do your research. We've seen it in Tasmania, we see it in Victoria, we see it in South Australia—economic studies that look at the value of hunting that have no look at what the economic impact is of those feral animals that are being protected.

The arguments that we see from the hunting lobby in New South Wales around aerial shooting and baiting are the same arguments that they use in every other State: undermining the social licence for aerial control, targeting things like pursuit times or heart and lung shots as ways to minimise the effectiveness of aerial shooting to make sure that it doesn't work, to keep those feral animals in the landscape. We see them working with other groups on trying to undermine the use of 1080, which we know have animal welfare problems and are not a fantastic tool—we need to say 1080 can be a really horrendous tool when it's used in terms of animal welfare implications—but if we do not use it, there are no real effective tools to deal with foxes in landscapes, which send our native species extinct. We need these tools to be able to have the sort of Australia that all of us deserve to

have where our native wildlife are thriving, where our native landscapes are not being trashed, trampled, polluted, killed, degraded. That will not happen if we've got a propaganda unit that is out there undermining the social licence for effective control tools and promoting ineffective feral animal management.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I will just note for Hansard that I think I said "make-up of the lobby"; I meant "make-up of the committee". Mr Buckmaster, if you had \$7.9 million to run an invasive species program, what do you think you could spend that on that we might be foregoing in lieu of this legislation?

TONY BUCKMASTER: For \$7.9 million, that equates to about \$700,000 per LLS. It would allow for effective management at some scale in those LLSs. As Mr Gough has said, feral pest management is expensive. It's not cheap and it's not a single year issue but having effective nil-tenure strategic control, it allows for planning, managing of the species and monitoring the outcomes of those to ensure that the techniques you're using are correct and allows you to then adapt the program. It allows adaptive management of programs to get better results in the long run.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Mr Gough, same question to you and/or Mr Brewster.

JACK GOUGH: One thing I would say on the principle, because I think it's really important, is it's better to have \$7.9 million spread over multiple years than it is to get one sugar hit of \$7.9 million. This is the current approach: \$13 million or \$14 million in one-year bursts. That is actually counter to effective and strategic feral animal management. We want to shift away from a system that is about sugar hits in response to pressure in particular areas, and also we would not want to see that just divided by 11. That's the other thing. We know that if you've got that money and if we've set strategic aims—the entirety of the South Australian Government's program to eradicate feral deer over the next decade they've costed out at about \$14 million to \$15 million. To give you a sense of scale—that's removing a population of about 40,000 deer—that's about half of what they need over 10 years.

ROB BREWSTER: I was thinking along those lines. I'd spread it out, not spend it all in one go. Try and use it effectively over a long-term period.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Very quickly, to close out, I know it's not mentioned in the legislation as such, but it did come up in the second reading debates, can I get a quick snapshot of the witnesses' views on bounties as an effective control tool?

TONY BUCKMASTER: From the centre's perspective, bounties are not an effective control tool. They never have been. They've been used by a number of jurisdictions around Australia for a period of time. They're not effective. They're open to being rorted by participants. We have multiple tens of evidence of that occurring. It can actually increase the longevity of the species because people use it as an income to supplement their normal income, so they don't actually wish to reduce or remove the species beyond the ability of them to obtain the bounties. So, no, we do not see them as an effective pest management method.

JACK GOUGH: Similarly, we don't see bounties as effective, and they go against most of the principles of effective pest management, not least because they are basically dispersed across the landscape, so you're not having a concentrated effort. But our biggest concern with those bounties is not the bounties themselves. It's that that money is coming straight out of other effective feral animal management programs. So this is cutting off our nose to spite our face. We are taking money to put into something we know won't work. I am sure, Mr Barrett, that there are pig hunters up in Queensland right now storing up those pig snouts to be able to send down and grab some sweet New South Wales taxpayer dollars.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Oh, God. What a propagandist. Honestly, what a propagandist.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: May I just clarify, your understanding—and we heard evidence earlier—that bounties aren't envisaged under this legislation at all?

JACK GOUGH: No, my understanding is that they're envisaged under the deal in the upper House.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Under what, sorry?

JACK GOUGH: Under the deal that the Premier has made with the Shooters Party under the upper House that there are—

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I can't talk about scuttlebutt, but in terms of the legislation we're actually dealing with—

JACK GOUGH: Sorry. Yes, exactly. There's been some confusion in the media. The bounties are not in there. It would be fantastic if they are not supported, because this will take money away from effective feral

animal control. The issue here is they came up because the Shooters and Fishers Party have put up multiple posts on social media about how they've secured that funding.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: But that's not something we're dealing with here.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: It's in the second reading speech.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Mr Gough, can you just give us a little bit of your background in relation to what qualifies you to be here today advocating the way you are?

JACK GOUGH: No worries. So I'm the CEO of the Invasive—

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: And can you keep it down to one sentence that doesn't ramble for about 10 minutes and waste all my time?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Point of order: That is just so disrespectful to a witness before a parliamentary inquiry of the upper House. I would ask you, Chair, to remind the member, this is not—

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: To the point of order—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: —treating witnesses with respect.

The CHAIR: I will hear Mr Borsak.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: I'll continue questioning.

The CHAIR: I'll just make the following remark: Obviously Committee members are aware of the procedural fairness resolution. We can't direct witnesses in how they answer questions.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Mr Gough, is it true that you're a former Greens staffer in this place?

JACK GOUGH: To answer your question, my background for this, I'm currently the CEO—

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Can you please answer the question—this last question?

The Hon. AILEEN MACDONALD: He hasn't answered the first question you asked.

JACK GOUGH: I'm currently the CEO of the Invasive Species—

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: You were a Greens staffer in this building, weren't you?

JACK GOUGH: My history is that I have worked before—

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Thank you. You're not going to answer the question because, basically, you're a propagandist.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Point of order: The witness should be allowed to answer the question that is put to the them.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: I put the question—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: The member, as you just ruled—

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: —and I'll ask another one.

The CHAIR: Order!

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: —and reminded, does not have any power or authority to direct the witness to answer the question the way he would like the witness to answer the question.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: I've reframed the question a number of times and I'm not getting a straight answer—

The CHAIR: Order!

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: —because Mr Gough is a propagandist.

The CHAIR: Order! I'll uphold the point of order. I remind the Hon. Robert Borsak that he is to afford the witness the opportunity to answer the question.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Thank you, Chair. Mr Gough, you stated that the Conservation Hunting Bill will harm biodiversity outcomes. That's been a big part of what you've been saying. But in 2023, the long-footed potoroo, a critically endangered species highly sensitive to environmental disturbance, has been rediscovered in the Bondi State Forest, an area that has been both harvested commercially for timber and also has

been open for declared hunting forest since 2006. How do you explain the persistence of such a species, which has actually migrated to that forest from northern Victoria—a multi-use forest that includes recreational hunting, conservation works by hunters—if these activities are supposedly incompatible with sound biosecurity and conservation outcomes?

JACK GOUGH: I might hand to Mr Brewster.

ROB BREWSTER: Yes, I can probably give you a bit of context around the long-footed potoroo. I've done a lot of work down in Bondi State Forest and know a bit about the long-footed potoroo and the conservation program in New South Wales for it.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Great.

ROB BREWSTER: It probably hasn't migrated. It was probably there, just undetected, for a long time. They're a very cryptic species. You've got to do a lot of monitoring to find them, much like that Leadbeater's possum in Kosciuszko, so that is probably why we haven't got a good read on where long-footed potoroos are in New South Wales.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Would you agree that feral animal control—particularly foxes, cats, pigs and dogs—is critical to the survival of species like long-footed potoroo?

ROB BREWSTER: Yes.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Okay. Thank you. If so, would your organisation oppose a bill that seeks to expand regulated hunting which can play a direct role in reducing the impact of invasive predators in public forests?

JACK GOUGH: In terms of the organisation's position, we are very keen to see a shift in the way that feral animal management occurs in New South Wales because, as I said in my opening statement, what we have right now isn't working. What this bill does is actually double down on the bits that aren't working. The bits that aren't working right now are that it's ad hoc, un-strategic, underfunded and thinly spread across the landscape with not very clear aims and intentions. We have had consistent undermining of attempts to change that from the shooting lobby, and we also have problems with maintaining the social licence for effective control tools.

What this bill will do is specifically impact on those two problems to make them worse. So yes, we definitely need a change. We need more money. We need a shift to a much more strategic system. That system needs to have long-term funding. It needs to have clear outcomes. We need to work out across land tenures. What are we trying to achieve? What are we trying to protect? Are we trying to actually stop the western spread of feral deer or not? If we are, then we need to have the funding, the strategies in place to do that. This bill takes us backwards.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: When the potoroo was discovered in the State forest, forest operations in Bondi State Forest were immediately paused. A clear example of adaptive management. Would you agree with that, Mr Brewster?

ROB BREWSTER: Yes.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Yes. Thank you. Doesn't this demonstrate that the government agencies and land managers can successfully balance hunting, forestry and species protection under a framework like the one proposed in this bill?

ROB BREWSTER: No, I wouldn't equate those two.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Why?

ROB BREWSTER: Because it's got nothing to do with hunting.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: But you agreed earlier that foxes, cats, pigs and dogs taken out of those forests—and the only people that are in those forests doing that are conservation hunters—was quite beneficial. Now you're saying the opposite, I think.

ROB BREWSTER: No, I think this is the problem. The only people in these forests are hunters. What we actually need is the land manager to be in those forests doing effective, long-term strategic invasive species management. I'm personally a hunter myself, a shooter. I have an R-Licence, but I'm not going to sit here and say what I'm doing in a State forest is effective. It just isn't. There's no evidence for it.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Mr Gough, are you familiar with the works of Dr Graeme Caughley?

JACK GOUGH: Not off the top of my head.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: You're not. Okay. Are you aware that Dr Caughley was widely regarded as Australia's most accomplished ecologist?

JACK GOUGH: No.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: No. Thank you. He was awarded the Doctor of Science for groundbreaking research into the dynamics of erupting mammal populations, particularly feral herbivores such as goats, pigs and deer. Have you read his book *The Deer Wars: The Story of Deer in New Zealand*?

JACK GOUGH: I have not.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: You have not.

JACK GOUGH: But I have been speaking recently with Forest and Bird New Zealand which is quite concerned that the mismanagement of deer—

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Thank you. That's not the question.

JACK GOUGH: —in New Zealand has been a persistent issue because of the power of their hunting lobby and means that they're having significant declines in their native wildlife and their landscapes.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Given the Invasive Species Council's ongoing advocacy on deer and pest management policy, one would reasonably expect its public spokesperson, being yourself, to be familiar with one of the most important works on the subject in this part of the world, especially one written by Australia's most respected ecologist.

JACK GOUGH: I look forward to you giving me a copy Mr Borsak, and I'll have a read.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: It's actually available on Amazon if you want to look it up. Maybe educate yourself. It'd be quite useful.

JACK GOUGH: More than happy for you to send me a copy.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: *Deer Wars* documents how exclusion of recreational hunters from deer control in New Zealand led to long-term failure. The people advocating for deer hunting in New Zealand have been a part of the solution, not part of the problem. And it wasn't until—

JACK GOUGH: I can say to that—

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Hang on. Excuse me, I'm not finished yet. Until the Government finally partnered with organisations like the New Zealand Deerstalkers Association and established structured conservation hunting, do you accept that Australia risks repeating these failures by similarly sidelining licensed skilled hunters from contributing to pest control under regulated frameworks?

JACK GOUGH: We are not going to deal with the enormous impact of feral animals on our native wildlife if we don't have strategic, integrated, cross-tenure management programs. If the answer to not having recreational hunters is to do nothing, that is a failure and, where that's happened in New Zealand, of course you're going to get bad results. What we are arguing is that the New South Wales Government have a responsibility, under their own Biosecurity Act, to stop the mismanagement of 2.2 million hectares of State forests, the mismanagement of Crown lands that have effectively become game reserves. That is not going to allow the New South Wales Government to have a credible position when they go to landholders and they say, "You have to do something about pigs," "You have to do something about feral horses," "You have to do something about feral deer under your general biosecurity duty." Those landholders will say, "Well, hang on a second. The New South Wales Government are just letting a few weekend warriors into a few State forests and saying that they're discharging their biosecurity responsibility."

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Thank you, Mr Gough. That's not the answer to the question I was asking.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Not the answer you want.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: I appreciate you just droning on.

JACK GOUGH: That is not an effective system for feral animal management, it is something that needs to change, and this bill takes us backwards.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Mr Gough, the recent study in Kosciuszko National Park showed collared fallow deer did not change their home range when pursued and shot by helicopters. Are you telling me that a deer hunter on foot is going to change that distribution?

JACK GOUGH: In Kosciuszko National Park?

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Kosciuszko National Park.

JACK GOUGH: I haven't claimed that.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: I'm not saying you've claimed it; I'm saying, did you know it?

JACK GOUGH: Sorry, did I know what?

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: That a collared fallow deer will not change its home range when pursued and shot by helicopters.

JACK GOUGH: I'm sorry, I think I'm not quite understanding what you're asking me.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: You're an advocate for helicopter shooting.

JACK GOUGH: I'm an advocate for effective feral animal control using all techniques in a tenure-blind approach that is well funded, not ad hoc, and strategic.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: You're an advocate in that process for helicopter shooting?

JACK GOUGH: Yes, aerial shooting is one of those tools.

The CHAIR: Order!

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: May I finish this line of questioning?

The CHAIR: Just one final question, please.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Studies by Dr Richard Mason showed that collared pigs travelled up to 360 kilometres without being translocated by anyone, which is a persistent claim of yours. Why does ISC ignore this? Doesn't this fit the tier of propaganda message that I was alluding to earlier?

JACK GOUGH: I'll just read out what the Hunter Local Land Services have said here, which is to be very careful when dealing with feral pigs as they can be easily frightened and scared away from a site when disturbed by hunters and shooters. If pigs are disturbed, they'll move into new areas, cause more damage and often become more difficult to control.

The CHAIR: Thank you to our witnesses for appearing today. If there were any questions taken on notice or if there are any supplementary questions, the Committee secretariat will be in touch with the details.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Mr NED MAKIM, President, Australian Pig Doggers and Hunters Association, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you to our next witness for making time to give evidence to the inquiry. Would you like to make an opening statement?

NED MAKIM: Yes. I have tried to time it to two minutes. Chair and members of the committee, thanks for the opportunity to speak here today. I am the national President of the Australian Pig Doggers and Hunters Association, so today I represent the people who have chosen to be a member of our association; I also seek to represent those who might not have joined us yet. The APDHA strongly supports, unsurprisingly, the Conservation Hunting Bill. We see it as long overdue recognition of legal, cultural and conservation-focused hunting. We've got members across Australia who are involved in ethical feral animal control, especially of pigs, and often our people use trained dogs under strict regulation in relation to animal cruelty laws and so on.

The bill does five key things in our opinion. It affirms the right to hunt, which gives form and focus to what we think is a legitimate cultural status. It establishes the Conservation Hunting Authority, and we think that would improve representation and practical hunter input; and opens up Crown land to manage hunting, and that would use the proven safe systems already in place in New South Wales State forests. It would, in its current form, permit suppressors to be used in conservation hunting. We see that as an improvement in workplace health and safety outcomes. I'm not wearing them today, but I've spent \$12,000 on hearing aids. Anything that involves hearing is of a particular interest to me.

We also think it can affect animal welfare outcomes. The reduction in noise reduces the amount of flinch in an animal and it gives you more shots at a mob of animals, so we think there's a benefit there in terms of animal welfare and in population reduction. And we very openly support the concept of a bounty. We think this is one way to get a bounty in a regulated manner, because it would offer further incentive to grassroots control of animals, and that money would go directly into regional communities. Lots and lots of our people are regionally based Australians, so we think that the results are there to make this worth looking at.

In 2024 we ran a program where we gathered data from people who were hunting pigs. The extrapolation from that was that there were 5.3 million pigs killed nationally by recreational hunters in that year, 1.6-plus million pigs in New South Wales alone. That's a lot of pigs, at a net positive economic result for the New South Wales economy of about \$327 million. It's obviously cost-effective, and we think it is landscape-level pig control. But most importantly with this legislation, for us, we think that recognition increases the chance, or the focus, on responsibility by pig hunters. Legal hunters are ready to self-regulate. They're ready to take pride in their contribution to the economy and to the ecology of the State, and they're ready to be publicly accountable for how they do that. We think the bill encourages that. That's where we're going. We urge the Committee to recommend that the bill be passed without delay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Makim. We'll now move to questions and we're going to the Opposition first this time.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Thank you, Mr Makim. Pig numbers at the moment are pretty bad.

NED MAKIM: Yes.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: What are you seeing? How big is a mob of pigs that you're coming across?

NED MAKIM: It's an infinitely variable. They can be a sow and a few pigs, but there could be a hundred.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Yes, okay. I'm definitely not against pig hunting. That would make my family gatherings—

NED MAKIM: There's more pigs now. I've been pig hunting for 50 years. I'm 65. I started as a 15-year-old. There are more pigs now in New South Wales everywhere I go than I've ever seen before. I've seen them in plague proportions in small areas. They are everywhere now, so something isn't working and we'd suggest that more incentive for hunters would be one of the ways of improving that outcome.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: When you run across a mob of say, 30, 40 pigs—not so much you, because I'm sure you're at the sharp end of the hunting—but your average pig hunter and I guess the tail of them, how many out of that mob of 30 do they pick up?

NED MAKIM: Look, it's not going to be the 30 unless they've got an offside shooting and they're shooting a rapid fire firearm out of a buggy or something like that. I don't know. It would depend. The variables are, if you're using dogs, the quality of the dogs. Good dogs will pick their own pig. Really good dogs go for the

biggest and then the other dogs work their way down. But they might only get one pig. That's not the benefit of pig hunting. It's the fact that pig hunters will keep going out. They will go again and again and again and again, and they'll do it for free.

I don't mean to jump in on evidence that was given previously, but there were some things that were said there that confused me, particularly that Hunter LLS was saying that, if you disturb a mob of pigs, they'll leave the area. Certainly, if you disturb them here, they'll move there, but they're not necessarily moving their home range. There's actually research that was done in 1989—I've got it on here, but I'm not clever enough to be able to get that up quickly, but I can provide that later—and it was done in a national park with a poisoning program. It showed that the collared pigs didn't move out of their home range at all while there was—they had hunters going in there with dogs chasing them. They had collared pigs. The collared pigs didn't move out of their home range, and the conclusion was that it didn't affect the poisoning program at all.

People have opinions, but the evidence that we found doesn't support those opinions. The evidence suggests that pigs—and I know from my own personal experience, they stay in their home range. If you see a big boar here, he lives in that area. You'll see him again and again, or you'll see his tracks again and again. They're like us. They have an area. People drive to work the same way, or they go to the same coffee shop. Pigs are the same. They're doing the same sorts of things every day because that's where they feel comfortable. The benefit of hunting is that the person who's hunting that block will go again and again, and learn more and more about that mob of pigs because they're a smart animal and you have to pattern them. That's some of what I do with people. I try to mentor younger hunters. They'll ring and say, "I'm seeing this pig, it's doing this, it's doing this. What would you do?" I'll provide them with some tactics. I'm always very excited when they come back and say, "Yes, we got that one or we got this one." It's quite a long winded way to say they won't get them all on that day, but they might get them all over a period of time.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: You mentioned there the dogs—and I presume well-trained dogs—will target the bigger pigs first. The majority of hunters, if they have to choose between taking down a big boar or a young sow, what's their target out of those two?

NED MAKIM: Again, it's variable, but yes, look, I'm always going to be more interested in a big boar pig or a big breeding sow because it's the size. That's the bigger test. It depends what your landholder wants. Any pig hunter who's got legal access to private land will absolutely follow what that landholder wants. That's gold for a pig hunter. If the cocky or the farmer or the landholder—I'm sorry, I lack sophistication in some of my descriptions here—says, "Kill everything," you'll kill everything. If they say, "There's a big boar there. I'm worried about the lambs," then you'll go for that pig specifically. But in the run of the mill, if you're just hunting, it's more satisfying to get a big pig than a little pig. You're going to pick up the little ones anyway. You certainly won't drive past one, or you won't walk past one.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: There is obviously a lot of criticism around pig hunters about the problems they cause on farms. Are you finding most of the places you're going back to repeatedly over many years?

NED MAKIM: I'm sorry, I didn't understand that question.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: There's criticism of pig hunters being problematic on farms.

NED MAKIM: Yes.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Can you counter that by saying that many times we're going back to the same places; we're continually invited back over many, many years?

NED MAKIM: Yes. Idiots and criminals are problematic on farms. Some of them also hunt pigs. But pig hunters are valued in the bush, because they will go out and they will climb the mountain, they will crawl into the blackberry bush—they will do the things that are needed to get to the pigs. They'll be out. It snowed the other day where I live and there were hunters out that day, in the snow, running around. It's not fun doing that. It's cold and wet. But the obsession with pigs—I cannot explain it to you well enough.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: You don't need to.

NED MAKIM: They will keep going. They will keep working on it. In my experience, too, and that's with corporate farms, big corporate places—I won't mention their names—and smaller landholders, they like to have active hunters on their property because it discourages poor behaviour by others. In the old days it used to be more about contact. That's not the case now, because things are different. It's more that the people who are stealing fuel, or cutting fences and things, like to do that sort of thing unobserved, because there's a very good rural crime police team in New South Wales. If you give them information, they will follow it up. Pig hunting is an interesting thing in Australian culture whereby, contrary to lots of other areas of Australian culture, it's

considered reasonable to give up someone who's cutting a fence or poaching on someone's country—to give them up to the cops.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Can I just clarify a couple of things? Is it an objective of your organisation to rid the country of all pigs?

NED MAKIM: No, because I think it can't be done. It's to catch as many pigs as we can, as many as physically possible.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: From your organisation's position, are we pro or anti the use of baiting such as 1080?

NED MAKIM: I'm a qualified 1080 person. I have a separate control business and all that sort of stuff. It'll kill stuff, no doubt. If it's used carefully, it's really effective. I do foxes and things like that. I'm not anti 1080. I prefer a quicker kill. I'm not a scientist; I just know what it looks like when something eats 1080, and it doesn't look nice. I'm really sort of shocked that it doesn't attract more attention. But it's a very effective thing. It'll certainly kill them. So I'm not anti it, I use it—I get paid to use it.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you for your time today. Under the legislation that we're considering, it opens up more than 50,000 hectares of shared public space for further hunting. Obviously there has been a lot of discussion around guns and gun safety, and the hunting aspect of it in regard to guns for hunting. Is your understanding of the bill that it will also open up over 50,000 hectares of shared public space for pig dog hunting?

NED MAKIM: It's my assumption, yes. I haven't had that said specifically, but I imagine it would be much the same as the State forests, and that's what's going on now, in declared State forests. We're what's called an Authorised Hunting Organisation, so we've met the Government's requirements to be recognised as a responsible group. If they join us, they do the tests, get their licence, and they can hunt with dogs, under certain restrictions. I imagine that that would be the same thing. We'd certainly be asking for that.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: And the bill also sets up an authority. Would you want that authority, or part of the role of that authority, to actually encourage more pig dog hunting across New South Wales?

NED MAKIM: I don't think you need to encourage it. It's a massive thing in itself. It's self-perpetuating. I would seek the authority to encourage legal, ethical pig hunting. That's what we're about. We want people to follow rules that allow them to continue hunting into the future. So we'd be looking for the authority to do that, yes.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Given that you're the president of the Australian Pig Doggers and Hunters Association, you probably saw a little while ago—we discussed it in budget estimates quite a lot in Parliament, and there was quite a bit of media around it—that the police had actually written to the Minister about concerns around pig dog hunting and actually asked the Minister to change the legislation to outlaw pig dog hunting specifically.

NED MAKIM: Yes. The police didn't do that. Two police officers did that, because the police subsequently retracted that.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: But they were senior rural police and they had raised these issues with the Minister because they had concerns around the promotion of these activities, and concerns for people on rural properties. I'm just wondering, if there's rural police and senior rural police raising concerns with the Minister to the point where they want legislative changes, why we would then sort of encourage and open up more areas for pig dog hunting.

NED MAKIM: Well you could just go the other way, couldn't you? You could just say, "Look, if there's people saying, "Yay, pig dogging. Why don't we just automatically do it?" There's different views in here, surely.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: This is a position of rural police officers.

NED MAKIM: No, no, no.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I'm not talking about lay members of society.

NED MAKIM: Yes, it's a couple of police. They were chastised over that, too. Because we deal with these people on an almost daily level so that we can find ways to work together. The ABC ran a story on it. I contacted them immediately. I was in the bush and someone sent me this thing. I contacted them immediately, spoke to the young guy who did it. That was never retracted on the ABC, but on all the other media, it was.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I suppose what I'm trying to say is these aren't lay members of society with an opinion. You know, we probably have different opinions, as members of society.

NED MAKIM: Yes, I appreciate that.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: But these are senior rural police officers, who raised this as a major concern in regard to animal welfare legislation—major concerns for biosecurity risks. I'm just wondering why we would then kind of expand on that when there are clearly concerns within the police force.

NED MAKIM: I think even allowing for the vagaries of who they were and all that sort of thing, they were talking about people, as I understood it, who had broken the law and who were behaving poorly and so on. We would absolutely agree with the prosecution of people who are breaking any law, breaking biosecurity laws. We're all for that. We don't have any problem with that at all. People have all sorts of views. As I've said, there's various views in here. It's about finding a common ground. Just because two cops who, for whatever reason, had a bad day and said something, that wouldn't be the basis for public policy.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I'm not quite sure that that was their position.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Mr Makim, I'm curious. You referred to the 1989 study that feral pigs don't move home range as a result of recreational shooting.

NED MAKIM: It was hunting, they said. I don't know how they hunted. I think they—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Are you aware that conflicts with more recent research that was published in 2021, that related to actually 29 studies that reported the effect of rec hunting, and almost found recreational hunting caused changes in home range size, range shifting, habitat use and activity patterns? Are you aware of that one?

NED MAKIM: No, I can't say that I've seen that.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Okay, well there is more contemporary research that—

NED MAKIM: I would love to be given access to that.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you. Perhaps I could put some questions to you on the basis of that, if you you're willing to have a look at that.

NED MAKIM: Yes, go for your life.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you. You also, in your submission, referred to the right to hunt that you think would provide some sort of cultural benefit. I'm just wondering if you could expand on that a little bit.

NED MAKIM: I'm conscious that the legislation doesn't say that the right to hunt means you can just go and hunt. There's still limitations on it. We live in a society where it is frowned upon to divide the society up and criticise groups, except in relation to hunting. When you're in the hunting community, it feels like we're a punching bag, and that the worst elements of what one person did one day will be applied to all of us. It's very demeaning and it's very hurtful to people. We've had some great examples just recently.

I'm really serious about this, because the sorts of things that are said about hunters would be actionable under some of the discriminatory laws and the cultural laws that we have. I agree with all of those things, but if you were to say some of the things that are said about hunters about any other group in society, you'd be ostracised. You'd be seen as an idiot. However, hunters—because animals and hunting and the various views excite such strong emotions in people—can become very obvious targets. What I think something like the right to hunt would do is to say to people, "We see that you exist, and we see that hunting is a legitimate thing to be involved in." We accept it's got to be legal, it's got to be this and that.

The example I was going to use is when we ran what we called The Great Australian Pig Hunt, which was essentially just gathering data. We gave it a nice name, gave them a few prizes and things like that. During that, I had a couple of people who look similar to me come up to me. They were somewhat emotional and they said, "Look, this has helped us feel really proud," because there was lots of positive media about how many pigs were killed and all this sort of stuff. I recently was talking to a lady whose family hunts. She's in Queensland. We're also collecting the tips of ears from pigs as part of the 10,000-year project to create a DNA bank of the feral pig population in Australia. She said it had given her family and her kids a new sense of purpose, because now they felt like they were contributing on a much higher level. I think it's akin to that, in that, if you recognise the positives in any people, they tend more towards positive behaviour.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: But they don't need a right to do that, do they? As you say, your program did that.

NED MAKIM: Yes, but we need something from somewhere higher up than just my little kitchen table in Inverell that says, "You people are welcome. You people are contributing something." Otherwise it's just me.

What I'm suggesting is that—you give it any word you want, but if hunting is recognised as a culturally legitimate thing, I think you will have a higher level of compliance with laws and things like that. Not that there's a huge issue now, but you'll have people striving to be more involved in the community rather than seeing themselves as separate. I just think that people have the right to hunt. That rings a bell with me. That feels good to me.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you.

NED MAKIM: That's what I mean, whether that's of any use.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thanks.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Makim. I wonder, how many members, roughly, do you have in New South Wales at the moment?

NED MAKIM: I knew you were going to ask that. I was going to do that this morning, but I actually left from Tamworth. I got up this morning at 4.15 a.m. to be here, to catch the plane down and—

The CHAIR: That's fine. You can take it on notice if you don't have it to hand.

NED MAKIM: Okay, I can do that.

The CHAIR: Yes, absolutely. If that's something that you can provide us.

NED MAKIM: Sorry, I read that. I should say, "Yes, I'll take that on notice."

The CHAIR: Thank you. Do you currently coordinate efforts to help with pest management?

NED MAKIM: I do with my landholders. I'm also on the Northern Tablelands Regional Pest Animal Committee. That's a good crew. They've got a roo shooter. They've got me. They've got another lady who's a landholder and a deer hunter. Then they've got LLS and national parks. It has been a good committee. I speak up there about pig behaviour and times of year and things like that. I also try to communicate, or I do communicate with the head of the LLS and her deputy about ideas for coordinating. We've got one before them at the moment to coordinate actions with organised pig competitions that are on in the bush—Ivanhoe being a great example. In three days they got 2,200 pigs. It didn't cost the Government anything. What we've suggested is to use that as a trial program and coordinate some activities in that LLS area prior to the next one, which is next year, give away a trap to encourage hunters to trap and see how many we get.

I'm all up for trials and tests to see what's going to work in the bush because one of the flaws I see in all feral pest control in Australia is it's all driven top-down. Expert A says we do this and then expert B does this and then it goes through a funding thing. The people on the ground who know about the animal behaviour are dealing with them every day and are dealing with thousands upon thousands of examples of this animal behaviour. Not many people are asking them. I think that the future for coordination is to get more of that bottom-up information, and maybe this is a way to do it. That's why I'm here today. I just want to try to represent my people and say we're ready to go, like we kill a lot of pigs and we're happy to do it in a way that works for the State.

The CHAIR: If the bill passes, would your organisation be open to working with Government and the conservation authority to sort of coordinate those efforts, as you say?

NED MAKIM: Yes, and coordination—I like to say we could be talking about big cats, but you're thinking about a lion and I'm thinking about a tiger. Coordination can be two different things in different people's minds. We need to talk a lot more. This is an opportunity for people from diverse backgrounds to talk and to hear one another. I'm all for that. I think that the more we talk, the more we can find ways to coordinate. But the biggest thing that hunters in that sort of coordinated way have to offer is knowledge of the animal.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Mr Makim, can you outline the research benefit of the data gathered in the great Australian pig hunters program that you recently finished?

NED MAKIM: Let me think, and again I can provide all of that detail, but essentially it gave us our first glimpse of how many pigs are being killed by recreational hunters in Australia. The biggest thing I got out of that was we have no idea how many pigs there are. There's five-point-whatever million pigs being killed Australia-wide, or 1.6 million in New South Wales—I think it was 1.67 million pigs being killed in New South Wales—and I note from earlier discussions that the number of pigs we're supposed to kill to keep the number from growing has gone from 70 to 85 now, so that makes it even worse. If we're killing 1.6 million pigs and the Government is killing 100,000 or a couple of hundred thousand—and I don't mean to be demeaning there, I don't know the number off the top of my head, but it's whatever it is—so say there's 2 million pigs being killed and that's not 80 per cent of them and it's not 70 per cent of them. Even if it's 50 per cent of them that are being killed, we've still got a massive problem there that no-one's looking at.

We don't have any good figures on how many pigs there are. The figures vary Australia-wide from about 4 million to about 25 million. I think that that was one of the benefits. It raised the issue of how many pigs there are. Each pig hunter is killing about 17 pigs per person per month. That was the average. That feels about right to me, on average. I know people that would be killing 300 or 400. That's easy to do on the flat country where you can get a good go at them. In the mountains it can be a lot harder. And there's people who might only go out once a month or once every two months and get a couple of pigs. But overall, every hunter was killing, on average, about 17.5 pigs or something like that, so that gave us a figure then to say how many people we might need in the landscape. People are killing pigs everywhere. There is an actual landscape-style killing of pigs going on and it's every day, it's broadscale and it's over a very, very wide area.

The other thing was that, using some research that was done in New South Wales about the value of hunting, what hunters spend—pig hunters go out twice as often as other hunters and spend nearly twice as much on the hunting—we were able to estimate that every pig that hunters get is worth about \$60.67, I think it is, to the economy. Again, I can provide all of that data for the committee later on. It's a large-scale operation. It just isn't run by a department. It's just people doing the right thing. It's like if everyone picked up litter, they would pick up a lot of litter. There wouldn't have to be, you know, the litter collection agency. There can be promotions, like the Clean Up Australia campaign and things like that. It gave us some base of what's going on in the landscape and what could happen if—we would like a bounty. I think we could nearly double those figures with a bounty because I think you would double the number of times people would go out.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Mr Makim, just to put some context around the numbers you're throwing, who academically controlled and verified your data as you went through it, and how long did this program run for?

NED MAKIM: We've got a couple of professors who look at what we do. They look at our methodology. I'm sorry, I'm having a little mental blank, but our USQ associate professor, Ben—how embarrassing. I've forgotten his last name. I'll provide that. We approached him through the—we worked with the Queensland Government on disease preparedness for exotic diseases and things. We went to them and said, "Who do you know who's a good academic who will tell us what we're going to do wrong and what we're going to do right?" They put us on to Professor Ben—I'm sorry; that's how we refer to him. We went through what we'd done. We sent him source documents to say, "This is what we're basing some of the stuff on. This is how we're going to collect the figures." We just kept in touch with him throughout this program.

And in all the reports we do, we do monthly reports, we've said, "We absolutely welcome scrutiny of whatever we're doing," because we want it to be legitimate. We want it to be credible. We'll give it to anyone. But, yes, we didn't just make it up ourselves. I know you're not suggesting that, but—because we're pig hunters, we're not academics, you know, so we sought academic background. Same thing we're doing with the collection of the ears—we've sought some academic support there—because we want whatever we're doing to be credible. So I'll give you those specific—

The CHAIR: Sorry, but we have to conclude our time for questions now. In terms of the information you agreed to take on notice, the committee secretariat will be in touch with you to confirm the details of that and any other additional supplementary questions that members might have. But we really appreciate you giving evidence, Mr Makim.

NED MAKIM: I appreciate the opportunity, and I'd like to say publicly too that the secretariat has just been marvellous in dealing with me. I am such a country bumpkin. They've been patient and tolerant and answered every question. And they told me I could take this—my name plate—because my grandkids will want that.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Makim.

(The witness withdrew.)

Mr BRYCE WILDE, Executive Director, Natural Resources Commission, affirmed and examined

Dr BEN RUSSELL, Associate Director, Natural Resources Commission, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome to our next witnesses. Thank you for making time to appear at the inquiry today. Would either of you like to start by making an opening statement?

BRYCE WILDE: Yes, thank you. The Natural Resources Commission is an independent adviser to the New South Wales Government on natural resources management. The commission has experience in undertaking evaluations and reviews of invasive species and conservation hunting programs that are relevant to the Committee's deliberations. In our recent invasive species review, we found that more than 340 weed and 40 pest animal species cause extensive impacts to the New South Wales economy, environment and communities. The commission conservatively estimates the financial cost of invasive species in New South Wales is at least \$1.9 billion per year, having increased from approximately \$26 million in the 1970s. As such, the New South Wales Government must lead a strategic, risk-based collaborative approach, supported by a robust system of integrated policy, planning and regulation.

There are approximately 3.6 million hectares of State forest, travelling stock reserves and Crown land managed by the Forestry Corporation, Local Land Services and Crown Lands. Management of those lands must ensure that public resources are targeted to actions that most effectively reduce risk and maximise the rate of return on investment or value for money. The commission is unaware of evidence that supports the extension of the Forestry Corporation's minimalist model or similar model to other public lands.

The Forestry Corporation use uncoordinated recreational hunters, along with dog and fox baiting, as a core part of its invasive species management. The Forestry Corporation, for instance, does not participate in aerial shooting programs organised and fully funded by Local Land Services.¹ In This creates a significant risk to the overall program's efficacy. The Forestry Corporation spends approximately \$1.79 per hectare on invasive species control across its 2.1 million hectares, while Local Land Services on their travelling stock reserves spend upwards of \$8.64 per hectare across approximately half a million hectares. The National Parks and Wildlife Service spends approximately \$6.74 per hectare across some 7 million hectares, as a comparison. Each of those public land managers does have different management objectives.

Hunting is a valid and valuable recreational activity. We support that. By itself, however, it is not an effective means of conservation. The commission has previously evaluated the National Parks and Wildlife Service's conduct of a supplementary pest control program using volunteer shooters as part of a coordinated pest animal program. This program, although costly to first set up, was found to be effective as it was well targeted, coordinated and collaborative. The three-year trial demonstrated how appropriately qualified and supervised volunteer shooters can safely contribute to National Parks and Wildlife Service's integrated pest management programs to achieve conservation outcomes. It showed how Government can collaborate with non-government organisations to achieve mutually beneficial goals in a public land management context.

The commission recommended that the supplementary pest control program continue and be expanded beyond the trial phase provided that, firstly, safety and animal welfare standards are maintained; secondly, it is strategically applied where it can provide most benefit as part of an integrated pest management program; and, thirdly, additional funding is allocated separate from national parks' core pest management budget. Thank you, and we would welcome any further questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Wilde. I'll now hand over to Ms Higginson.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you very much, both of you, for attending, and thank you for your evidence. I just wanted to refer to, if I could, in August last year, the NRC put out a report, a very comprehensive 150-page report, on *Reducing Risk, Securing the Future – NSW Invasive Species Management Review*. That report, to my understanding, didn't recommend that we would introduce a piece of legislation like the one we're here to discuss today. Is that correct?

BRYCE WILDE: Yes.

¹ In [correspondence](#) to the committee dated 2 September 2025, Mr Bryce Wilde, Executive Director, Natural Resources Commission, clarified their evidence.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Am I correct in thinking that the evidence in the opening statement you've just provided, and consistent with that report, I implied that actually what's proposed in this legislation could, in fact, undermine some of the objectives and features in a strategic approach to a successful invasive species management approach?

BRYCE WILDE: We haven't seen evidence that this proposal is warranted. What we have seen evidence of is that Government should be targeting its limited finances in biosecurity to the programs that have demonstrable practice and research supporting them, and that is where there are well-coordinated targeted collaborative cross-tenure programs where ground shooting does have a role to play but it's not the primary means.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Based on that report, and it was very comprehensive, do you think that there is a kind of incongruence between recreational shooting as an objective and invasive species management as an objective?

BRYCE WILDE: There is potential for that, and it depends upon how each is managed and undertaken. Certainly there are recreational hunters who are conservation-minded, and through our previous evaluation of supplementary pest control, where we saw through the efforts of Sporting Shooters Association of New South Wales, their members, who participated, had the will and the skill to participate in a coordinated and supervised program that delivered conservation benefits on public land. So it can happen, but there are other recreational hunters who do not share those same motivations and have their own legitimate motivations for pursuing their recreational activity.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Were you, as the Natural Resources Commission, consulted in the making, drafting and delivering this bill?

BRYCE WILDE: No, we weren't consulted. We had conversation when we were aware of the bill. So, limited consultation, fair to say.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Did the Premier's office or any of the ministerial offices reach out to you asking for your advice?

BRYCE WILDE: There was a conversation that happened between Minister Moriarty's office and the commission.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: So even though the Premier was the person responsible for commissioning your advice, that was, as I understand it, delivered in that preliminary report of August 2024 about invasive species management, no-one from the Premier's office contacted you in relation to suggesting this was an approach that the Government was going to take, other than later Moriarty's office contacting you?

BRYCE WILDE: That's correct.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: And I'm correct, aren't I? Nowhere in that report, which was the advice the Premier sought from you, as the independent Natural Resources Commission that provides Government advice, nothing in that report suggested that there should be a new authority or advisory group formed, and nothing in that suggested that rec hunting should become part of the invasive species management control in New South Wales?

BRYCE WILDE: Correct.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Given the figures that you presented as to cost per hectare that is currently being spent, is it your view—and I accept if this needs to be taken on notice—that \$7.9 million over two years to establish a new advisory hunting authority is money well spent for the objective of achieving invasive species management control in New South Wales?

BRYCE WILDE: I can't comment on whether the money is well spent. I would have to say there should be an effective evaluation if there is to be such a set-up. What I can comment on is that there are significant opportunity costs there. That there is insufficient current funding for invasive species management and that \$7.9 million would go a long way to improving the capacity and the system overall to focus on targeted risks and ensuring that there are well-defined programs and activities cross-tenure, well-coordinated, that can achieve the set objectives. I do think that the money could be better placed within the existing system.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Do you think that this bill could effectively do more harm than good in terms of the overarching objective of effective invasive species control in New South Wales?

BRYCE WILDE: I don't think I'm in a position to say whether it can do more harm or good. What I will suggest is that, as per my opening statement, the current model which is most similar to this is the model which is in place in the Forestry Corporation, and that model is the weakest on the public land managers.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you. I don't know whether you have a built capacity in this area, but based on what you understand and the work that you do in terms of natural resources and management across the State, do you think that there is a possibility of undermining stakeholder trust? I know you touch on stakeholder trust in the report that you've generated. If we put so many eggs in this basket, which you have given evidence there is not good evidence to suggest it's the better mechanism, do you think that could generate more stakeholder loss of trust in terms of the effectiveness of invasive species management control?

BRYCE WILDE: That's not quite clear. If you're thinking through the different stakeholders, the primary stakeholders here being private landholders and then other public land managers, private landholders have diverse views and many do allow recreational hunters on their program, on their own land. What we did find in our work is that, again, in relation to the Forestry Corporation, there are significant stakeholder concerns and neighbours of State forest who are concerned about their lack of attention on biosecurity matters and how some of those species are crossing onto their neighbours' properties. Those concerns are heightened for the Forestry Corporation more so than for other public land managers.

When we undertook the supplementary pest control, in that evaluation, of the concerns that there were at the time by neighbours of national parks, they were general concerns which were raised generally about shooting and, out of those, each one was then addressed and resolved satisfactorily by National Parks to their neighbour's approval. Stakeholder views are quite complex. But if pest management programs are done well, targeted and coordinated, then you bring along neighbours with you and they see the support. That requires extension and engagement, and I think there is a greater opportunity for government to invest in regional coordinators within Local Land Services and to facilitate greater control by all stakeholders would be a better investment.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: In terms of natural resources management, including the component of invasive species control, do you think that having a governance model for an authority or advisory group where there is a majority of views of one particular interest group is a best practice model, or do you think that it could conflict with best practices?

I'm referring specifically to the model that's proposed in the legislation.

BRYCE WILDE: I think that any model being designed by government needs to have integrity in its design, to be clear on what its purpose is and then to have its membership reflect that. If the model and the purpose of the model is to represent legitimate interests of a stakeholder, then that makes perfect sense to be a majority membership of those stakeholder interests. If the purpose of the model is to provide for improvement of conservation, then the membership of that model should reflect the expertise which is required to achieve the stated objective.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: In this case, having no conservation representatives on a group or a body that is called a Conservation Hunting Authority, would you see that as a bit problematic?

BRYCE WILDE: I would think that either the model itself, the purpose, or the membership would need to be revisited.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: In terms of the figures you have costed, the Forestry Corporation has \$1.79 per hectare, compared to that highest of \$8.64 of the LLS. But you're saying that National Parks, from your research, seems to be the body that has the better neighbour relations and is able to manage those landholder engagements. Do you think the National Parks figure is a good figure or do you think we should be investing more?

BRYCE WILDE: Our report calls for increasing investment across all public land managers and across invasive species to improve biosecurity outcomes. As such we're calling for a statewide application of funding resources based upon clear risks ensuring that money is allocated to the priority risks in a very robust manner. Also to those programs which have more return on investment and cost effectiveness.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Do you have any views on the idea of enshrining a right to hunt? Have you come across anything like this in your research? Accepting this one's a qualified right to hunt, but it still enshrines a right to hunt.

BRYCE WILDE: We didn't look into that in our research. As I said, I think recreational hunting is a valuable and a valid activity.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: It's not proposed in this legislation but we've had evidence put before us—and it was raised in the second reading contribution to this legislation—about bounties. Do you have a particular view on bounties—effectiveness or ineffectiveness of them?

BRYCE WILDE: Bounties are found to be not an effective instrument for achieving biosecurity. There's been a series of national reviews of the effectiveness of bounties and those reviews have found them to be largely

ineffective, open to different uses and not to have achieved results. The Victorian 2002-2003 evaluation of the fox bounty trial there found several problems with it and did not recommend it to be continued. There is good research on what is needed for successful biosecurity programs and they come about by working with willing landholders, education extension, having clear objectives, coordinating action and using most effective techniques, which generally include baiting and aerial controls. Then there is—again—supplementary roles for ground shooting to help mop up. So there are successful practices there but a bounty by itself is not considered to be good practice in biosecurity or pest animal management.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Following on from the bounties, others are pointing to the success of bounties and saying they do work. Are you aware of what evidence they're calling upon and why do you come to different conclusions?

BRYCE WILDE: No, I'm not aware of the evidence they're calling upon and I'd be happy to look into it.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Does support for this bill from this Government align with what you've inferred as being the general approach towards biosecurity over the past two years?

BRYCE WILDE: Sorry, can you rephrase that?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Does the Government's initial support for this legislation, in your mind, align with what you've inferred is its approach to biosecurity, or is it a bit of a shift in its views?

BRYCE WILDE: I don't think I'm in a position to be commenting on the Government's approach or position. I'm very happy to answer what our reviews, evaluations and evidence have shown.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I'll hand over to my colleague.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Given that the commission wasn't consulted in the development of the bill and the commission has a statutory role in providing independent, evidence-based advice on natural resource management, do you consider it a risk that legislative reform of this kind proceeds without formal input from independent environmental advisers?

BRYCE WILDE: We are an independent adviser and we're here to serve the government of the day, and that is at the request of the government of the day. So we're happy to serve when asked.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: If you were asked for an independent review, you would undertake that—if the Parliament or the Government requested it?

BRYCE WILDE: Yes, if the Government requested advice, we would provide it.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: What evidence is available on the long-term ecological impacts of conservation hunting?

BRYCE WILDE: That's a very good question because, if you're actually trying to unpack the long-term ecological outcomes, there is in New South Wales a dearth of knowledge on that. When we did the evaluation of supplementary pest control, we were not able to put in a before/after control research-based instrument to then determine the long-term ecological monitoring, and we were very clear on that as a limitation.

If you look outside of New South Wales and consider some other longer term pest animal programs which have been undertaken, such as the Bounceback program in South Australia where there has been ongoing monitoring, that Bounceback program does include an element with sporting shooters using supplementary ground shooting as a mop-up to be very focused on the specific species, which are hard to attract by the other controls, such as goats, to protect the wallabies in the rocky terrain. That program has had strong beneficial outcomes for key threatening species and has shown that supplementary ground control shooting does work as part of a wider program. That's probably the best example of long-term ecological monitoring, which has resulted in beneficial outcomes and shown how there are legitimate roles between non-government and government working together to deliver outcomes.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: But in New South Wales you have limited data at the moment. What steps would you recommend be taken before expanding access for conservation hunting?

BRYCE WILDE: What would be effective would be, firstly, to have a strong monitoring, evaluation and reporting program in place, which is focused on outcomes, and particularly being very clear on your target for the program, what species you are targeting and what is your goal, to then determine what is the response of that species. If that species is plant or animal, to then monitor what that response is and then to set that up in time and track that. That would be beneficial, to have baselines first-off and then a clear scientific-based approach to monitor over time. Given the difficulties of any program within changing climates, it needs to be long-term to

ensure that you've actually got attribution correct so that you can determine what has been the benefit of the activity on the outcome you're looking for.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: How would you describe the necessary conditions for conservation hunting to be ecologically sustainable?

BRYCE WILDE: If I refer back to our work on the supplementary pest control, we found that there was a series of key considerations there to find out what would mostly lead to successful elements of voluntary conservation hunting under a supervised program. Those included, one, skill and will of the individuals. In that program, the marksmanship, the hunting ability, the awareness, the health and safety concerns of the volunteer participants was very good or good, in 80 per cent to 90 per cent across all those components. That's really important to get people who are skilled and motivated, know their firearms, know how to hunt and also are fit enough to go into some terrain which is quite difficult. Conservation hunting is often about finding the remaining species, the hard to get species, and that requires a heightened level of physical fitness than the usual day-to-day recreational hunting for instance.

Then you need to match the activity to the terrain, the activity to the size of the area, to have the right technology matching to the target species. If you're targeting nocturnal species then you need to have the right equipment—night vision et cetera. Then to ensure it's coordinated with other programs so it follows a baiting program to mop-up the species which are alive and are bait aware. Then to ensure that it's at the right season so you are most effective in your operation. Those model factors all need to be thought through and in most cases, if you do that, then you will have a successful program. But that requires planning. It requires effort, it requires coordination, and requires a central planning body to ensure that all of those elements are brought together and then you'll have a high chance of success as a supplementary measure to existing cross-tenure landscape-based pest control programs.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Do you think there needs to be some regulatory safeguards put in place to ensure that what you're talking about is achieved?

BRYCE WILDE: Not necessarily. You can, but the supplementary pest control program—you can run those programs without legislation. It doesn't require legislation. It doesn't mean that you can't safeguard existing legislation and improve it by having some of these provisions put in place, but it's not necessary.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: So you're saying current compliance and enforcement resources would be sufficient at the moment?

BRYCE WILDE: Our invasive species review found that there needs to be enhanced compliance and enforcement capacity, effort, resourcing, training, leadership, follow-through, education—it is an area which requires a significant uplift.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Would you be able to provide on notice the detail on what those would be?

BRYCE WILDE: Those components are not specific about conservation hunting, recreational hunting. That's specific about the biosecurity duty and ensuring that all people who are responsible are fulfilling their duties and that's where we think that compliance and enforcement does need to increase and improve. But that is on the back of education, extension, ensuring that compliance and enforcement is risk-based, proportional. I could happily talk further about that—that's broader across invasive species management.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: You mentioned earlier about State forests not being involved in aerial culling. I wonder if you can touch more on the impacts of people not being involved in landscape-wide controls, be they private or public lands. What's the impact on the efficiency of those programs and the outcomes?

BRYCE WILDE: Feel free to jump in at any stage, Ben.

BEN RUSSELL: I will.

BRYCE WILDE: It's a bit like if you think of a doughnut. If there's a hole in the doughnut it's going to have a problem. Pest animals are very smart. They are aware of where there is pressure. If that pressure is coming from shooting, from baiting or whatever, they move and adjust. If you have that integrated program with neighbours joined up, whether they're private or public, you can exert that pressure consistently and then sustain it in that area consistently. When someone is not playing their role, it lets down the whole system. That is, unfortunately, too often the case across New South Wales. If you look at the successful districts that are able to get on top of their well-established pest animals, it's where there are usually highly motivated local people who are well coordinated and are running a program which is effective. Where there is not those provisions and there

are some neighbours who are participating and some who are not, it is very hard to get on top of established pest animals.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: On a more localised micro-scale, what about targeting trophy animals, like boars and bucks, over breeding sows?

BEN RUSSELL: If you're going to undertake successful pest animal management, you want to be removing all the animals. You don't want to be targeting particular animals over others. Obviously, if you remove those particular animals, they're no longer in the landscape. But generally, if you are going for an effective conservation-based approach, you're looking to remove as many animals out of the landscape as possible and reduce it down as far as possible. We've talked a lot already about prioritisation. That's because a lot of these species are widespread—they're all across New South Wales. We're not going to reduce their numbers all across New South Wales. We have to focus on areas where we can reduce them locally. You've just touched on if there is a particular area that's not undertaking control, that becomes the source, so you're not going to have that long-term suppression; instead, you're going to have animals continually moving back into the landscape.

Really, if you want to be successful, you have to target an area, reduce as much as possible, but at a very local scale, to protect particular assets knowing that, outside of that, you're always going to have pest animals more broadly across the landscape. Thirty years ago, 40 years ago, when we did pest management, that's what we did. We did it broad scale, everywhere, and no numbers went down anywhere. It's something that we've really improved on in recent years, and we are seeing those localised reductions, which do allow whether our native species or our agricultural industries to thrive. But it's only occurring at that local level. When you have those holes in the landscape, as you've just described, that becomes the source for those pest animals to reinvade and take up their impacts again.

The CHAIR: Thank you. In terms of recreational hunting, I don't think a claim has been made that recreational hunting is the only solution to fixing pest management in the State. Mr Wilde, you mentioned the importance of having a coordinated approach. Could you talk more broadly about how recreational hunting could play a role within pest management?

BRYCE WILDE: Certainly. First off, if we look at it from an overarching level, there needs to be very clear State strategies to then flow down to regional plans and the regional plans to be very clear on what are the risk pathways, control areas, areas which we want to prioritise for eradication or containment or asset protection and that have been spatially identified. If it's spatially identified at that level and supported by having regional coordinators who then can work with different landholders to say how we are going to have a coordinated program—if you've got that structure, prioritisation, clear strategy and target, that's when there's a potential for recreational hunters to work within that program. For instance, if there has already been an aerial baiting program or an aerial shooting program at the right season, in the right area, then to say what we're now looking at is that in this area we're going to do a mop-up operation and we want to use and access professional shooters and recreational shooters in a coordinated program. That will be able to have demonstratable benefits. But it needs to be part of a well-defined program of works supported by planning at the regional scale and then down to that local scale, so you're clear on what is needed and when.

The CHAIR: Just so I'm clear, a conservation hunting authority—like what is being proposed by the bill—could be that connection or interface between government and the organisations on the ground to make that enabling work happen, or that mop-up, if you like?

BRYCE WILDE: That's not what I was stating. I refer back to the Supplementary Pest Control program that was done by National Parks and Wildlife Service, in collaboration with Sporting Shooters' Association. The manager of that program was the National Parks, but they worked very collaboratively with the Sporting Shooters' Association. It wasn't the Sporting Shooters' Association who had authority or decision-making over that process. They were the willing partner who brought their expertise, their members—who were highly skilled and motivated—to assist in that process. That's the model that we've evaluated and have seen has worked, and that's a different model than what is being proposed under this bill. I have not seen under this bill—at the moment—those provisions which would enable some of that to occur, at this stage.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Mr Wilde, I've read your report and I'm listening to your evidence. Do you believe at any stage you should have engaged with recreation or conservation hunters in forming your views? Basically, they just don't exist in your reports. I'm not talking about these small, supplementary programs. I'm talking about the scale program, for example, that's been running, as you know, on State forests for over 20 years.

BRYCE WILDE: We have had engagements with recreational hunters and your different representative groups over time. We've had public submissions.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Can you please elucidate on that?

BRYCE WILDE: We have public submissions on each of our important review—call for public submissions, receive those. I can still recall—it's been a few years ago—attending AGMs of recreational hunting groups and speaking about the work that we were doing.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: But why wouldn't you actively engage to get data? You talk about the South Australian Bounceback program, which has been probably running for the best part of 35 or 40 years. It's very small, very targeted and can be used to mop up. You talk about the supplementary pest control programs that have been running in New South Wales by National Parks—also very small, very targeted, also very useful. But you don't engage in the large scale and you don't review the large-scale work that's been done by conservation hunters in New South Wales in State forests and I just wonder why, when the comparisons of those processes glaringly need review and reporting on.

BRYCE WILDE: Our knowledge of what happens on State forests shows that in the Forest Corp's monitoring program, which they do as part of their harvesting operations under Coastal IFOA requirements, show that of the top 10 species shown on their camera traps—which are put out there to target and monitor the health of threatened species—foxes and cats are the top 10 most seen animals. Forest Corp does not report or provide any public information on their outcomes or progress on their pest animal management programs or their weed management programs. Their investment in invasive species, as I said before, is the lowest of public land managers. Forest Corporation do many other good things, which I need to put on the record, but not when it comes to invasive species management.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Forest Corp's job is to grow trees, harvest and cut timber. We understand that. But you have a dedicated hunting unit within DPI that has run the program since O'Farrell destroyed the Game Council back in 2012, I think it was. Why wouldn't you engage with DPI Hunting to try to coordinate the gathering of statistics, the gathering of information and data, to look at what really is happening in State forests in large-scale conservation hunting? Why wouldn't you do that? Why do you focus on these tiny little boutique programs of mop up? Do you believe that you'll ever get to a stage where you'll be able to mop up the last pigs in New South Wales?

BEN RUSSELL: We did speak to the head of DPI Hunting as part of the review and, in terms of your last statement, as I've just said, no, we're not going to get to a point where we're mopping up the last pigs. We're not going to remove pigs from New South Wales. We have to target where we're undertaking our management, which is what we've been talking about.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: If you've spoken to DPI Hunting then why don't we see an evaluation from your organisation as to the effectiveness or not of that program? Why is the role of the people who kill most of the animals—and we've heard evidence from Mr Ned Makim that they kill 1.6 million pigs in New South Wales outside of State forests. Why aren't their activities also included in a study as part of the overall landscape management of that particular species, for example? Why is it ignored?

BEN RUSSELL: That information wasn't provided by DPI Hunting. If we were asked to undertake an evaluation of hunting in New South Wales, I'm assuming—and Bryce, correct me if I'm wrong—that the NRC would be happy and willing to undertake that.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: When DPI Hunting does economic modelling, for example, they don't just look at what happens in State forests, they look at what happens in the whole State from an economic point of view. Why wouldn't you do the same when it came to evaluating the contribution of conservation hunters in New South Wales? Again, I ask you, why is your last report totally silent about the people who kill most of the pigs in New South Wales, by far and above? Why is that not included?

BRYCE WILDE: As I said before, and as Ben said, we've engaged with DPI, we engage with all sectors and use the research available to put forward our advice to government and our latest invasive species review was firmly focused on government agencies and how the system could be improved within that. We did have conversations with New South Wales farmers, with other landholders, to inform it, and we welcome the opportunity to look more broadly, as you're suggesting.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Thank you. If this bill passes and a conservation hunting authority is created, would you be prepared to coordinate and work with them in a study of what actually is happening on public lands in New South Wales?

BRYCE WILDE: Absolutely. As I said earlier—and I accept your point about it being a small-scale program—in our evaluation of supplementary pest control, we worked very collaboratively with the New South

Wales Sporting Shooters Association, and were very impressed with their motivation, their attitude and their abilities. We would welcome such knowledge.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Your own evidence, as you said earlier, was there's a dearth of knowledge around conservation hunting so I'm glad to hear what you just said. Are you aware that in Victoria conservation hunters kill over 150,000 sambar deer every year in their forests?

BRYCE WILDE: I'm not aware of that figure but I do know the figures in relation to deer and pigs are very high and so we welcome those actions. But then the question is what is the population control which has been happening and what are the outcomes in addition to those numbers being accrued?

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Have you approached or have you discussed these control programs with Victoria Hunting?

BRYCE WILDE: I personally haven't. I'm not certain whether Ben has.

BEN RUSSELL: I have not recently, no. We had talked to them, but not as part of this review, no.

BRYCE WILDE: Years ago, we have had discussions with Victorian groups, but that was not recently.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: I hear in your evidence you're talking about having discussions, but with the small supplementary pest control programs you're obviously talking to them quite a lot and getting I suppose what sounds like systematic information and data. Why wouldn't you do the same on a regular basis with, say, the Victorians, who run a very large-scale program for the control of sambar deer—and fallow deer, I might say, down there—and are having all sorts of problems trying to stay on top of those numbers? Why wouldn't you do the same with the continual programs that have been running in State forests in New South Wales for 20 years? What's the difference? Why don't you systemically set up those communications and work together to try to come up with more effective control programs, but on a larger scale, because you know as well as I do—and what I'm leading up to saying is, as you said, Dr Russell—that you'll never get the last pig and you'll never get the last deer, will you?

BRYCE WILDE: Correct. They're all good suggestions. We are just limited, like everyone, by time, but that is a good suggestion.

The CHAIR: Thank you to our witnesses for making time to give evidence. The Committee secretariat will be in touch with you if there were any questions taken on notice or supplementary questions.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Ms SARAH DAVIES, AM, Chief Executive Officer, Alannah and Madeline Foundation, affirmed and examined

Mr STEPHEN BENDLE, Senior Policy Adviser, Alannah and Madeline Foundation, and Convenor of Australian Gun Safety Alliance, affirmed and examined

Ms MONIQUE DAM, Chief Executive Officer and Board Director, Lucy's Project, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for making time to give evidence to the inquiry. Would either of you like to start by making an opening statement?

SARAH DAVIES: Thank you, Chair, I'd very much like to. We, the Alannah and Madeline Foundation, speak here today in opposition to the bill, which our founding patron, Walter Mikac, AM, has called the most regressive firearms legislation proposed in Australian parliaments since the tragedy of Port Arthur. We have detailed our concerns in our submission. There are many audacious grabs for power in the bill, but I'll just touch on three key ones in our opening comments.

The first one is enshrining a new right to hunt in legislation, which is a calculated attempt by the authors of the bill to circumvent the National Firearms Agreement, the New South Wales Weapons Act and the New South Wales Firearms Act, which all state that firearms use and possession is a privilege, and that privilege is conditional upon public safety. Only the USA has a right to use a gun. We are also deeply concerned by the legal contestability this opens up by declaring a new right in any legislation and how this immediately creates legal complexity around the implementation of other legislative and regulatory powers.

Secondly, opening Crown land, forestry areas, local government land and other public lands to shooting inherently puts public safety at risk. These public lands are currently promoted as outdoor recreation sites, where people are encouraged and are free to enjoy the great outdoors without having to be concerned about hunters. The bill designates about 20 allotments of Crown land for hunting immediately with no ministerial oversight. We haven't been able to discover the precise locations, and we would be really keen to know whether anyone here knows where they are. The bill further creates mechanism for the firearm lobby to help establish new Crown lands for hunting. The bill directly contravenes the Crown Land Management Act 2016, which requires "environmental, social, cultural heritage and economic considerations to be taken into account in decision-making about Crown land".

It requires those responsible for managing these designated Crown lands to promote their use for hunting. I'm not quite sure how that sits with their current obligations to promote recreational use of the areas and facilitate public access. Thirdly, the bill unilaterally abolishes the Game and Pest Management Advisory Board without any rationale and installs a new government-funded Conservation Hunting Authority, giving it significant powers, which will effectively be a legislated marketing agency to promote hunting in New South Wales, paid for by taxpayers.

At the moment, the advisory board provides government with diverse expert advice from fields of pest management, wildlife, veterinary science, hunting, education et cetera. The new hunting authority, on the other hand, will be chaired and controlled by hunting organisations. Only one position on this authority would come from any sector other than hunting. The New South Wales taxpayers will be paying for it all: paying for the hunters to sit on the board to undertake research into the benefits of hunting and paying for a communications and marketing body for the gun lobby. As currently drafted, there is no public benefit in progressing with the bill. We can't see how any number of amendments could unwind the deliberate complexity in the bill and the multiple efforts to promote hunting. We understand that there have been amendments suggested that would remove the new ministerial position, the creation of a conservation hunting licence and permitting the use of firearms suppressors and other prohibited equipment, so we won't dwell on them here, but we are happy to answer questions if helpful.

As a leading national charity dedicated to protecting children and young people from violence and trauma, firearm safety is central to our origin story and our mission. We have had to champion this for 28 years. Introducing a right to hunt destroys the principle in the National Firearms Agreement, which states clearly that firearms possession and use is a privilege and that this privilege is conditional on the overriding need to ensure public safety. The political dealing that sees this bill still here today has effectively traded away public safety, totally ignoring the 97 per cent of the New South Wales population who are not firearms users and have not been consulted in any way on this matter. We respectfully urge that the bill be rejected in its entirety.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We have Ms Dam online now from Lucy's Project. Would you like to make an opening statement?

MONIQUE DAM: My name is Monique Dam and I'm the CEO of Lucy's Project, a charity that seeks to improve the safety of people and animals experiencing domestic and family violence. Lucy's Project made a submission to this inquiry, co-signed by the Aboriginal Women's Advisory Network, Domestic Violence NSW, No to Violence, People with Disability Australia, and Full Stop Australia. We are highly concerned about the potential increased access to weapons and the risks of severe and fatal violence to women, children and animals experiencing domestic and family violence. We are particularly concerned about the impacts for families living in outer metropolitan, rural, regional and remote areas. We are opposed to the proposed amendments, including to enshrine a right to hunt, which normalises hunting and the use of weapons. Victim-survivors of domestic and family violence have reported experiencing constant fear and feelings of powerlessness when the person using violence has access to a firearm.

Professor Sarah Wendt, who has researched Australian rural women's experiences of domestic violence for over a decade, highlights that the use of guns for hunting increases the tendency of perpetrators to use guns to intimidate victim-survivors. The higher rate of gun ownership in rural, regional and remote areas increases the risks already of women being killed and being subjected to serious injury. The significance of access to weapons as a high-risk factor is demonstrated by its inclusion in risk assessment frameworks across the country. The national risk assessment principles for family and domestic violence state that a perpetrator's access to, or use of, weapons is a high risk factor. Access to guns is also recognised as a risk factor in the New South Wales domestic violence safety assessment tool.

When assessing risk, support services must ask victim-survivors whether the person using violence has access to guns and whether the person has ever harmed any animal, including wild animals. People who use domestic and family violence will threaten, harm and kill animals as part of a pattern of coercive control to control and intimidate people. People living in outer metropolitan, rural, regional and remote areas often share their home environments with wild animals, and people who perpetrate coercive control may do so by inflicting cruelty and violence on wild animals, both native and introduced species. That concludes my speech.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We will now move to questions.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: You've noted concerns in your submission about the impact of, say, increased hunting access to households where family violence may already be present. Could you describe how these risks intersect?

MONIQUE DAM: Absolutely. Thank you for the question. What we know is that there is extensive research that demonstrates access to firearms, including guns, increases the risk of more severe violence and potentially fatal violence for victim-survivors of domestic and family violence. This research has been undertaken across the world also in Australia as well. As I mentioned, Professor Sarah Wendt has undertaken significant research into this issue. That's because access to guns, and use of guns, can be used as a tool of coercive control, and to intimidate women and children who are experiencing domestic and family violence. That's why so many of the risk assessment frameworks will note that access to weapons, including guns, is a high-risk factor. It's actually a really important indicator for caseworkers when they're assessing the level of risk to a particular family, to women and children, for them to take note of: If there is access to guns, then this particular woman or this particular child or multiple children are at greater risk of more significant and severe violence.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Based on that, do you think that the bill should include additional screening or exclusion provisions for firearm access in family violence situations?

MONIQUE DAM: That could be a measure that could potentially mitigate some of the risks. However, at the same time, we know that the perpetration of domestic and family violence is incredibly prevalent. The most recent research that has been released by the Australian Institute of Family Studies showed that 35 per cent of men in Australia have used domestic and family violence, and so it's incredibly prevalent across the Australian community, and any steps that we can take to reduce the risks of harm to women and children should be taken by governments—if that means reducing that access in the first place—because it's possible that any screening measure may not necessarily screen out all the people who may be perpetrating domestic and family violence.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I might now turn to Mr Bendle. From, say, a violence prevention perspective, do you feel that there is a risk that if this bill were to become legislation it could unintentionally normalise unsafe attitudes towards firearms?

STEPHEN BENDLE: We haven't made a submission to that point. However, we have said that legislating a new right to hunt creates a whole new paradigm by which legal firearm owners may have a view of being able to use their firearms because they have that right. We are concerned that the introduction of a right in legislation does create complexity with other legislation. For example, we've wondered what impact it has on the police, who have to conduct the fit and proper test to determine whether someone is entitled to a firearms licence

and, therefore, the ability to acquire a firearm. We wonder what impact the fact that a person will call upon their right to hunt, whether that creates any legal concerns, and therefore leans into the point that you have made.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: If the bill proceeds—and I know you have outlined some amendments or recommendations here, but I'd like you to put it on record—what amendments or clauses would most meaningfully reduce that risk that you're talking about?

STEPHEN BENDLE: At the very least, we have recommended that there be the removal of the clause that institutes a right to hunt. As we said in the opening statement, we don't see any public interest in the bill in its entirety. We don't see any benefit to the 8.1 million people in New South Wales that don't own, use or maybe even have ever seen a firearm. So, at the very least, there's that recommendation. But our recommendation is to withdraw the bill in its entirety.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Are you aware of any jurisdictions that model best practice on child-centred firearms policy?

STEPHEN BENDLE: The National Firearms Agreement, which every jurisdiction is a signatory to, has established that no person under the age of 18 should have a licence to use a firearm. And yet every jurisdiction, including New South Wales, circumvents that by allowing permits. Until recently, a jurisdiction enabled 10-year-olds to therefore legally use a firearm. We don't see the public benefit in that. It does create a pathway for a commercial industry to promote their recreation activity and their sport. That's the only rationale to enable 10-, 11- or 12-year-olds to legally use or handle a firearm.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Has anyone got any evidence to correlate an expansion of areas available to hunting to an increase in domestic violence?

MONIQUE DAM: I can speak in response to that. We wouldn't necessarily point to any evidence that indicates it would in itself increase domestic and family violence, but when we're talking about preventing and responding to domestic and family violence, it's critical that we reduce all of the factors that may increase the risk of more severe domestic and family violence being perpetrated against women and children. Extensive research has demonstrated that access to weapons, including firearms, in itself does increase the risk of more severe harm and fatal violence. In fact, the National Risk Assessment Principles for family and domestic violence cites research that found—that research is somewhat dated now—that women who are threatened or assaulted with a gun or other weapon are 20 times more likely than other women to be killed. That highlights how this is a high-risk factor.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Mr Bendle, in the past, you have come on record about some of the interactions between farmers, hunting and access to land, legal or otherwise. Could you touch on that again for us here, please?

STEPHEN BENDLE: Farmers that we have spoken to over the years have raised many concerns about trespass, damage to fences and gates, gates being left open, that sort of thing. In fact, the University of New England published some work only a couple of years ago—a survey of farmers. Some 41 percent of farmers recorded illegal shooting or hunting on their property, 49 per cent reported trespass and 40 per cent were reluctant to report crime due to a worry about revenge or retaliation. They are statistics from a survey of farmers which reinforces the conversations that we have had with primary producers and farmers in that area.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you for your attendance today. In regards to the Australian Gun Safety Alliance and the Alannah and Madeline Foundation, has the Premier met with you in relation to this bill?

SARAH DAVIES: No. Walter Mikac wrote to the Premier probably about three or four weeks ago now, when we became aware of the second reading. As of this morning, neither Walter nor I, who is the contact point for organising a meeting, have heard anything. But I do understand through some media coverage earlier this week that the Premier has offered to meet with Walter. We are still waiting for that to materialise.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: If you could speak directly to the Premier right now, what would you say to him about this bill?

SARAH DAVIES: We would really encourage him to withdraw the bill. I think the points that we made in the opening statement and in the submission are clear on why.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: You mentioned the National Firearms Agreement in your opening statement. Do you think that this legislation would be in breach of the National Firearms Agreement and, if so, how?

SARAH DAVIES: Yes, we do.

STEPHEN BENDLE: The National Firearms Agreement sets out in its preamble:

... firearms possession and use is a privilege that is conditional on the overriding need to ensure public safety ...

The New South Wales Weapons Act and the New South Wales Firearms Act have the same statement in the objects. In none of those documents or legislation is there any right to use a firearm. We think that this proposed bill breaches that.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Putting aside the actual bill as it has been presented—because I understand you don't support the bill itself—I wanted to get your thoughts on potential amendments and whether you would support certain amendments passing. If there was an amendment to ensure that there's no unlicensed shooting allowed to occur—so fixing the current P650 form process, as per the recommendation of the Coroner in the inquest into the deaths of John, Jack and Jennifer Edwards—do you think that would be a positive step to improving public safety around firearms in New South Wales? Would you like to see an amendment like that potentially attached and passed?

STEPHEN BENDLE: We have made previous submissions to the New South Wales police in response to the Edwards Coroner's report and recommendations, and we've supported, in fact, in other jurisdictions as well, trying to restrict unlicensed shooting. That would certainly be one that would assist in reducing that public risk.

SARAH DAVIES: I think really that amendment outside of the bill is a really sensible piece of safety legislation that should happen anyway.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Would you be supportive of amendments, for example, similar to some of the reforms recently passed in WA, restricting the number of firearms that individuals are allowed to possess, for example? Would that also help improve public safety?

STEPHEN BENDLE: We've been supportive of the Western Australian governments and their initiatives to improve public safety for Western Australians. One of the key things there that had the support of primary producers in Western Australia was the cap on firearms. It indicated that the cap of 10 firearms for primary producers, five firearms for recreational shooters and five for sporting shooters really covered the vast majority of licensed shooters anyway. But New South Wales police published information here in New South Wales, where there are people with over 300 registered firearms. So at the very least, police know where they are. I'm sure they check on them regularly. That's not to indicate that they're doing anything illegal. That is within the legislation. They're well within their rights to do that, but I'm not sure it meets the public interest test. One of the things that we've been very loud about in all jurisdictions, and with this bill, is that it's being put forward by a commercial interest looking to promote a particular recreational activity, totally ignoring the 97 per cent of the population that don't use firearms. I think that's what's missing in any consideration in this bill.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: There's been some discussion around the section of the bill regarding silencers and other prohibited weapons. There seems to be an agreement that that's going to be removed. Do you still have concerns about the impact this bill will have in relation to gun violence and public safety, even if those changes are made?

SARAH DAVIES: Yes.

STEPHEN BENDLE: Yes. We have never vilified legal firearm owners, but we don't think that there should be a proliferation of hunting, a proliferation of the shooting industries in the complete absence of consultation with the vast community that don't use firearms. I think if we had the public consultation on this, there would be overwhelming support for the amendments you were just talking about, but also restricting the proliferation of firearms in the community.

SARAH DAVIES: There are a couple of other elements. We've talked about the right to hunt and our concerns with that, but also the powers given to the hunting authority compared to the current terms and reference and scope and role of the advisory group. We don't know where these 20 blocks of land are in this bill. We've tried to find them. We went back to the 1800s, to Crown land statutes, we still couldn't identify where the land was. The bill describes the authority as having the power to tell the Minister where they would like designated Crown land to be. It then requires the managers of those Crown lands around the State to comply to promote hunting. I find that an extraordinary set of powers for one relatively small—in terms of population use—recreation activity having the power to be able to do that and all the time being publicly funded to do so.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: In regard to this area of land, we're talking about over 50,000 hectares of shared public space opening up to hunting. Can you tell us a little bit about your safety concerns when this hunting is moving well beyond a small amount of public land, and mostly private land, to actually huge amounts of shared public space and hunters being in the same place as bushwalkers, campers and other individuals?

STEPHEN BENDLE: Under the Crown Land Management Act, Crown land managers are required to promote the public use of land for the enjoyment of all in New South Wales. We can't imagine how that can be achieved through cohabiting with shooters when people there camping, et cetera, would have no real understanding of whether hunters were in the vicinity or whether and when that was to occur. And it's huge. I think there are other submissions to the Committee that indicate the amount spent on tourism in campgrounds, for example, in public areas, and the number of people who use those public areas for bushwalking every year—something over a million people—who report that they will go back regularly.

I think coexisting with people that might assume a right to hunt in those areas is not in the public interest. Now, hopefully, if this was ever to go ahead, there is no-one that would ever be injured. But it's not unreasonable to assume, with the amount of people using those public areas and to all of a sudden implement a situation where you have hunters using it as well—that is not what governments should be doing to ensure public safety, remembering that the test to use and possess a firearm is public safety. That test has been ignored with this bill.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: Can I just clarify for the crossbench that the time that was allocated was the entirety of the crossbench time.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: It seemed less time than was given to the Opposition.

The CHAIR: We initially thought that you were going to share the time with the Opposition.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Can we then have an extension of five minutes because I think there was a bit of confusion and we thought there was more time?

The CHAIR: Sure.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: In the past week we've seen a Shooters Party member elected in Tasmania and they have made public statements calling for a right to hunt enshrined in law. Is there a risk that, if Chris Minns supports this bill to pass, he's setting a precedent for relaxation of gun laws in other States and Territories as well?

STEPHEN BENDLE: The newly elected representative in Tasmania, on his first day of being elected, discussed the initiatives being talked about in the New South Wales Parliament, so it would not be surprising.

SARAH DAVIES: We've also seen public statements from the Northern Territory minister about considering Castle Law, so the answer to that question is yes.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: You have now mentioned Castle Law. You have put in your submission that the right to hunt would encourage and open the door to this kind of thing. Are you aware that just this week in the New South Wales Parliament another member of the Shooters Party was bringing a motion or entering a bill with the right to defend yourself and your property? Were you aware—you kind of predicted in your submission—that this would lead to this?

STEPHEN BENDLE: Yes, we're aware. I'm not sure it was a member of the Shooters Party.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: It was my colleague Mark Banasiak.

STEPHEN BENDLE: We are aware of that. It has been suggested in Queensland as well, and it was discussed by the Northern Territory Chief Minister. The Shooters Party have a policy of implementing a right to self-defence, and we assume that includes firearms. Once again, we don't think that it's an oversight in including in this bill the right to hunt. We think it's the first step.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I was just wondering about your views in relation to what the former Prime Minister John Howard has said in the public arena recently and if you could provide us with your sense, given your long involvement with the Port Arthur massacre, the entrance of good laws—arguably, the best laws across the planet in terms of gun safety, is what they've been acclaimed to be—and whether you share the former Prime Minister's view that this move is catastrophic from that vantage point of post-Port Arthur.

SARAH DAVIES: I think Mr Howard was very clear in his comments to the media about utter commitment to the National Firearms Agreement and resisting any kind of attempt from any angle, under any guise, to chip away at it. In fact, a couple of years ago, Walter and Mr Howard donated their initial exchange of letters that happened immediately after the Port Arthur tragedy to the National Museum of Australia to be part of the Defining Moments national collection. It was an extremely moving experience to have those letters delivered and a bit ironic that Walter still had the letter he wrote to John Howard, because he wrote it on aeroplane paper and faxed it, so he had the original copy. It was a bipartisan Federal event. We had the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister there and representatives across the whole political spectrum, again affirming the critical

value and nature of the National Firearms Agreement to Australia's culture and safety. I think every time that there is a risk or a threat to that, the same voices reiterate time and time again the absolute commitment to the National Firearms Agreement and the principles within it, and that the overriding consideration should always be public safety.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Were you slightly relieved when Chris Minns, the Premier of New South Wales, came out just a couple of days ago saying he really doesn't want to weaken gun laws and he doesn't want to have publicly funded gun lobby propaganda? Did that provide any sense of potential relief going forward?

STEPHEN BENDLE: We're very pleased that the Premier said that—we think that's positive—but we think this bill goes way beyond just firearms. Access to public land, introducing a right to hunt—the things that we've made in the submission here today go way beyond just the use of guns. We think that the Premier needs to go much further. As we have said, we don't see any public interest in the bill. I think that's the test, public interest and public safety, not a commercial self-interest.

The CHAIR: Mr Bendle, earlier in the hearing you mentioned a UNE study about farmers that had been surveyed. I just wanted to ask you a couple of questions about that. My colleague has also asked if you are able to provide, or take on notice to provide, the source of that study.

STEPHEN BENDLE: Yes, I can do that.

The CHAIR: That would be wonderful. The committee secretariat will be in touch in terms of the details for that. In terms of the survey, are you able to tell us how many farmers they looked at and was that in a particular geographical area?

STEPHEN BENDLE: My understanding is that the authors said that it was a representative sample of New South Wales farmers. Researchers, as we know, do a representative sample, not sample every farmer in New South Wales, but they were confident about the representation of the data.

The CHAIR: Who was the author of the survey.

STEPHEN BENDLE: The author is Dr Mulrooney from the University of New England.

The CHAIR: Was it a survey that was then validated or replicated? Are you aware, or is it something that—

STEPHEN BENDLE: No, I'm not aware of that. But the paper would probably provide that.

The CHAIR: I'm sure it would. As I said, the Committee secretariat will be in touch in terms of the details for that.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Mr Bendle, with respect, your passion for firearm control and regulation is obviously noted. However, this inquiry is focused on a conservation hunting bill and the control of invasive species on public land. Could you clarify what expertise or evidence you bring that directly relates to conservation hunting and feral animal management?

STEPHEN BENDLE: Is my background and experience relevant in this? Chair, is that—

The CHAIR: I think the question was in order. It was about the terms of reference of the inquiry.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: For context, do you support any form of hunting?

STEPHEN BENDLE: Sorry. What was your first question?

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: The first question is can you clarify what expertise or evidence do you bring that directly relates to conservation hunting and feral animal management? You, for example, just quoted a survey dealing with farmers. It's a survey; it's not a study. It obviously hasn't been peer reviewed et cetera, et cetera.

STEPHEN BENDLE: I'm not sure about that.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: What do you bring other than your advocacy, anti-gun advocacy, to this inquiry that relates to the bill?

STEPHEN BENDLE: Firstly, I'd seek to clarify that I've never been anti-gun. I've never made a public statement that vilifies any legal firearm owner or their ability to use a firearm. What I've said, and I've said again today, is that I think governments making laws in this country need to put the public safety as the test and the public interest, and not the commercial interest and the recreational interests of a few people.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: I've been listening to your evidence and—

STEPHEN BENDLE: Going back to—if I may continue to answer your question. It might surprise you, I've had a Victorian firearm licence for—I'm giving away my age—probably 45 years.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: I've had one longer, but anyway.

STEPHEN BENDLE: I'm not sure it's that sort of competition.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: But do you support any form of hunting?

STEPHEN BENDLE: I support the legal activities of licensed firearm owners and others.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Do you acknowledge, then, that hunting in New South Wales is legal?

STEPHEN BENDLE: Yes.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Do you accept—and I didn't hear it in your evidence earlier, and certainly not from Ms Davies as well—that there's been safe programs, well controlled, well run, for nearly 20 years on public land already in New South Wales? Do you acknowledge that?

STEPHEN BENDLE: Safe hunting?

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Yes. Conservation hunting on State forests in New South Wales has been run since February 2006. There's never been an incident. Are you aware of that?

STEPHEN BENDLE: Yes, I'm aware of that. Absolutely.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Then how can you give evidence—

STEPHEN BENDLE: But I'm not aware that there's never been an incident.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: There hasn't been anyone shot on any public land in New South Wales ever.

STEPHEN BENDLE: No injuries?

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: No injuries. So how can you in evidence—and to you also, Ms Davies—say that the addition of Crown lands managed under the same program would be an increase in risk?

SARAH DAVIES: I'm not sure that managed under the same program—if we look at the terms of the bill—is accurate, because it seems to us that the bill abolishes the game and pest management advisory body, which is the current way it's managed.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: The game and pest management advisory body has no control whatsoever over the program.

SARAH DAVIES: And introduces a hunting authority which gives significant powers to promote hunting, to provide research into hunting, and to advise the Minister on what lands should be open and available to hunting, and then requires the managers of those lands, whoever they may be, around the State, to comply.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Sorry, but you've misread and you misunderstand the whole bill.

The CHAIR: Order! The time for questions is now concluded. I want to again thank you for making time to give evidence to the inquiry today. Thank you, Ms Dam online. The Committee secretariat, as I mentioned, will get in touch with you with regards to any questions that were taken on notice and also any supplementary questions from the Committee. Thank you both again for making time to give submissions and give evidence today.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

Mr NATHAN MORAN, Chief Executive Officer, Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our next witness. Mr Moran, would you like to make an opening statement?

NATHAN MORAN: I'm here today representing the metropolitan local land council as the CEO, and also acknowledge I'm a Goorie. I hold native title rights as a Thungutti and a Biripi person.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you for giving up your time and being here today. The New South Wales Government has said that it is supporting the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party bill to introduce what's referred to as conservation hunting across all of these Crown land areas. We heard evidence earlier from the Natural Resources Commission, which is an independent body that provides advice to the New South Wales Government on certain matters. It just produced a big report about invasive species management control. The representatives from the NRC said that recreational hunting on State forest lands at the moment is the least effective way of controlling invasive species across the public forest estate. I'm just wondering if you have any views about that, what that means to you, the land council and land councils in other areas across New South Wales in terms of trying to control invasive species across public lands.

NATHAN MORAN: Just to test myself, firstly, as a Biripi and Thungutti, that is growing up and attending primary school in Port Macquarie, having family—mother—born in Kempsey, it's a large area of forestry. My grandfather was an Aboriginal timber cutter and part of Forestry. There are actual stories on the Hastings and Aboriginal relationships with Forestry, and in the Macleay valleys, and Hastings is about my family. I just acknowledge that State forests aren't a really large stakeholder in terms of overall assets or ownership across the State. They are in some areas, like I referenced in the Mid North Coast, but in the area, say, for metropolitan land council that covers from Cessnock to Bankstown, they are a very minor, if not insignificant, landowner.

When it comes to actually addressing ferals, I'd suggest that it should be done across the board through national parks, Crown lands and Aboriginal land. These are lands that are usually not occupied and/or developed. They are the areas where, from my experience of 50-odd years of life let alone more than 20 years of working in local land councils as a CEO and as a responsible landowner, they are a rife problem. Feral pests—animals—cause all sorts of problems, not just for environment, and I'm here today to try to ensure people are aware of the damage they pose to our culture and heritage, to our sites, to areas where we forage, to where we seek out our medicines and our bush tucker. A massive issue for us. But when it comes to Forestry and the activities they do, I confess to say I wouldn't know how effective they are. But I do have a big background in having areas, in my DNA and my native title rights, of a lot of State forest, but the activities that they perform, and acknowledging the different baits that they've used, I don't think have really been great. I don't think there's been a concerted, coordinated or collaborative effort to go through State forests and eradicate feral animals. I think it's been sporadic and uncoordinated and, as a result, ineffective.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: What we have learnt is that the Government was intending to provide \$7.9 million to a new organisation that is mostly dominated by members of the gun lobby in order to try to facilitate recreational hunting on public lands. What do you say to that in terms of the use of that public money?

NATHAN MORAN: I acknowledge, firstly, you've got to work with the existing people who are doing it or actively engaged in undertaking works or activities to eradicate pests. What I'm here in hope to do is collaborate and coordinate with Aboriginal land rights and native title holders about a synergy that's not really happened yet, but we hope to have happen, whereby Aboriginal people, in our responsibilities as landlords, our cultural rights for hunting and gathering, I believe should be and must be interlinked, working with the relevant bodies, be they gun bodies, Shooters—whoever is performing the activities.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Do you think the Government is doing enough under current programs with Aboriginal landholders, various ranger groups, non-local Aboriginal Land Councils but other Aboriginal groups to control invasive species across public lands?

NATHAN MORAN: I acknowledge the Metropolitan Land Council today. I don't receive any assistance through Local Land Services, nor any government level, quite frankly, to address pests. We are very thankful that the Commonwealth now allows us to operate a ranger program, that only occurred due to the change of Government policy, to allow us this year to start our first ever rangers program. The activities they'll do include this, but we're not given active support or resources to do it. Primarily, support for us is to preserve culture and heritage, ecological works, but it doesn't seem it translated to the reality by being the largest landowner privately in many local governments. I might need some help to deal with ferals.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you for your time today. To your knowledge, were any Aboriginal Land Councils, Aboriginal communities or Elders consulted on this bill, including areas in which the hunting is proposed to occur?

NATHAN MORAN: I'm not sure about specifics other than myself. I can speak to mine. I did have engagement with the Shooters, Fishers party. The local Land Councils, I can attest, through local associations and monthly get-togethers, are aware of it. I'm not sure about how they have individually engaged or participated. That has not occurred through our—dare we say—network or via the State Government on to the State Land Council to engage us. It has been through the actual activities of the locals themselves.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: When you say you've been engaged by the Shooters, you mean the Shooters party, in regards to when they were putting this bill together?

NATHAN MORAN: Yes. Can I just clarify, if people aren't aware, the Shooters, Fishers party have had a longstanding—in decades-long—relationship with Aboriginal land rights, intersecting on this area of addressing ferals but also supporting each other for our respective roles. I've had a relationship, and do have, for the entire 11 years now of my CEO-ship at Metro Land Council, and I attest back to the '90s and into the 2000s of my communities working with the Shooters, Fishers party.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Can you tell me a little bit more about the consultation? Did you give feedback on the bill? Was that feedback incorporated into a draft or anything like that?

NATHAN MORAN: Not by written submissions. I'm here today to give it in person. I've got a copy that I've handed to Robert today to attest for Metro's support for the proposed bills and the reasoning.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Can you ask him to table it?

NATHAN MORAN: It primarily links to our role in land rights and the overarching Commonwealth rights under native title. At the bottom of it, it's about protecting our culture and our environment, and acknowledge, as the largest landowner of a couple of local governments in the Sydney Metro area, we have a very big interest in trying to see this occur. For the areas of Hills, Hawkesbury and northern beaches, where we are the largest private owner, there are rife problems with feral animals occurring. Foxes are attacking animals that are living on our assets, cared for by the Sydney Veterinary Hospital. We have to deal with foxes breaking in over in the northern beaches, around Terrey Hills and Duffys Forest daily, attacking animals that we're trying to preserve and protect, working in partnership with the veterinary hospital over there. It's a daily problem for us.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Just to confirm, some of those areas of land, you believe, in this bill will include places like Duffys Forest.

NATHAN MORAN: Just as an example of a localised site where rangers are based and we're dealing with feral pest invasions nearly daily. We have a big problem with, say, foxes over in that area. If you go out—

The Hon. EMMA HURST: But you're not sure if this particular bill that we're talking about today incorporates those areas such as Duffys Forest.

NATHAN MORAN: No, it does. These are land council owned land that we want to have help with. They adjoin national parks. The majority of our land claims either adjoin national parks and/or other Crown sites. But I would attest, out in the Hawkesbury area, the Hills areas, Cessnock local government areas, there are much more concentrations and higher levels of feral pest invasion—and Singleton. We include boundaries that, yes, it's quite large and diverse, from the Putty Road areas to the Yengo.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I guess my question was just because a lot of us don't—it's quite difficult in the bill to see which areas are actually included in that Crown land area.

NATHAN MORAN: If we provide a Crown land map, I'd suggest majority of it's north of the harbour. Majority of our interest intersect—about 70 per cent of our land holdings are north of the harbour and extend to the Cessnock area—are the land claims that adjoin Crown, national parks lands primarily.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I was just curious about whether you've considered the provisions of this bill and hunting regimes such as these that would be presented from this bill over lands that have current native title claims over them, and whether you're aware whether there would be any kind of conflicts.

NATHAN MORAN: I can only speak to the specifics as a Thungutti native title holder and the claims that we're pursuing. It wouldn't pose any problem for our communities. In fact, it would only complement us in protecting our environment and our culture to see more work done to eradicate pests and feral species. As a native title holder in the north, we've had major problems with dogs. Reindeer are a recent problem that's occurred in the 90s and the Mid North Coast for the Biripi and Thungutti people. We've had pigs virtually from the colonial arrival

in Port Macquarie in 1821, but certainly today there's a much larger array of feral pests and animals that are causing major problems. We have major problems with wild dogs and feral dogs on the Mid North Coast that without this type of work being done—extending it into Crown holdings, not just limiting it to national parks or forests, is going to be a lot more effective than what's occurring now.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Just to be clear, you're saying recreational hunting.

NATHAN MORAN: Yes. It's needed. Land claims, native title claim land, Crown land, land that sits, like I said, unoccupied or not really being used is the majority of the areas these things are occupying, using or basing themselves in.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I'm asking questions purely out of ignorance; I'm not trying to be smart with any of this sort of stuff. How much land actually sits underneath the metro land council?

NATHAN MORAN: Currently today, in title, about 3,500 hectares.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: The technical owner of that all comes back to you as the board?

NATHAN MORAN: To the council led by a board. Members are the owners at the end of the day—in the structure of governance.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Are they managed as an entire estate or are there different lots that are managed individually?

NATHAN MORAN: Entire estate is managed by one council spread across 27 local governments. There are claims afoot that we'd attest to say that would be double that amount, if those claims were successful, but I'd say to you, we don't count them.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Again, sorry, this is my—does that 3,500 hectares come under this bill, do you believe, that would allow access to recreational hunters?

NATHAN MORAN: At least 90 per cent of it is in areas that adjoin national parks, Crown, in areas that doesn't have any use currently of—yes, for metro.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Under the current regime, how do you—this is a very broad question, but if you can narrow it down a bit—manage your pests and weeds on that 3,500 hectares?

NATHAN MORAN: Engaging consultants. Some work is done by ourselves, in terms of mitigating, like fencing, surveillance. But yes, unfortunately, it's a large expansion cost to us to go and engage with consultants to undertake whereby we may be served with notices or become aware of infestations of ferals.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Have you been engaged in landscape-wide control programs that involve other agencies as well?

NATHAN MORAN: Not on a holistic or collaborative scale, no. We do work with National Parks in a one on one, but it's not all-of-government or all-of-land stakeholders that I would see as a better way to do it.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: The legislation does refer to the reason for a right to hunt as a cultural reason. What does that mean to you? How do you define that? What is your understanding of what that means in the context of this legislation?

NATHAN MORAN: Under native title, there are provisions within the Native Title Act for people to access areas for hunting and gathering, but it's very similar to the New South Wales laws since 1983 whereby Aboriginal people have the right to access land. They've got to go through a process, of course, asking the local land council to negotiate that access through land rights. That land could be to hunt, to gather; it may be also to recreationally camp. But that is the provisions that allow us this access. Hunting and gathering has been going on, if you're not aware, for us as coastals—myself—for the mullet season runs from thereabouts in March every year through about to August. You'll see traditional hunting taking place through mullet seasons. In other areas up in the hinterland you'll see the mob going out hunting our roos or our red meat. Yes, these things occur and, under land rights, it's possible. And, thankfully, under the Commonwealth laws of native title, it too has those rights and provisions.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Do you understand the cultural reasons defined under this bill to extend purely to Aboriginal people or across the whole to non-Aboriginal people as well?

NATHAN MORAN: The references, I suppose for us in Aboriginal, is to try and ensure that our rights are there for hunting and gathering in any proposed areas, I believe, but more generally it should be for all. But it is a specific for us. We want to have the access to hunt, to access traditional foods and/or game.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Just to be clear, you understand the cultural reasons in the context of this bill to apply not just to Aboriginal people but to the cultural values of all people.

NATHAN MORAN: The latter I can't speak for, but I can only hope they too could enjoy or understand what we see country as providing. It is the essence of our culture.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Have you got examples on your 3,500 hectares of programs that have worked well as far as control of invasive species?

NATHAN MORAN: Working with the usual ones, unfortunately, as I mentioned, with our major stakeholders, National Parks, it's been baiting. I don't think it's really been effective, quite honestly, whether that's here in the Sydney Harbour or if it's out the back of Wollemi or Yengo national parks, in more remote areas. Baiting is not really effective.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Being in this metro area, I guess you're exposed to a lot more people, as opposed to regional areas. There's less people engaged with our boundaries and that sort of stuff in regional areas. Here you're closer to the bulk of the population.

NATHAN MORAN: In some aspects. Some are very remote. Like I said, if you go to Yengo, you won't find 100 people living within 100 kilometres. When you come here to where we're sitting, absolutely, we're responsible for the city of Sydney, the most densest part. But it's horses for courses. There's eradication work going on by National Parks along the harbour within one kilometre from here that's using baiting. That's one example. But they are using other techniques, like guns, out in the more rural areas of the Hawkesbury, Cessnock and other local governments.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Closer to those more populated areas, do you get the sense that your neighbouring population has a proper understanding of the impacts of invasive species on sensitive—or any—land?

NATHAN MORAN: Through the experience of growing up in Port Macquarie, those who live in town have no idea what happens in the greater Hastings. For the experience of operating here, in the concrete jungle known as the city of Sydney, I would suggest their residents and citizens are nowhere near as astutely aware of those out in the Hills, the Hawkesbury and the more rural and regional areas about this, but I hope they do become more aware of it. There is a huge problem with foxes just outside the door here, running amok through the gardens, destroying vital ecology, destroying our cultural sites—some other feral pests. People who mightn't have as much interaction with bush or country that's not developed mightn't understand what's in it.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Is there anything you'd like to see more of?

NATHAN MORAN: Greater education that feral pests are everywhere. They just differ by location. Lastly, I want to attest that in our culture, it's the essence that all living things have spirits and have a right to belong, but for preserving what we have in this unique environment, one of the most isolated parts of Earth, where we have a very unique ecology, it's been an absolute, tantamount, horrible, shocking reality. In my totems, for instance, I inherit the species of gula bears, koalas, the most threatened by very much what we're talking about: feral animals. I acknowledge that the Government today creates parks to try and protect my totem, but it's not working. On the other side, possums or whatever native animal, they are all gravely in danger of feral invasive species.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Coming back to that spiritual side of it as well, to manage invasives can be an unpleasant sort of experience. You're talking essentially killing and baiting animals. Do you and does your culture consider that worth that unpleasantness for the outcome?

NATHAN MORAN: No good if you don't give. In our culture, we always maintain a hierarchical balance that nothing was overdone. There was no growth of one area or one individual species at the detriment of another. There was balance. That balance has been lost for nearly 220-odd years. Reflecting on the roles my grandparents spoke about their grandparents perform, we hunted animals that weren't our totem for that very reason: to manage the environment.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Moran. In terms of the document that you provided Mr Borsak earlier, are you happy to table that and have it published?

NATHAN MORAN: And email as well. Absolutely.

The CHAIR: Thank you. In terms of the impacts of feral animals on the land, what are the impacts that you're seeing?

NATHAN MORAN: Probably the harder ones to deal with are pigs and the impact of their uprooting of grass and soil. That unleashes acid sulphates that affect our cultural sites predominantly for metro rock art. Sydney has the greatest concentration in New South Wales, if not the country, of rock art, engraved and painted. Metro are the one who have 4½ thousand cultural sites registered. Pigs and animals that disturb the soils and then cause run-off onto sites are a massive problem. Faeces and other urinations on our sites as well from feral animals, horses or dogs—they too have damage. The ultimate ones are probably those who disturb the soil that runs over the top of our sites and then, unfortunately, leads to the permanent removal and destruction of them.

The CHAIR: What actions do you take to manage those feral pests on the land? You mentioned the contractors.

NATHAN MORAN: That's where I talk about the mitigation: barrier fencing, protective, surveillances, mobilising people to go and surveil it, but building fencing, trying to do mitigating works nearly daily.

The CHAIR: Would you be open to working with Government and recreational hunters in a coordinated way to coordinate that feral pest management?

NATHAN MORAN: Yes. That's exactly why I'm here. I hope that we can collaborate and coordinate better, whereby hopefully our communities and Aboriginal communities—be they land councils or native title holders—can start gaining these skills and undertake the necessary training to get licences to be part of it.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Mr Moran, you mentioned earlier that you've got a program just commenced in relation to training young rangers. Would you like to elaborate on that?

NATHAN MORAN: Yes. Metropolitan land council, with the assistance of the Australian Government, in March this year launched our yennore—a word for "walking on country"—ranger team. That ranger team specifically is four females and three males going through ecological training, culture and heritage training. They are our first resources to assist us to do the work I describe about taking care of land, managing land, managing conservation, managing culture and heritage. It's been a critical step in our journey of near 40 years to now have recurring resources to assist us to do our jobs better. We certainly earmark they are the ones, we foresee, who'll be undertaking suitable training, potential licensing to go out and undertake hunting of ferals.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Is that only for your country? Is that only for the metropolitan lands?

NATHAN MORAN: It is just a local land council metro-wide ranger, But I acknowledge local land councils north at the Central Coast have been lucky enough to receive one. There's one operating at Dyarubbin in the western parts of Sydney, in and around Penrith. There's another one operating around Liverpool for south-western Sydney, and we're very pleased to say we've got the aquatic rangers out at La Pouse today in the east as our neighbours. So we're all getting on board slowly.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: So eventually you hope to have a statewide program running.

NATHAN MORAN: Hopefully have each local land council have rangers, and then each of those to have the support to undertake things like conjointly working on feral pest eradication, let alone just land conservation, culture and heritage work.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Where are you in terms of resourcing, and what do you think the other land councils' resource position is in relation to trying to push this thing forward? Given that it started, basically, as a Federal initiative, have you got anything from the State Government in relation to this?

NATHAN MORAN: That's a very good question. The facts are the facts, and that is, in terms of what we have to do our job. A local land council such as metro who meets 100 per cent compliance is eligible only for 164,000 thereabouts—800, call it—165,000 maximum in 2025 to manage all of its responsibilities under the land rights Act, let alone the responsibilities as a landlord for thousands and thousands of square metres of land and indeed thousands of hectares of land. That's what we're given. Under the rangers program itself, that's the most adequate funding we've received that we believe is equitable and fair. To date we're receiving, for those seven rangers, thereabouts on a million dollars a year to do the job. We're just hopeful that the State can understand that land rights could be a lot better if we had resources to do the roles and responsibilities we have.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Just to be clear: You're saying that you are getting some State money or you're not?

NATHAN MORAN: So \$165,000 per annum to meet all requirements under land rights is provided for meeting 100 per cent compliance, which we do today. I just acknowledge that's nowhere near adequate for the responsibilities of a landlord, let alone culture and heritage, nor to report as a public body.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Where does \$1 million come from?

NATHAN MORAN: That's from the Commonwealth. Just to fund seven rangers to be employed, to undertake ranger training, is a great counterbalance to the funding we receive to run the whole entity by the State.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Do you want to perhaps talk about the possibility of how your program might roll out if, for example, if they have a look at the legislation, there is a position on that authority when it's formed to appoint a lands council representative. How would you see that working?

NATHAN MORAN: For the existing system, where we have nine zones representing 123 land councils led by our State, I'd suggest that that process would be standard business for us. If the State was given those resources to go out and communicate to the 123 of us for our nine zones, I think it could be very effective.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: You mentioned earlier in your evidence that you'd see that coordinating and cooperating with the existing programs. Would you see that also, I suppose, meshing with the DPI hunting programs?

NATHAN MORAN: Yes, I think that's essential that they intersect, collaborate and coordinate together.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Are you a member of any political party?

NATHAN MORAN: No, never.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: In terms of species management—animals, totem species—are there any programs that are not invasive-species focused that you, as a land council, have your eyes on to try to attract more funding, more work for those rangers?

NATHAN MORAN: There are areas I must commend—environment trust areas protecting our species. Metro is proud to take care of an over 5,000-year-old living plant in its backyard. Yes, there are some good initiatives. Although they're small, they're very appreciated by us to try to do our job to maintain some of the most valuable ecology and heritage of this country.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for making time to give evidence to the inquiry. Our Committee secretariat will be in touch with you if there are any questions on notice or supplementary questions.

NATHAN MORAN: And I'll get that submission to you, so you've got a copy for records. Thanks to the whole Committee for the opportunity to speak.

(The witness withdrew.)

Mr LANCE MILLER, President, Sporting Shooters Association of Australia (NSW), affirmed and examined

Mr PETER SZAAK, Chief Executive Officer, Sporting Shooters Association of Australia (NSW), sworn and examined

Mr BRIAN BOYLE, affirmed and examined

Mr ANDREW MALLEN, Assistant Vice-President, Australian Hunters International, sworn and examined

BRIAN BOYLE: I am appearing as an independent witness but, to be completely open, I wish to draw the Committee's attention to my background and also my declaration of interest in my submission where I state that I currently work in the office of the Hon. Robert Borsak. Unlike Jack earlier today, I'm not hiding anything, including the fact that I was the CEO of the Game Council for 8½ years. It's something I'm proud of.

The CHAIR: Welcome, and thank you for making time to give evidence to the inquiry. Would any of you like to start by making an opening statement?

ANDREW MALLEN: Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I'm going to table some documents, which I have here with me, and some of these documents show a total lack of recognition of hunting by recreational shooters as having any real worth to community. The first one is penned by Mrs Joan Dawes, of Pestat Pty Ltd, in 2008, and it indicates an incursion and a biosecurity risk caused by Canada geese in 2007-2008. The records indicate the existence of the birds, but they lack any knowledge of the fate of these birds. Another document, *f*, mentions the four Canada geese, explains the sightings, and that they were shot by authorities. They weren't shot by authorities at all. It was in the early days of the Game Council, and the Game Council engaged me as a volunteer hunter under the scheme. I went down in the company of their game manager at the time. I shot those four biosecurity threats and removed them. In the ignorance of other government agencies, to bury hunting as a useful tool, it was never recorded. It's virtually impossible to find online any record of this. We spent all day yesterday digging up these couple of documents.

The Annual Report from the Game Council of New South Wales in 2007-2008 to then Minister Ian Macdonald describes the sighting of the four Canada geese, reports the movements, and it mentions the engagement of Game Council in New South Wales by other government agencies who were unable or unwilling to do anything about this biosecurity threat. It was taken care of in one day. It was in difficult surroundings. There were surfers in the surf less than 400 metres away. The lake was full of endangered waterfowl. We did it with no fuss, no bother. This is a volunteer hunter doing something for the ecology of New South Wales. That's basically my opening statement. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Mallen. If you want to provide the documents you're tabling to the committee secretariat.

ANDREW MALLEN: Certainly.

BRIAN BOYLE: I also thank you for the opportunity to appear here. In light of the unfounded and misleading comments this morning and in recent media and social media campaigns, I'd like to table a report, and it's quite a big one. Its title is *Clarifying misinformation about hunting, violence and social harm*. It's based on a systematic review by Dr Samara McPhedran of Griffith University, in Queensland. It draws on over 130 studies, and it finds no evidence linking recreational hunting to violence or antisocial behaviour. I'd also like to table a recent independent report titled *A systematic review and meta-analysis of the ecological effects of Australian deer*, by Dr Rosalie Chapple and a few others. It was finished in March 2025. She's from the Centre for Compassionate Conservation at the University of Technology in Sydney. This comprehensive review analysed the scientific evidence behind claims made in Australian deer management plans and policies.

It found that the majority of these documents were not based on sound science, often relying on untested assumptions, observational anecdotes or secondary sources, rather than empirical source data, which they should do. The authors concluded that most policy claims lacked empirical grounding and urged that future decisions be based on transparent scientific evidence. I'm not saying that deer shouldn't be hunted, deer shouldn't be controlled. I'm just saying that we need, in Australia and New South Wales, to base it on real evidence, real science, and that's where we need to move forward.

This morning we heard a desperate witness expose his true inner beliefs and descend into disparaging language, labelling conservation hunters as weekend warriors. This makes me really sad. I go right back to when I was nine, going out hunting with my father. It's part of my culture. It's just part of what I do. I do it with my friends, my family, my son-in-law, and I now do it with my grandchildren. While he and his organisation won't roll up their sleeves or sweat on the hill or get blood on their hands, they are more than happy to disparage the hundreds of thousands of law-abiding, responsible people—men and women like myself—who will go out on

their own time, pay for our own travel, gear, food, and shoot animals and—God forbid—enjoy it and the cultural activities associated with hunting of connecting on a level with the land and the wildlife in a way that only a hunter can do.

When a bushwalker goes through the country, they look at it. When a hunter like myself goes into a gully looking for a deer, we connect. We are part of the environment. This is a connection that goes all around the world. Hunting is part of the oldest continuous part of culture on this planet. I've had the privilege of actually working in the Territory with traditional people on traditional country and actually managing traditional rangers for two years up there. But I worked for 10 years in the Territory. I've been out on country. I've shot animals—geese—I've shot scrub bulls with them and cooked them up a couple of hours on the fire. There's nothing like it, that connection of country. There is no difference between what they do and what I do.

Basically, what I'm saying is, yes, hunting is the longest continuing cultural activity of humans for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians who still have a connection to this great land we live in. It is time for the lies, bigotry, prejudice and hate language we suffer to stop. Even when presented with examples of endangered species being rediscovered and declared hunting areas in New South Wales, Jack and his mate, the ISC, this morning just couldn't bring themselves to admit that hunting could have contributed—even the slightest bit—towards a positive outcome in the case of the long-footed potoroo. This was a great ideological insight indeed.

All I do is I urge that we heed the lessons of the past and face the realities of the present. The realities we face at the moment are massive in relation to pigs. Deer are going to continue to expand. It's nothing to do with hunting. It's a biological fact. They are right across the State now. They will eventually occupy every piece of available habitat. That's all there is to it. If you talk to real scientists on a quiet basis, they can't do it because they're paid to present a different argument. But when you talk to them, they will actually admit that they are going to eventually occupy every piece of habitat. They will one day go all the way from Melbourne to the top of Cape York, and there's not a damn thing we can do about it. All we can do is try and mitigate the impacts of them and involve as many people as we can in their control. I think we need to just move forward in this State and build management based on commonsense evidence and cooperation. Thanks for that.

LANCE MILLER: Thank you, Chair and Committee members, for the opportunity to address this inquiry. I appear today as New South Wales State president for and on behalf of the Sporting Shooters' Association of Australia, which represents over 65,000 licensed, law-abiding firearms owners across the State. Our members are part of a deeply committed and growing community, dedicated to safe, ethical and conservation hunting. SSAA NSW strongly supports the Game and Feral Animal Legislation Amendment (Conservation Hunting) Bill. This legislation is a long overdue recognition that properly regulated, evidence-based conservation hunting is not only compatible with biodiversity goals; it is actually essential for them.

Our Farmer Assist program, our contribution to National Parks pest control operations, and our statewide network of ranges and training programs prove that hunters are reliable, capable partners in managing invasive species. We endorse the bill's proposal to establish a dedicated conservation hunting authority, expand access to Crown lands, and formally recognise the cultural and personal significance of hunting to many Australians. We also strongly support the regulated use of sound moderators—common in other developed nations—for hearing protection, improved accuracy, and better outcomes for both wildlife and the local communities.

Our ranges serve as critical training and mentoring centres for responsible firearm use. With 139 facilities supported by 52 branches and 87 affiliated clubs across New South Wales, we are well positioned to support the safe and effective rollout of this new framework. Ground shooting through the National Parks Supplementary Pest Control Program has contributed to their programs controlling invasive species to these lands. However, expansion of invasive and pest species has proven that we need a unified approach across all land tenures. It is my belief that ground shooting is the most ethical pest management method available to manage pest species. This bill represents modern, practical conservation in action. We urge the Committee to support it. I am happy to take any questions on how SSAA can be a partner in this important initiative. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: I will now move to questions and start by throwing to the Opposition.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Who's the best pig hunter here?

LANCE MILLER: That's going to be a debate.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: We're seeing massive mobs of pigs now. It wouldn't be uncommon to see a mob of 50 pigs?

ANDREW MALLEN: Not uncommon at all.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: When you come across a mob of 50 pigs, how many of them do you clean up?

ANDREW MALLEN: It depends how I'm hunting.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Best case scenario.

ANDREW MALLEN: If I'm on foot, you're going to be quite lucky to get four or five, depending on the terrain. But I know of a good operator who works at night-time with thermal gear and, if there's 20 in the mob, he'll get 20.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: But your average run of the mill, which I presume is a fair way behind you—

ANDREW MALLEN: That's right, yes.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: —out of a mob of 50, might get two?

ANDREW MALLEN: You'll get a couple on foot. If you're on a quad bike, which is very common these days, it's much easier. If you've got a lever gun around your neck with a red dot on it and you've got a scope rifle in the scabbard and you chase that mob, and you know your property, if there's 15 or 20 in the mob, there's a very good chance you're going to get 10 or 12.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Are you continually going back to the same—

ANDREW MALLEN: I've been going to the same piece of dirt, and I've got a lot of experience in this part of the world. I've shot thousands and thousands of pigs off these properties. I've done it out of helicopters. I know the benefit of that. We set records that the LLS, LHPA, PP board were unable to break. As a result of that, they brought in the FAAST system to cut it off from people outside of the system. It's become a job for the boys. It's an internal thing now. If you're not FAAST accredited, you don't shoot out of a chopper. That's protecting their jobs. I understand that. I've been going back to the same property since 1968. I go every year. I was going every month, every six weeks, continually shooting pigs. We'd go there after a helicopter shoot and still shoot 120 pigs in a three-day weekend—after the helicopter shoot. So they don't go far.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: My question is, if you've been going there for that many years shooting and there's still that many pigs there, doesn't that talk to the lack of efficiency around that as a control method?

ANDREW MALLEN: No, it talks to the incredible breeding rate of pigs and the sheer fact that it's just about impossible to beat them.

BRIAN BOYLE: Mr Barrett, can I add that in all the time that you've been hunting out there, there's been the LHPA, the RLPB, the LLS—all of these iterations. Pigs are still there.

ANDREW MALLEN: And poisoning. It's a process that's used. They used to use a thing called SAP back in the early days when I was a kid. There's 1080 baiting and trapping. I use multi-tools, and the average hunter does, because we know that we can't just get them all shooting. I've bought thermal scopes, I've got monoculars, I've got quads, I've got buggies. I trap, I shoot—I shoot of a night-time, daytime. I had a history with the previous Game Council as a firearms training officer and a law enforcement officer. In the early days, when we were permitted to advocate for hunting, a lot of what I did was train hunters. I trained them to shoot every pig they see and shoot every deer they see. The only way to control numbers is to shoot the girls. You can shoot bucks all day long, but you're not going to affect the herd growth. I'm trying to take the focus of hunters away from trophy hunting, with the antlers on the wall and the trophy. I'm trying to convince people—and it's working—that the meat is the trophy. Go and hunt the younger animals. Hunt the female animals. They're better to eat. There's plenty of them. By doing that, you physically interrupt the breeding cycle. You reduce the number of child-bearing in the herd.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: This is with deer?

ANDREW MALLEN: This is with deer. And it's the same with goats. It's the same with pigs. To me, if you can knock a sow over that's carrying eight suckers, you've had a bit of impact. I start at the back of a mob and I shoot forward. If the biggest one is there and he's easy to hit, and you're in a bit of scrubby terrain, you're going to see him and see more of him. Whack him, for sure. He's the one that's going to be attacking your lambs. When the helicopter shoots first came to the area that I hunt in, it was amazing how much—we'd do it just before the lambing season and, in the chopper shoot, we'd shoot 700 in 10 hours. It would have a good impact. But then, for weeks afterwards, we'd continue to shoot pigs. The number of twins that were being born was very noticeable after we started this intensive attack.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: The State forests at the moment that are accessible to hunting, are they at capacity as far as hunters are concerned?

ANDREW MALLEN: As far as bookings?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Yes.

ANDREW MALLEN: The popular State forests that carry pretty good numbers of animals that would be getting out of the State forest and impacting on surrounding landowners, they're very hard to get a booking in. Good forests that produce regularly, they're generally booked out.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: But they've still got pigs and deer in them?

BRIAN BOYLE: I was involved with the Game Council and went out to the State forests before they were opened up to general hunting. They were under a very limited permitted system. Generally, it was the friends of the local forestry guys, because they wanted to have people they trusted back in those days. I went through the Central West. There used to be deer rubs everywhere, pig rubs and goat shit. You go out now into those forests around Oberon and there is nothing like the deer sign there used to be. There is nothing. There are nowhere near the animals. You do not see where mobs of red deer have been out in the Hampton State forest, where they used to be in the open on the regen, or where they replanted the forests.

There haven't been scientific studies for follow-ups, but the anecdotal evidence, which a lot of the other people that have been here beforehand have been basing their evidence upon, is the pressure has changed. It hasn't eliminated the animals, but it's lowered them to a lower level than they were in 2006, when these forests were opened. There's no doubt about that. I challenge you to go around now. Drive around Hampton, drive around some of those forests around Oberon there, and look for the deer rubs. There used to be deer rubs all along the roads in the old days. There isn't anymore. It's as simple as that.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Would you like to see all deer wiped out in New South Wales?

BRIAN BOYLE: I'd like to see them controlled. You're not going to wipe them out. That's all there is to it. You can keep using that language, but it's a false statement. Deer are in the Australian environment forever. That's all there is to it. We have to manage them. The best way to manage them is not through these failed programs that have been going on here. We're replicating what went on in New Zealand from 1930 through to 1975, when the animals Act changed. I moved across to Australia in 1990. I saw the change from the wildlife Act to the noxious animals Act to the wild animal control Act, the WAC Act. During all of these things, government programs had very little impact whatsoever. When they actually did studies—they used to have hunters; they called them deer cullers in those days, out in the hills—they used to publish these annual reports, and they were very pleased with shooting X thousands of deer.

When a scientist actually went out and studied how many the recreational hunters, or private shooters, over there were doing, it was in the folds of 10 times the amount that the Government was doing. They went, "Oh, shit. We actually need to start engaging with these hunters." The great thing that's happening now in New Zealand, you've got engagements with things like the Sika Foundation. I used to manage an area called Lake Sumner Forest Park, and it had a recreational hunting area in it. Hunters actually got paid for the choppers to go out, and they shot 1,500 red deer in a weekend. You've got the Wapiti Foundation, which manages wapiti in the Fiordland National Park. It culls out the red deer and keeps the numbers down, to a level that's more compatible with the environment than they've ever been managed before.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Mr Boyle, I presume as someone quite familiar with the draft legislation as it is—

BRIAN BOYLE: Yes, very familiar.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: —when it talks of these Crown lands, does it include rail corridors?

BRIAN BOYLE: Not that I know of.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Is there somewhere that I can point to to give me confidence that this can't include rail corridors?

BRIAN BOYLE: My understanding of what the Crown Lands department did, they went through a risk assessment, and they also decided on a certain size of land. They picked up those areas that could give them comfort for this conservation hunting to start occurring on it. This is the first step on it. One of the things that Andy could tell you, when he was a game manager down in Wollongong, to give you some comfort, it took about two years to negotiate the Wongawilli mine. Have you ever been onto a mine site and seen how WHS-averse they are? They even had mirrors on the hallways in case people bumped into each other. We managed to get a shooting operation up on that place. They culled quite a few there, didn't they?

ANDREW MALLEN: We shot we shot 1,200, 1,500 deer.

BRIAN BOYLE: You can do it, but it's all about risk management.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Who killed off that program?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I really do need some information on this bill, if that's okay. Could you tell me what it means for the obligation of land managers to consider that list of things in there when it comes to changing land?

BRIAN BOYLE: What it is is just putting it in front of them to consider hunting. I come from a background of working in Parks. I've worked for Parks for 20 years before I started in the Game Council. Then I moved across and I worked in the Northern Territory in fisheries. One of the things that I learned about in fisheries—and it's all about resource management—is they have a thing in fisheries called a resource allocation policy where you start allocating the resources across the various sectors that are interested in that fishery. I thought, "Why can't we apply that to public lands?" Because, at the moment, national parks are actually bushwalking reserves. The National Parks Association was set up by a group of bushwalkers, and there's a heavy bias towards their type of people. Now, public lands should be public lands, so all I want is the lands—outside national parks; we've left that out of the bill—for them to consider conservation hunting as a part of an overall planned, structured pest control plan.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: And because it is then legislated, would that then give hunting a preference over other activities?

BRIAN BOYLE: You need to read the bill closer, Scott.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: That's what we're here for: to ask questions.

BRIAN BOYLE: That's what it actually—you need to realise that, if they don't do that, it doesn't negate anything that they've done, so there is a get-out clause for the Government. If it fails to do that, there is actually a clause in there that says that it does not negate any of their plans.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Can I hear from someone else, then? Mr Szaak, which organisation are you with again, sorry?

PETER SZAAK: The Sporting Shooters Association of Australia, New South Wales branch.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Can you guys confidently assure me that when your hunters are going out, they're not targeting bucks and boars over breeding does and sows?

PETER SZAAK: Sorry, can you say that question again?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Because we just heard before that Mr Mallen targets the breeding stock. Do you think that is replicated across the bulk of your members—that they're not targeting bucks and big boars?

PETER SZAAK: For trophies, you mean?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Yes.

PETER SZAAK: Yes, absolutely. The mandate within our organisation is the hunt. Like Mr Mallen, we talk about harvesting. Harvesting is a big deal with it. I think it's the crux of it all, to be honest, other than the obvious. Our training programs that we advocate, is a program that's ASQA accredited. It's a "humanely destroy animal" course. It's a national course that is available—not to mention the rigour that's placed on a lawful firearms owner to indeed get a firearms licence in the first instance. We're talking about this group of people. Something else I'd ask that you think about when we akin a volunteer group of people—no differently to our SES and certainly our bushfire brigade and our other VRA associations—that is a large asset of people out there that, I believe, could come within this forum and assist the State. It is obviously a problem; it's a pandemic. Whilst it's being addressed, it's not at the level that we'd hope. That's not a one-size-fits-all. We accept that. Notwithstanding that, this is another asset that I believe should be drawn upon.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Something did slip my mind before, Mr Boyle, and I did lose it. The scenario in that—this is going to open up more Crown lands to be able to get to hunting and that sort of stuff. How would someone who's not a hunter that also wants to access that Crown land be made aware that there's a high probability that there will be hunters in that area if they're bushwalking, camping or bike riding?

BRIAN BOYLE: When you drive through the country at the moment, Mr Barrett, when you're out in areas that Nationals are interested in, how do you know that hunter is on a farmer's land?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: On a farmer's land?

BRIAN BOYLE: Yes.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I'm not going onto that farmer's land camping.

BRIAN BOYLE: What I'm saying is, it doesn't make anything safer by the fact that you have a knowledge of someone hunting. The safety comes through in the Firearms Act. The Firearms Act states that you only point your firearm in a direction where it's safe. You only pull the trigger when a target has been positively identified. The whole risk assessment for hunting was undertaken very thoroughly three times, I'll tell you, when we opened up State forests. Three times we went through it and guess what? From 2006 to 2000 and to now, it has worked very fine. People talk about the risk and safety, but one of the things I used to say to people who have horses, I said, "If you really love your kid and want them to be safe, sell your horse and buy them a gun because it is a lot safer than horseriding."

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I think you've clearly misinterpreted the motive of my question. How would I find out if someone was in there hunting that weekend before I plan my trip to go camping in Crown lands?

ANDREW MALLEN: Signage.

LANCE MILLER: When we go to do the State forest, we have to log on to a website and that block is booked for that shooter, so it is on the website that there is a shooter there, or a couple of shooters, in that environment. From that point of view, you can resource the information if you wish. It's not easy to get at, though, let's be honest. Who's going to go looking? Back to Mr Boyle's statement, though, you must identify your target. You must identify the fall of shot—every single shooter starts there. So even if you miss your target or if a bullet goes through a target, where's it going, before you take a shot? The risk is in the quality of the shooter and, in this case, they're very highly trained.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I'm curious, if there was a novel development that wiped out all pigs and deer very fast across the landscape, would you be supportive of that?

LANCE MILLER: If I may, I think feral management is not only about our members or shooters in general. Feral management is a major problem that we face in Australia. Everyone, I believe, would support it. It's not just ground shooting. I can give you a tier of how effective things are. Ethically I don't like it, but poisoning is effective. Rounding up stock is effective. Helicopter shooting is effective. What happens, though, after all of those events, there is still a breeding herd that is smarter and more cunning: They can't be taken by helicopter, they won't fall for the baits and they won't get near the property fences. They have to be taken by ground hunters. I don't say this is the total solution; I say this is only part of a solution. We would support anything that supported, particularly, our farming communities, who are struggling with feral animals at this point in time. That would be our objective.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: If there was a novel way that wiped out—you'd fully support that; no more ferals out there for you to go and hunt? That is something that you would say, "Yep"—

BRIAN BOYLE: And I say good luck to you, Sue, because look at myxo, look at—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: No, I'm just asking if you would support that.

BRIAN BOYLE: I'm just saying, to understand our future, we need to look at our past history, otherwise we risk being stuck in the present. It's a great philosophy. Let's be honest: You've had myxo, you've had calici. I actually helped release the calicivirus down in Victoria. Nature has a way of finding its way around things. Good luck with your novel stuff.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Earlier you gave evidence, Mr Boyle, that walkers, when they walk through the forest or the environment, are not as connected as you are when you have a gun and you're hunting something. Can you explain that a bit better?

BRIAN BOYLE: Yes, it's actually being—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: How is your way of connecting more connected than somebody else exercising an ordinary function of being a human?

BRIAN BOYLE: It's based on my 20 years' experience as being a park ranger in tracks in New Zealand, Tasmania, Victoria.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: What part is it, though?

BRIAN BOYLE: Let me finish. Walkers go from point A to point B and they take a few photos, and occasionally they have the weather come in on them. They get to point B and then they cook up their dinner. I've done that with my kids. It's a different experience altogether. When you're a hunter, before you go out hunting you start thinking about which direction the wind is coming from, what direction the gullies are going to face and where the animals are going to be, what time of the year it is and where they're actually feeding. Then, when

you're walking through those gullies, you're connected to how dry the bush is and how much noise you're actually making.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Can I just interrupt for a second? You're a bit like scientists and ecologists, that kind of connection. You're giving me very similar examples.

BRIAN BOYLE: That's right and, having worked with Indigenous people and been out hunting and seen the joy that they have when you deck an animal, and chop it up and cook it on a fire—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: When you what, sorry?

BRIAN BOYLE: When you shoot an animal.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Deck an animal?

BRIAN BOYLE: Yes, that's right. That's what they say.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: So the cut and thrust is the more connection than, say—

BRIAN BOYLE: No, it's not.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I'm misunderstanding.

BRIAN BOYLE: Yes, you are misunderstanding. It's the whole experience, you see? When you're going out hunting—people don't understand—it's not just about the hunt and the shot. It's about the whole weekend that you go out, building up for it.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: How is that superior than, say, somebody riding their horse through the environment?

BRIAN BOYLE: I just explained that to you. When people walk through the environment, they look at it. When we go through it, we know where the wind is coming from because we have to worry about our scent.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: You're making a lot of assumptions about walkers and the way they walk, that they're not doing these things too.

BRIAN BOYLE: It's based upon my 20 years of experience as a ranger and dealing with them, Ms Higginson.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: All the walkers you've dealt with are not connected to the environment?

BRIAN BOYLE: Only the few hundred thousand I've probably dealt with, and campers.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: They're not connected to the environment around them?

BRIAN BOYLE: I'm saying they're not connected the same way we are, definitely not.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: What role did you play, Mr Boyle, in drafting the bill before us?

BRIAN BOYLE: I had a lot to do with it.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I'm asking what role, not how much.

BRIAN BOYLE: I worked with Mr Borsak under his instruction and with Parliamentary Counsel.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Whilst you were doing that, did you also engage with the office of the Minister for Agriculture and the office of the Minister for the Environment and their staff?

BRIAN BOYLE: I accompanied Robert at whatever meetings he needed to do with the various people in government, yes.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Could you tell me when those meetings were, what they were and how many of them there were, please?

BRIAN BOYLE: No, not off the top of my head.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Would you be able to take that on notice and provide it to the committee?

BRIAN BOYLE: I could try and take it on notice.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: You'd have diary entries and all of that?

BRIAN BOYLE: Yes, I can look at emails.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you. When you were in those meetings, was there any concern from any of those Ministers' offices about the things that you had in the bill?

BRIAN BOYLE: Concern? I really think that's inappropriate to address me, asking about concerns about Ministers in government. You should be asking—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: But you thought it was appropriate to come to this inquiry and give evidence, Mr Boyle. I'm just asking you questions about your—

BRIAN BOYLE: Didn't you listen to my opening statement?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Yes, you told us that you've had a massive—so I'm just asking you if you—

BRIAN BOYLE: I didn't say in my opening statement about the "massive" role, possibly—your words, I think. I'm sorry about this but I came here as a proud hunter, as a grandfather and a father, and as a hunter, mainly, to try and express my passion for hunting and the fact that I have witnessed, for 40 years, failed control programs. Continuing with a failed paradigm is not a great way to go.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: We've heard that evidence and we're very grateful for it. Thank you. You've also provided evidence that you worked for Mr Borsak, you've drafted the bill, you've met with Ministers, you've been to offices, you've instructed Parliamentary Counsel. These are all very relevant matters to the credibility of your evidence, the weight of it and the relevance. If you wouldn't mind, could you please—

BRIAN BOYLE: The best thing you could do would be to read the bill that's been tabled, go through it and try and understand it.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I've read the bill several times. Could you please tell me how the lands that were provided from department of Crown Lands, in the schedule of the bill, how are those lands selected? Did you have a role in that?

BRIAN BOYLE: No, I didn't.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Did Mr Borsak have a role in that?

BRIAN BOYLE: No, he didn't.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Was there some kind of selection criteria that was provided?

BRIAN BOYLE: You will need to ask the Crown Lands Minister for that, sorry.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Did you meet with the Crown Lands Minister with Mr Borsak?

BRIAN BOYLE: We've had a lot of meetings, but I don't think we've actually gone through—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Would you mind taking that on notice and checking for me?

BRIAN BOYLE: Yes, I'll take that on notice.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: I'm going to start the clock again for crossbench time, because this has happened a couple of times, if you're wanting to share the time with Ms Hurst.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you all for your time today. I just want to go back to some of the discussion over the questions from the Hon. Scott Barrett, particularly around safety. It sounds like, from the description that you're giving, the need for safety sits in the shooter's hands, so it relies entirely on the shooter making sure that they're following the way that they should be shooting. Can you understand the community concern that safety relies on someone that they haven't met, that at the moment, there are permits that allow, for example, 12-year-olds to be shooting guns, that somebody that may be taking very young children to one of these areas may or may not know that there's somebody in there shooting and that the safety for themselves and these very young children rests entirely in the shooter's hand? Can you understand that there is that concern from community?

BRIAN BOYLE: Certainly. I hear you there, Ms Hurst. The greatest thing we can do, instead of adding to the fear, is actually educate people about WHS and the hierarchy of controls, and also educate them about how the systems actually work. If someone is out hunting, they're under the control of someone who's responsible, licensed and all of those things. The other thing is, in every daily life, no matter where you go, when you drive down the road, you don't actually have control of the person driving towards you as you actually drive towards that.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: But there are no 12-year-olds driving cars on the roads.

BRIAN BOYLE: You don't know that.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Well, if they were, then they would be arrested and they would be removed from the vehicle.

LANCE MILLER: Twelve-year-olds are always, always under adult supervision, one on one.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I do understand that, but they do have the firearm in their hands. They have this firearm with the ability to use it.

BRIAN BOYLE: But direct supervision is like that—being that close.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Yes, I understand that there's an adult there. But you don't have a 12- or 13-year-old necessarily driving a car behind the wheel, even if there's an adult next to them. I'm just saying, do you understand that the community are going to be—I would be terrified to go into a State forest. I probably wouldn't be terrified if you were there, Mr Boyle, because I've met you. But I would be terrified if a 12- or 13-year-old had a gun and I had a young child with me. Can you understand that?

BRIAN BOYLE: If my grandson, who is not 12 or 13 yet, but if they were under the age of 15—

The Hon. EMMA HURST: If they had the gun, I would be terrified.

BRIAN BOYLE: But I'd be directly controlling them, within arm's length. They're not out on their own.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: But they're holding a firearm in their hands and using that gun.

BRIAN BOYLE: As a public figure, you have you have a role to educate people instead of instilling fear in them. So let's not instil fear about this thing. The people who are opposed to this, they couldn't find anything wrong with the Act so that they've had to go through all of this hierarchy of things to try and dismantle it, and the last thing now is fear. This thing is well-controlled.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: But don't you see that maybe there is a level of understandability around that fear? We've seen two hunting accidents recently. A son accidentally shot his father.

ANDREW MALLEN: On private land.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: A young boy, a 9-year-old, was shot in the leg. These are real incidences.

BRIAN BOYLE: Not on State forest, though.

ANDREW MALLEN: You've got 20 years of practical, real, living experience where it has been incident free. No-one legally engaged in hunting on public land since 2006—

The Hon. EMMA HURST: That's because there's not much public land currently available. It's a very small amount. The two instances that I'm talking about are on private land.

ANDREW MALLEN: There are two million hectares.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: But I assume if we make hunting on public land much broader, over 50,000 hectares more—

ANDREW MALLEN: That's only 25 per cent more than currently available. It's not even that. It's about two million hectares.

BRIAN BOYLE: It's less than 2½ per cent.

ANDREW MALLEN: Four hundred State forests have been continuously hunted on.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: If it's such a small increase, then why are we doing it at all?

BRIAN BOYLE: Because we want to add to the—

ANDREW MALLEN: Because we want to help with the spread and expansion of invasive species. We want to also look after and give some cultural recognition to hunting in this State. It's a real, honourable pastime. It's not something horrible that goes on behind closed doors. It goes back as far back as you can think.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: It's definitely not behind closed doors because it's all outside.

ANDREW MALLEN: It's something that we should all be proud of. It's made us who we are today. Whether you're engaged in it yourself or not, it's in your DNA.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I'm not sure about that.

ANDREW MALLEN: There is hunting in your DNA.

BRIAN BOYLE: That's why you've got canine teeth, you know.

LANCE MILLER: It doesn't matter what we do, there is risk. Getting out of bed in the morning, there's risk. Accepting the risk and mitigating risk is the job of anybody who is doing anything, including driving a motor car. From our point of view, the training and the support services—training under instruction of qualified range officers and then, obviously, with an adult, if you're talking about the under-18 children—all of this is managed extremely well. I would submit that the law-abiding firearms owner is probably the most law-abiding person in New South Wales because we have so much compliance with police. We have a fit and proper person ruling in whether or not we can get a licence. A fit and proper person is a driving offence, for example—

The Hon. EMMA HURST: We also heard this morning that one of the organisations got legal advice that the right to hunt could actually challenge the fit and proper person test.

LANCE MILLER: I don't believe that. The police in New South Wales control the firearms laws and that goes back to the National Firearms Agreement. I sit on the firearms consultative council. The police assistant commissioner manages or chairs that and, in that environment, they're going through the firearms regulations at the moment. I think you'd find that everyone is supportive of firearms regulation in New South Wales—us included, absolutely. But the firearms are not—

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I'm sorry, I don't mean to be rude, to cut you off, I've just got only a few seconds left and I do want to ask one more question of Mr Boyle. We found out this morning that the funding allocation in the budget was \$7.9 million. Was that the first moment that you'd heard about the money that was actually allocated, given that it hadn't been given a figure? Did you find out with us the exact amount?

BRIAN BOYLE: Yes, that's the first time I heard of it.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: You had no prior knowledge as to how much money was being allocated?

BRIAN BOYLE: No. It's very hard to actually delve down into the budget because there's lots of generalisations with it. But I applaud it. Let's hope there's more of it.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you. Do you want to finish your answer, because I cut you off?

LANCE MILLER: I'll talk to the funding, if you don't mind. If you go to a community in rural Australia, \$7.9 million is probably what that community is missing at the moment—just that community—in damage to property and to cropping and to animal husbandry for the cattle and such that they're trying to breed for sale. I don't believe that's a significant expense, especially compared to the value that the standard shooter, our members, for example—they're actually a tourist in that environment. They go there and they spend money in that space. They're contributing to that economy at the same time as they're helping to protect the farms that are there. It's quite a positive outcome.

The CHAIR: I might start with a couple of questions before I hand over to my colleague. To the Sporting Shooters Association of Australia and Australian Hunters International, can you give us an idea of how many people are in the organisations that you represent in New South Wales?

LANCE MILLER: I'll go with the SSAA. Nationally, we're over 220,000, so we represent about 25 per cent of firearms licences in Australia. In New South Wales, we've just cracked 65,000 members.

ANDREW MALLEN: That's Goliath; this is the David: AHI has approximately 500.

The CHAIR: In New South Wales?

ANDREW MALLEN: In New South Wales. We have some interstate members, but predominantly New South Wales.

PETER SZAAK: Just to be clear, some of those members are also SSAA members.

The CHAIR: I imagine that's the case. Thank you for clarifying. We heard briefly from you, Mr Mallen, at the start, but I am keen to hear from you all about whether you or your members take part in feral pest management currently?

LANCE MILLER: The supplementary pest control program that the National Parks run in conjunction with SSAA—we are volunteers for that. I was a foundation member of that. Four of us went and we were tested—we had the past test, but we were tested further—and we also had government departments watching that, auditing effectively what we were doing at the first exercise. So yes, we are engaged at that level and in, obviously, private hunting.

ANDREW MALLEN: The question is AHI members' engagement in structured pest animal control.

The CHAIR: Yes, whether it's structured or otherwise.

ANDREW MALLEN: Recreational hunting?

The CHAIR: Do you or your members take part in feral—

ANDREW MALLEN: Yes, extensively. It's probably the majority of what they do. Plenty of the members go away regularly to a couple of properties that the club has access to and they're making big inroads in reducing the number of deer on those particular properties. Pigs are a staple; there are so many of them all around the State. Also, I've been connected with the SPC program through SSAA for a number of years. I'm not an active member, but I'm on the waiting list to go. There was talk of it being expanded statewide by National Parks and Wildlife. I'll be keen to take part in that when it gets to that stage and they give me a call.

Also, when I was employed by Game Council, operating as a game manager, I personally looked after six very productive structured pest animal control programs, all supplied free of charge by volunteer hunters. They actually paid for the right to have a licence to do it. They were successful. It's a pity that the Game Council at the time when it was folded up—DPI and the Government chose to not continue those programs. The Illawarra is suffering as a result.

The CHAIR: Have you ever quantified the value or the number or significance of that work, either historically or currently, in terms of what you're doing?

ANDREW MALLEN: I don't know the figures—I'm certain that DPI could furnish that—but there is an economic benefit to the New South Wales economy from recreational hunting. I think possibly Ned Makim today with APDHA would have mentioned the significant number of pigs that they've taken.

The CHAIR: Yes, the great pig hunt.

ANDREW MALLEN: They've done a lot of research, but I can't give you those numbers off the top of my head.

PETER SZAAK: Excuse me, ma'am. Whilst I'm not here to speak on behalf of National Parks, who, as we know, are an environmental group, they've called upon our services again to assist them in circumstances that I would say openly that they can't manage on their own. They've sought our assistance, by way of our members, who, again, are lawful, law-abiding firearms owners. Notwithstanding that, they've also sought that our members receive the same training as their employees. That's a level of expectation based on that particular program. Most recently, we've just gone through another recruiting drive. I'm not sure I saw your name on the list, mate.

LANCE MILLER: He's on it.

PETER SZAAK: Of course he was. We're bolstering those numbers again, to add to that program.

BRIAN BOYLE: Madam Chair, I'm a member of the Australian Deer Association, and I was a former national board member, responsible for deer management. We developed a program called the Deer Management Initiative and the Deer Management Program, which developed hunter education so that hunters could go in—and they have gone into the Alpine National Park in Victoria using thermals as well as hunting in areas there—to help control animals. Branches do it individually. Our branch up in the Hunter Valley, it's got 220 members. It's growing by about five a month. We have just taken on the Deer Management Program. Guys have sat the accreditation and are currently doing the range test. Some of our members are already relating to farmers and going out—in the Hunter Valley, there's vineyards—controlling deer, helping them with it.

The system of the DMP is about empowering the clubs with training and accreditation so that they can talk to landowners and say, "Look, we're trained, we're accredited, we've got insurance," and showing them the documents and then working with them, doing a risk assessment and being able to hunt—and on tricky places. The Hunter Valley is not a remote place. It's full of vineyards. Guys are already going out there now and shooting deer and doing a good program.

The CHAIR: It's full of deer too. As someone that lives there, I can attest that there are far too many feral deer. Would you or your organisations be interested in working with the Government in a more coordinated fashion to manage feral pests?

LANCE MILLER: Of course.

PETER SZAAK: Yes.

ANDREW MALLEN: Most certainly.

The CHAIR: Very good. I'll now hand over to the Hon. Robert Borsak.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Thank you, Chair. Just thinking about adaption of, say, deer or pigs. Once they get some hunting pressure on them—maybe this is one for you, Mr Mallen—what do they do, in terms of availability?

ANDREW MALLEN: Will they move away or will they stay?

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: I'm talking in terms of when they get a lot of pressure and you're day-shooting them, they end up—

ANDREW MALLEN: They go nocturnal.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: That's right.

ANDREW MALLEN: Straightaway.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: I've seen recently—and, obviously, I've got a couple of night scopes—there's some pretty silly stuff being bandied around in the media about having to wear body armour when you go deer hunting. I don't understand how that came about. Can you describe to us how effective you would think thermal hunting equipment—now available quite easily, bought across the counter—could be? Mr Boyle, you may want to comment on that too.

ANDREW MALLEN: My wife hunts with me, and we do a lot of hunting up in the north-west area, where there's a pig problem. She doesn't hunt as often as I do, but I thought I'll buy her a thermal scope to give her a better chance of an evening. When she first looked through the scope, she looked at the sow and she said, "That's a sow." And this is at 100 metres away, in the dark. They're a game changer, an absolute game changer. I think they're a very, very effective tool. It's very difficult, with the quality of the stuff that's available now, to not get a clear view of your target animal. You can very, very clearly identify the animal and you can place your shots. They are a great addition. They're very expensive and you've got to be a bit dedicated, but they're a great thing.

BRIAN BOYLE: Similarly, I went out recently with an experienced hunter on the North Coast and, for the first time, used thermals. I was amazed. We sat off an area and, a couple of hours after dark, the deer came out and we shot a couple. They definitely are a game changer. Hunters everywhere are starting to adopt them. That's a great way of working with landowners. If you really want to get good results, we need suppressors as well, because if you had them combined with suppressors at night, you would kill two or three times the animals.

ANDREW MALLEN: Easily.

BRIAN BOYLE: Easily, yes, and there's no change to the risk profile. Despite what the panic merchants are saying, it doesn't change. I've used them in New Zealand. It's amazing, the difference, what they do. There would be good WHS around shooting ranges as well as out when you're actually hunting. It would be a great move if this bill actually passed that through and adopted common sense.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: You mentioned earlier in your evidence about the Illawarra Deer Control program on mining. Would you like to elaborate on that, how that operated and how successful it was?

ANDREW MALLEN: It was on the Wongawilli coalmine at West Dapto. In the Mining Act, you must prove proficiency with your tools, and a firearm is considered a tool. It was a rare situation where we had to do a shooting proficiency and, over the four years that it ran, I'd say 200 different individuals were tested and they passed the qualification. I had them working, 40 people at a time, on a roster system. They were so concerned about the risk. We used to sign in and sign out. They had gas sniffers all over the place, looking for explosive gas. The deer are smart. They would come down a well-timbered ridgeline and they'd feed across this great big, grassed area, and there were houses, there were tiled roofs within 150 metres of where we were shooting.

I went down first and worked out safe shooting lanes that would have a good backstop to catch the bullets and I put star pickets in—fibreglass ones—so there'd be no ricochet. I colour-coded them. We put shooting stations in. I told the shooters, "This is how you shoot. This is where you shoot," and they did. They stuck by it. But, after three months, the deer smartened up. They didn't use that ridge anymore. They changed to a gully. So we'd have to reposition the shooting lane. Over the four years, we'd have easily taken 1,500 deer off that site. I did an area of the shooting lanes and I had four shooting lanes on the whole site, and it was less than six acres. You show me a government agency that can take that number of deer off six acres in four years, and I'll give more than a quid to the Red Cross. It was outstanding numbers.

We were doing the same thing on the Wollongong uni. We were working on a 15-acre block at the back, but we were only shooting onto about three acres of it because it was safe, and we were working in daytime and night-time on that uni for many years. SSAA Illawarra was the AHO of it, the approved hunting club that provided the shooters. They went through a stringent test. When we had to get some paperwork updated, I went back to the

university management and said, "We need to get this rejigged," and the student council got involved and they said, "Oh God, you can't dare shoot on our property. You can't shoot on the uni, it's too bloody dangerous." I said, "Mate, it's been going on for two-and-a-half years and you didn't even notice." That's how effective it can be done. It was very effective. It was very safe. Then, when the Game Council got wound up, that was the end of all of these conservation hunting groups.

We also worked in the Capertee Valley, which is out in the Central West, the edge of the Central West. We removed numerous pig populations, deer, goats. Also at Wollongbar TAFE, up near Lismore, Western Plains Zoo—yes, there were many of them. They were all difficult. In a similar situation to that Canada geese incursion, you've got a lot of good people out there operating as private shooters. I've met plenty of professional shooters and I've met plenty of private shooters. The only difference between them is the bill at the end of the job. There's no bill with a volunteer. Okay, you get a certain level of training, but training is easy to introduce to shooters. We're a fairly intelligent group and, if we see an opportunity at the end, we're happy to accept training.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much to you all for making time and appearing at the inquiry. If there were any questions taken on notice, or indeed if there are any supplementary questions, our Committee secretariat will be in touch with you with the details of those.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Ms LORI MODDE, Chief Executive Officer, Outdoors NSW, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for making time to give evidence to the inquiry today. Would you like to start by making an opening statement?

LORI MODDE: You've been given a couple of subsections from our strategic plan, which highlight how we interact with many different Government policies and departments across New South Wales. We represent about 50,000 workers that work in the outdoors to lead about 2.1 million people in outdoor education or outdoor recreation. That makes up about 1,500 organisations that are making sure that there's safe navigation and protection of those people who want experiences.

Holistically, we look at the outdoors as being somewhere to get health and wellbeing outcomes. We advocate that quite highly. In the last 20 years our population has doubled, and we are now faced with a lot of issues of screen use and mental health in our society. We do a lot of promotion in getting people outdoors and to do it safely. Of all the major activities that we do—I hold a census every year so I can get a pulse of what's happening in the industry. The top six activities are bushwalking, camping, paddle craft—which is kayaking, canoeing, et cetera—rock climbing or abseiling, mountain biking and nature play. We're getting more of our little youth out into nature now, discovering some of the things that we've probably missed in the last couple of generations.

Overall, part of the bill is that we're looking at four different areas, and that's, firstly, safety for the public. The second one is the consultation of users. What consultation is being done with who is actually using the current sites? The third is respect for culture, and the fourth one is best use of resources. We work with land managers on a day-to-day basis, so we understand the pressures that they are under to look at conservation. I'm really conscious that the best use of resources needs to take precedence in this. We recognise the importance of invasive species control. We see the damage ourselves in a lot of the areas, and we know that the land managers in particular are doing professional pest management strategies which are certainly the best that we have seen while we've been out there. But we are concerned at the conflict between other users of the public and potentially the increase of hunting in these areas.

The five areas that we wanted to really pinpoint were that the Game Council-like body really needs to have independent conservation and land management experts—we are concerned that the word "conservation" may be used without justified evidence and scientific background—and have First Nations representatives as well as recreation and tourism stakeholders. We've seen an absolute boom in adventure tourism in the last few years. Even Tourism Australia is promoting our adventure tourism aspects, so we're seeing a lot more people enter these places than ever before. As I say, the framing of hunting as conservation is concerning. We just want to see evidence-based pest management strategies and clarify the recreational objectives being in competition with that.

The risks to shared land access and public safety—explicit consultation needs to take place with who's actually using these facilities right now. At the moment, we know that we have no available access to where the hunting is being done right now. It's not publicly accessible and, even though my operators are asking for that, we still have not got that access at this point in time. Cultural hunting we absolutely acknowledge is a significant part of First Nations people and their background, and we applaud their involvement in anything to do with this bill. All the land use decisions currently being considered need to look at partnerships and education programs.

As far as the bounty schemes are concerned, we want to see effective use of resources. If I hear it once, I hear it several times from land managers: They don't have enough funds to do things like repairing bridges for our two million people to cross. Yet we're putting money into something that is not going to support our land managers with getting more people out there for their health and wellbeing. We support a well-managed, evidence-based approach to land access and conservation. That is pretty much the bottom line. We connect with nature for safety, and health and wellbeing. I think that probably covers everything that I wanted to say.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thanks so much for your evidence and the work you do. It's very inspiring, and I completely hear what you're saying about the generational nature outdoor deficit. It's so wonderful to see that these are programs that are building and are successful. It's seriously heart lifting. I know it's a bit of a controversial thing to do but, if you wouldn't mind, we just heard some evidence that walkers and people that go into nature for various passive activities—arguably, if that's a characterisation as opposed to hunting—are less connected somehow, that their experience is less connected to the environment than these other people, and that perhaps this character of people and their experience is somehow external to the environment, not connected to it and part of it. Given your expertise and your engagement, I would love it if you had any comments to add to that.

LORI MODDE: I don't agree. We have a growing area in our industry known as nature therapy. Nature therapy is being sought after quite significantly because of our mental health challenges, some of the challenges

in physical health that people are seeing, and also disconnection and isolation that people are facing. In that, we have therapists and we have psychologists taking people into natural areas to be with nature, to understand nature and to feed off nature for those therapies. That is only one example. Our leaders who do outdoor education are not just teaching the children how to abseil or climb. They are teaching them about the rock formations. They are teaching them about the different types of eucalypts that they are seeing and the different ecology and biology. It is not something where we go in and do our business and then we leave. It is very connected. Our leaders are very well trained. As we said, we cover outdoor education. We have educators who are highly experienced and qualified taking people into those areas and delivering great outcomes for people. The only way they can do that is by making them connect with nature like they do.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: With the incompatible uses of public lands and with those programs and the classes of people who are engaging in nature and with nature, do you view the idea of people—going back to the former witnesses—running through the bush and chasing animals as largely inconsistent with the other uses of land?

LORI MODDE: I think I speak on behalf of all or most of my members when I say that they need to know where they are. It is in conflict with what they're trying to achieve, particularly in nature therapy, where you're immersed in a setting where you're trying to take what is around you into your therapy. It is certainly in conflict when you've got a group of kids out there trying to do nature play. Forests have been a great source of increased visitation because of their ability to allow things that national parks don't. That includes people like my trail bike riders. They are together as a group because of social isolation. They are getting health benefits by being together in an environment and being part of the environment around them.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you for your time today. Following on from those questions, if we were to open up this shared public space for hunting, do you think there is a real risk that people who are involved in much of the outdoor recreation—you listed the top six—may actually cease those activities because of concerns that they don't know whether there may be hunters around or that parents may pull their children out of programs?

LORI MODDE: I can't comment on how they manage what they do. I'm not involved in the hunters' association. I'm not a hunter myself. I don't know how they create safe environments. I don't know what they train on. I don't know how to control that. But, certainly, even just the public awareness of this bill has increased the number of times my phone has rung from operators who are concerned about whether it will interrupt access in certain areas. As you can imagine, schools are very conscious about their risk management. I can probably assume that schools will be the first ones to pull out of State forests.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: What sort of effect would that have on those schoolchildren? You talked about the mental health benefits and the physical health benefits from the community being able to use those spaces. What kind of long-term effect will that have?

LORI MODDE: The long-term effects on the activities they do in the outdoors?

The Hon. EMMA HURST: On the individuals who will stop using those outdoor spaces.

LORI MODDE: Absolutely. It is something I am advocating consistently for. The skills that can't be taught in the classroom that are taught in nature are lifelong skills. They are skills of resilience, which, we are seeing, are absent in the generations coming through. That comes from a lack of being able to go and play outside at night. Most people my age will remember that our mums used to say, "Come home when the streetlights come on." We don't have that these days. Certainly, a lot of the skills that we learnt from being in nature and playing outside are skills we took through our careers—in my career, particularly. I think we are losing a lot of that aspect today. We need to encourage families to get back to that. Nature plays a great example, where we're seeing rises of asthma and all these different causes where kids haven't been exposed to dirt or things that will build their immunity; also, balancing skills, motor skills and all of those different things we can see through the school system that are disadvantaged because these kids haven't had these opportunities.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: You talked in your opening statement about consultation. Were you consulted at all, or are you aware of any outdoor organisations that are involved in these activities that were pulled in for consultation at any point?

LORI MODDE: The first I knew of it was one of my members, Bushwalking NSW, came to me and told me about the bill.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: They saw it when it had already been introduced, or were they consulted?

LORI MODDE: No, they saw it when it was introduced. So no, the consultation hasn't happened. As I said in our letter, this has to improve because there are 2.1 million people that we are guiding into these spaces every year.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: The bill would also, potentially, allow recreational hunters access to prohibited weapons such as silencers. We heard the last group talk about thermal imaging. Does that increase the risk? Does that make things even worse, potentially, for people who are trying to share this space?

LORI MODDE: I can't comment on the technology, of course; it's not something I'm familiar with. But what I can tell you is our guys are out there overnight.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Thank you for coming along. You obviously, and your members, spend a lot of time in these lands that we're talking about. How would you describe, from what you've seen and what you're hearing, the state of these lands when it comes to invasive pests and weeds?

LORI MODDE: I think they're generically aware of certain areas that have had damage done by feral animals. But certainly in my six years, coming up—five-and-a-half years—in this job, no-one has come to me with an issue around feral animals.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Of your members, have you got any stats or evidence around the economic opportunities they produce, particularly for our regional communities? In my head, I'm thinking things like mountain biking and those sort of activities.

LORI MODDE: Yes, absolutely. Of our industry, it's \$4.3 billion in New South Wales, so we contribute highly from an economic development sense. Going to our employment as well as our volunteer network, about 36 per cent of our workforce is volunteers, so we add a social impact as well as an economic. Mountain biking is a big area of ours. We've just produced the mountain biking manifesto, where the Government has invested \$51.8 million in new infrastructure for mountain bike trails in forests. That has increased our footprint dramatically. It adds layers of complexity around maintenance itself and other things, which is exactly why this manifesto has been released. But going with that, there is a huge demand for this type of thing, knowing that we've got more built-up societies, more built-up population areas and these are the backyards for our community.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: It's \$4.3 billion each year; is that increasing or decreasing?

LORI MODDE: Increasing. We have an interesting challenge at the moment where our workforce is decreasing and our demand is increasing. That's a dilemma for another day.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: The footprint you spoke about—are you aware of any instances where those sorts of activities are happening in areas that are also accessible for recreational hunters?

LORI MODDE: I am aware that hunters do get licences for some of the areas that we are currently using. As I say, we don't have a full scope of where that information can be shown. In asking Forestry, that currently doesn't exist because it's in a different agency and the corresponding across to Forestry and their access is not there. But I am aware we do cross boundaries at the moment.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Have you got any even anecdotal evidence of conflict between—

LORI MODDE: All I've heard from some of my guys is that sometimes they hear shots fired.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Of your members, do any of them have a legislated right to pursue their activities?

LORI MODDE: Correct. They hold licences with Forestry, in a lot of cases. The mountain biking trails are a great example where they hold a licence with the Forestry Corporation as well as permits. A lot of our educators get permits to be on the land. Similarly to an Eco Pass in national parks, Forestry allows certain event licences, activity licences. But the one thing, as I said before, Forestry allows certain activities that can't be done in national parks, and they are very sure that they're going to continue offering that as a free service as well to the community, which is outstanding.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Those licences and permits you talk about, in your mind do they equate to the legislated rights that would be within this bill?

LORI MODDE: I couldn't comment on that. I don't know what that would transform as.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: My actual question, which maybe you misunderstood, is do any of your members have a legislated right to pursue their activities?

LORI MODDE: No, absolutely not. Sorry, I've misunderstood. I heard licensing, not legislation.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: That \$4.3 billion, would you be concerned that would decrease should more lands be opened up to hunting?

LORI MODDE: Absolutely, yes, I would be. As I say, unless we were able to establish some clear guidelines, and telling us where they were shooting, and being able to move around that, it would be very difficult to understand where they are, when they are, and as a last resort I would hate to see all our schools pulling out.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Could it be something that could be shared? This weekend is a hunting weekend, this weekend is a mountain biking weekend?

LORI MODDE: It comes down to the framework of the permissions, and if they could be public information, shared, it could be. As long as everyone abides by the requirements.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: In terms of the areas of New South Wales, and you may have already said this but I missed it, it just came up, is your evidence that you look at programs across the whole State?

LORI MODDE: Correct.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Across the public land estate?

LORI MODDE: Yes, absolutely, we go right to the borders. We have a substantial area called journey programs which takes kids and adults on overnight treks. That could be as far up to Cameron Corner, where the States meet. We go right across the State. Obviously, the closer you get to the coast, the more populated these areas are. The further you go west, the more land and less population.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: There's a load of lands that are in a schedule that this bill would make available to conservation hunting, or recreational hunting. Are you aware of where those lands might be?

LORI MODDE: I can't say I am.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Just following on from the question of the Hon. Scott Barrett, if we were to close one weekend for hunting and then one weekend for everything else, do you think that we would end up kind of—because it sounds like you said the top six were something quite different to hunting, obviously.

LORI MODDE: Yes.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Would we end up where we're kind of closing out the park for a minority and then trying to get the majority of park users all into one weekend, and it could become quite difficult and unmanageable for many of those activities because we wouldn't have the time necessarily to be able to actually coordinate them?

LORI MODDE: If I can answer that by saying right now we have even difficulties understanding where the closures are. So the communication to my two million participants on a potential closure due to a landslide is a challenge. Times that by different access points here; it would be problematic.

The CHAIR: We've heard evidence today that hunting has been occurring in State forests in New South Wales for over 20 years. Yet public use of our State forests is obviously still significant. Would you not agree that hunting and other public uses can work together if managed properly?

LORI MODDE: I think it goes to that point I was just making. If the framework is there and we come up with a wonderful foolproof method of knowing where they are, when they are, so that we can avoid those particular areas—absolutely. But the challenges even exist today. After 20 years, if we can't get that right, how is this going to improve from this point forward?

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: I'm a little intrigued by that answer. You say that after 20 years we can't get it right. Please give me examples where it's not right.

LORI MODDE: Sorry, I was meaning what I was saying before about knowing where the hunters are.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: That's what I'm talking about. I mean, declared State forests in New South Wales are hunted all year round.

LORI MODDE: Correct.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: They are open public Crown land and anybody can use them. In fact, the only people that do need permits on Crown land are hunters. The people you talk about—trail bike riders, rogainers, it doesn't matter who they are—they don't need permits to access those Crown lands.

LORI MODDE: That's not correct. They actually do—

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: State forests?

LORI MODDE: Correct. If we have an event, we need a permit.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Hang on, you're saying an event. I'm not talking about events. I'm aware that State forests, when events are booked, are closed specifically for your event.

LORI MODDE: Correct.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Also for events for other organisations like Scouts New South Wales, Scouts Australia, blah blah blah. I know all of that. When those areas are closed, they are closed to hunting, they are closed to the forestry activities and any other activities that may be carried out in the forests.

LORI MODDE: That's right.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: They become specifically your use for that weekend or that week or whatever it is, whether it's four-wheel drivers or those sorts of things. Tell me how knowing where hunters are, when you're booked in there and it's exclusive to your organisations, is possibly an access risk.

LORI MODDE: All of our users are not exclusive. I just made mention of the event permits and special permits.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: That was my point: not all of them are exclusive. In 20 years, in non-exclusive use, where has there been a problem when you've been, or your members have been, accessing public land hunting areas that have been declared?

LORI MODDE: Let me rephrase. We don't know where the hunters are, so we can't make a choice to go to another location because we don't know they're there.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: That's illogical.

LORI MODDE: How?

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: You just said that your people access, basically randomly, State forests that have been declared for hunting, but then you say you can't make a choice not to go there because you don't know where they are.

LORI MODDE: Not all areas of State forests can be hunted.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Declared State forests, I'm talking about. I just fail to understand what you're using to support your concerns in relation to access.

LORI MODDE: If a school wants to do a journey program, there is no website right now where they can look up where hunters will be.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Why would they need to do that?

LORI MODDE: Because they wouldn't go there.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: They don't need to be there.

LORI MODDE: Where would they go?

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: They could go anywhere else. I was in Scouts for many, many years, for example. We accessed bushwalks in national parks all over the place. I didn't need a website to tell me where I had to go and what I could do. I've used my four-wheel drives in State forests. It's of no concern to me whether there are hunters or mushroomers in there. Lots of people collect mushrooms in State forests, as you're probably aware. What is the access issue? I just don't understand it.

LORI MODDE: Can I go back to my earlier point about how our population has doubled in just over 20 years? The impact on our outdoor environments, including State forests, has increased significantly.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: You said that access was being denied to off-roaders by hunting access. Can you give me specific examples where that's happened? You said in your evidence earlier that your four-wheel drivers—your off-roaders, I think you called them—were being denied access when hunters have access.

LORI MODDE: No, I did not say that, sorry. I don't represent four-wheel drivers.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: You don't? You used the word "off-roaders".

LORI MODDE: No, trail bike riders. There are trail bike riders as part of our community. We're talking about the social isolation issues and helping them connect with State forests. They do use State forests.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: I think that's a good thing.

LORI MODDE: Correct.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Are you aware that in Victoria, State forests and many parts of many national parks are actually multi-use?

LORI MODDE: Correct.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: And that campers, four-wheel drivers, hunters, bushwalkers and people as such during hunting season all year round occupy the same camps at the same time and don't express the same concerns that you're talking about?

LORI MODDE: Have you asked them? I liaise with Outdoors Victoria.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Of course I have. I've got a Victorian hunter's licence. I've camped in the High Country, right next to bushwalkers. I've been through that process in Victoria.

LORI MODDE: I can't comment on Victoria. All I know is that I work with Outdoors Victoria a lot and they've got similar concerns to ourselves.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Can you tell me what those concerns are?

LORI MODDE: I couldn't speak on their behalf.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: I put it to you that those concerns aren't material whatsoever, because I've got lived experience in relation to that, not CEO experience. That's about all the questions I'm going to ask. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for making time to give evidence to our hearing today. If there are any questions taken on notice or any supplementary questions, our committee secretariat will be in touch with the details.

(The witness withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Ms KATHRYN JURD, General Counsel, RSPCA NSW, affirmed and examined

Dr SUZIE FOWLER, Chief Science Officer, RSPCA Australia, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

Ms TARA WARD, Volunteer Managing Solicitor, Animal Defenders Office, affirmed and examined

Ms LOUISE WARD, Programs Lead, Four Paws Australia, affirmed and examined

Ms KRISTINA VESK, Chief Executive Officer, Cat Protection Society of NSW, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome. Thank you to our next lot of witnesses for making time to give evidence to the inquiry today. We will now go to opening statements.

KRISTINA VESK: This bill is about more guns in more places and a publicly funded lobby group to promote even more guns in even more places. It has nothing to do with conservation. It is about enshrining a right to shoot that diminishes the rights of others—people and animals—to exist without an increased threat of violence. Cat Protection is not a political organisation, but I do not think it is a political statement to say that we agree with former Prime Minister John Howard that our gun laws are the envy of the rest of the world. As he told the Telegraph this week, this is just an indirect way of establishing a government-funded lobby group.

There is zero evidence that taking pot shots at animals is a conservation strategy; the evidence is overwhelmingly to the contrary. Habitat loss and incursion into habitats threaten biodiversity. If the Government cares about the environment, it should protect habitat. It should proceed with its plan for nature. It should fulfil its election commitment to the Great Koala National Park. The Government did not go to the electorate two years ago promising to wind back gun laws and allow more guns in more places. It did not say it would take funds from critical services and divert them to the promotion of guns.

No person of peace and goodwill—no person who believes in evidence-based policy—accepts that we need expanded gun ownership, expanded terrain for shooting or a publicly funded gun lobby. The community wants and needs more investment in mental health services, not more guns. The community wants and needs more investment to protect women and children from family and domestic violence, not more guns. That critical services in mental health, housing and domestic violence are chronically underfunded but somehow a magic pot of taxpayer money can be found for something that serves no-one except the gun lobby is breathtaking. We shouldn't even be here today. The bill should be rejected in its entirety.

LOUISE WARD: Thank you for the opportunity to provide evidence to this inquiry. Four Paws is the global animal welfare organisation for animals under direct human influence, with offices in 16 countries and 10 species-appropriate sanctuaries. Our mission is to reveal suffering, rescue animals in need and protect them. In Australia, we work to ensure that animal welfare is embedded in law, policy and practice. As an animal welfare organisation, Four Paws Australia strongly opposes the Game and Feral Animal Legislation Amendment (Conservation Hunting) Bill.

Our expertise is in scientifically based animal welfare, and our submission and evidence here today is guided by a core concern: the significant and often overlooked suffering inflicted on animals through recreational hunting practices. The proposed bill represents a troubling shift in policy, one that risks institutionalising animal cruelty under the guise of conservation. It reframes recreational or hobby hunting as conservation hunting, despite the absence of a clear, evidence-based definition and a lack of scientific consensus on its legitimacy or effectiveness.

This attempt to redefine recreational hunting as a conservation activity not only misleads the public but dangerously elevates hunting interests above animal welfare and community safety. Independent evidence consistently shows that recreational hunting is associated with high rates of animal wounding, prolonged suffering and harm to non-target species. The lack of oversight, inadequate shooter training and lack of animal welfare standards contribute to widespread cruelty. The bill fails to address these risks, offering no meaningful improvements to enforcement, compliance or animal welfare protections. Four Paws does not support lethal control as a standard method of population management. Where intervention is deemed necessary, it must be grounded in rigorous scientific assessment, ethical justification and strict welfare safeguards.

New South Wales is a State of animal lovers. Over two-thirds of households have companion animals, and recent surveys show that more than 80 per cent of Australians support stronger animal welfare laws and independent oversight. Yet this bill proposes to expand access to over 50,000 hectares of public land for hunting, rename restricted licences as conservation licences, and establish a Minister for hunting and fishing, all for the benefit of less than 0.3 per cent of the population who currently hold a licence and in opposition to the vast majority of the community. Four Paws urges MPs to reject this bill and instead invest in evidence-based,

professionally coordinated and truly humane approaches to conservation that reflect the values of the New South Wales community and uphold the highest standards of animal welfare.

KATHRYN JURD: This is a complex statutory environment. The proposed bill makes significant amendment to the way recreational hunting has been conducted in New South Wales for at least two decades. I just wanted to say a comment about the process of public consultation with respect to this bill. The RSPCA comments that the bill was introduced on 27 May. It was referred to the Committee for inquiry and report on 24 June, and submissions were due at midnight this Monday. We received an email at about 11 o'clock, I think, on Monday, asking for witnesses to attend today, and we're here, ready, willing and able to give evidence to the best of our ability.

However, up to 10 o'clock today, there had been about 80 submissions uploaded. Since evidence started, a further 15 have been uploaded of the witnesses that have given evidence. I have not had the ability to read those submissions in advance of my evidence today. Accordingly, I expect that the witnesses that have given evidence today are hearing for the first time substantive views on this bill. It appears from the numbering that there are at least 213 submissions filed. Accordingly and necessarily, our evidence is limited to that which we've been able to consider in advance of giving evidence. Stakeholder consultation fatigue is well known in the literature, particularly in the animal welfare context, and this bill needs more time before taking what are some extraordinary steps, to which I will turn now.

The RSPCA opposes recreational hunting, but our opposition to this bill goes beyond mere opposition to hunting. This bill creates a statutory right to hunt unknown to New South Wales law previously and unknown in any similar regulatory context. A ministerial portfolio disbands and then replaces a statutory authority and makes some 55,000 hectares of Crown land available for hunting. For some of that I rely on news media reporting because I actually have not been in a position to determine what Crown land gets made available under schedule 2. It also creates a statutorily enshrined, genuine reason for people engaged in hunting to purchase, possess and use prohibited weapons. To a question that might be asked—what animal welfare risks are associated with this amendment that are not currently existent with recreational hunting?—I respond as follows.

Firstly, it makes available significant swathes of Crown land currently used for recreational purposes quite antithetical to hunting. The Committee has heard evidence this morning that it includes land with difficult terrain and requires a consideration of the local particulars regarding breed and experience with other pest management practices. There is no evidence that the authority proposed has this expertise. Whilst land managers must consider the use of the land for hunting, the right to hunt generally and consult with the Conservation Hunting Authority in the creation of plans of management, it does not have to consult with any other land users. And in conjunction with the potential for large amounts of land to be used, increased use of prohibited weapons, including silencers, increases the opportunity for innocent but dangerous interactions for non-human animals not the target of the hunting exercise and humans alike.

TARA WARD: The Animal Defenders Office, or ADO, is a nationally accredited community legal centre run by volunteers. The ADO is astounded that a quarter of the way through the twenty-first century, New South Wales is debating a proposal to create a so-called "right to hunt" and yet has not dealt with the current and ongoing serious animal welfare problems inherent in hunting, let alone follow the lead of other jurisdictions in Australia and overseas to recognise animal sentience. We should be here today discussing a bill that addresses these issues. Instead we are discussing a bill that purports to create a right to engage in an already legal recreational activity involving violently killing animals, and without proposing a single new animal welfare measure. This is a serious concern. For example, the Committee heard earlier today that recreational hunting includes pig dogging.

That form of hunting is considered to be such a violent activity for the dogs and target animals alike that it has been banned outright on animal welfare grounds in the ACT. The only other activity banned in the same provision for its inherent violence is live baiting—another particularly cruel activity that certain small sections of our society still consider acceptable but that is utterly rejected by contemporary society at large. The bill does not address the fundamental problem of a lack of animal welfare monitoring during recreational or any hunting where it matters most, being the point of kill. Members of the public in New South Wales can have no confidence that animal welfare standards are being complied with during recreational hunting.

Codes of practice and guidelines are useless if compliance is not monitored and their rules or recommendations are not enforced. The bill does not address this issue. Instead it seeks to normalise an inherently violent activity and dress it up as providing some kind of nebulous public service that it cannot even define. Without recognising animal sentience and fundamentally changing the way we regard other animals, humans are doomed to keep making the same regrettable mistakes that created this conservation problem in the first place—that is, introducing non-native animals into our native landscape. They didn't introduce themselves. We put them

there, and this bill will do nothing to fix that. The ADO hopes that common sense prevails and the bill is not passed.

The CHAIR: Dr Fowler, do you also have an opening statement?

SUZIE FOWLER: No further opening statement. Unfortunately, I didn't hear the others because the room was on mute.

The CHAIR: I'm very sorry for that.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you for your attendance today and those very strong opening statements. Ms Jurd, first of all, in Ms Ward's opening statement she talked a little bit about the enforcement of any kind of additional hunting. I want to get the RSPCA's perspective as well. How hard would it be to enforce animal cruelty laws and oversee this hunting? We heard hunters this morning say, "Don't worry. If anyone is cruel to animals, those people will be prosecuted." How realistic is that, when you're talking about hunters in State forests, for example, where there is not particularly any enforcement agency, having any oversight to make sure that animals aren't experiencing any unnecessary pain?

KATHRYN JURD: My experience is that it's unlikely that participants in the activity will report themselves to a regulator, so I suspect it's unlikely. We do sometimes get complaints that are accompanied by, for example, footage that's taken and then that footage gets made public. That is one way that we receive these complaints. But, ordinarily, things that happen, particularly at night-time in far-flung places of New South Wales, do not find their way to any of the regulators, whether it's the New South Wales police—I can't speak for either the New South Wales police or the Animal Welfare League, but in 18 years of prosecuting it's unlikely that participants report themselves to the regulator. I will note that I looked at the Judicial Commission's statistics for enforcement in respect of the current Act, and there have been five or six prosecutions in relation to breaches of licensing requirements in the last four or five years. The statistics since 2020—August of 2020, I think—report five instances.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Just to the two lawyers on the panel—there's been a lot of discussion today too about the right to hunt and enshrining a right to hunt. Could I get your legal perspectives on what that could potentially mean? It was mentioned this morning. Someone did mention that they were concerned that the fit and proper person test could be challenged, potentially, in court, if there was a right to hunt enshrined. From an animal perspective, are there further concerns around this kind of right to hunt or that hunters would be given priority of space over other recreational users?

TARA WARD: I don't have an answer for that in any kind of detail, but I think the problem is that New South Wales is a non-human-rights jurisdiction. So creating a human right in just an ad hoc piece of legislation—this is part of the problem. We don't know what it means, and we don't know how it's going to interact with other laws. This is the problem in doing something in a rush, that all these consequences haven't been, or potentially haven't been, thought through, and its impacts haven't been thought through either. That would be one of the concerns in creating this human right or this so-called right in a non-human-rights jurisdiction and just in a standalone piece of legislation.

KATHRYN JURD: I've heard it described this morning as a qualified right. Again, I can't speak for them, but I think that people giving that evidence intended to convey that there are provisions in the bill that say, for example, where a land manager declines to grant access for hunting, that decision shall not be invalidated by the existence of the right to hunt. That doesn't qualify the right. The right exists as it's created, as a right to hunt. As Tara said, not only is New South Wales not a rights-based jurisdiction; most jurisdictions in Australia are not rights based. There is not, for example, a right to free speech in Australia; there is an implied right of freedom of political communication. And so, to create statutorily a right for such a confined act in this way—and I take and endorse Tara's point, that we don't actually know how courts would go about interpreting this legislation.

One of the RSPCA's submissions overall is that there is a lack of definitions generally in the bill, such that, in terms of trying to clarify any ambiguity, courts would have recourse, for example, to explanatory notes or the second reading speech, other extrinsic material. That process of statutory interpretation is well understood by courts. The problem for me, when I was trying to work out how this bill might operate, is that there's not enough within it to know with any certainty what a court would make of it. If those "rights" start opposing each other, courts are in real trouble—because I would have no confidence in how they would go about interpreting that ambiguity.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: I've got a question for everyone that's here. First of all, we've heard a lot of concern about a lack of consultation. I'm curious if there was any consultation with any of your groups, either by the Government or the Shooters party, in regards to the animal welfare impacts for this kind of a bill. I'm also curious about how you feel about this kind of bill coming forward and being supported, potentially, by the Minns

Government when some of its election commitments on animal welfare still haven't been fulfilled—such as the independent office of animal welfare, the Great Koala National Park, the overhaul of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act—and that money has been allocated and prioritised here. I might go to each of you. If I can start with you, Ms Vesk.

KRISTINA VESK: No, we weren't consulted. But, to be fair, for the party drafting this bill, I wouldn't expect them to. I imagine they were surprised that it's got this far. We have not been consulted. I really just can't add to saying that there is not an evidence base to this. There does not appear to be a values base that reflects community values of care and stewardship. It does not reflect what the Government has in place and has put forward. Anyone I have spoken to about this is just genuinely surprised that here we are.

LOUISE WARD: No, we weren't consulted either. As I said in my opening statement, it feels that this bill is being elevated in a way that doesn't reflect community values. Eighty per cent of Australians have said that animal welfare is important to them and believe the government has a role to play in protecting animals. We've also written to the Minns Government to ask about the progress of the independent office. It's just very concerning that the Government's pursuing this over, as you said, election commitments and animal welfare initiatives that would be broadly supported by the community.

KATHRYN JURD: RSPCA NSW wasn't consulted. I found out about this on Instagram.

TARA WARD: The Animal Defenders Office was not consulted. We weren't invited to make a submission. We found out about it by word of mouth. Once we got to grips—as much as you could, in that limited time frame—with what was being proposed, it was, as I said in my opening statement, nothing short of astounding that this is where the Government was going, and yet other very significant animal welfare priorities are being ignored or not progressed.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Does RSPCA Australia have anything to add?

SUZIE FOWLER: The only other comment I can make is that a survey done in 2018 of the general public showed that, in Australia, 77 per cent of the public in that survey were either concerned or very concerned about hunting animals for sport.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: We had a prior witness here today, Mr Brian Boyle. He stated in his submission that it would be an inherent conflict of interest to have any animal welfare representative or veterinary stakeholders as members of this new authority that they're proposing to put forward, the Conservation Hunting Authority. What is your reaction to this? What do you think that says about how animal welfare will actually be regarded on this committee if there's no-one, not even a vet, to actually represent that space?

LOUISE WARD: I find that very concerning. There's a wide body of evidence globally that documents the cruelty and suffering of animals with hunting, and that includes missed shots, maiming and dependent young being left. So the fact that animal welfare wouldn't be a part of that is extremely concerning, given the direct impact on animals and given, as I've stated, the community concern about animal welfare.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Does anyone else have any other thoughts to add in?

TARA WARD: Yes, I think the public could have no confidence in this entity that is being created by statute if it's being created without a balanced membership. Any kind of committee or authority that is formed according to good practice has a balanced membership representing different stakeholder views that are relevant to the issue. I had thought of something else, but it's gone so I'll hand over to my—

KRISTINA VESK: I'll answer the question, if I may. If, as is proposed, there aren't animal welfare considerations here and it's all very good, then how does an animal welfare specialist represent a conflict of interest? Basically it's just saying, "No, I don't want to hear that. I don't want to hear veterinary evidence. I don't want to hear evidence about sentience. I don't want to hear evidence about pain. I don't want to hear evidence that challenges my point of view."

That's not a conflict. That's just saying you don't want it. It's not an ethical conflict. The conflict there is it's just information that is being rejected at the outset.

KATHRYN JURD: Can I quickly say it's contrary to how we do it in other, similar contexts. The Greyhound Welfare and Integrity Animal Welfare Committee, for example, is made up of a diverse array of—and we've regularly said it needs to be more diverse, not less. The point of it is that it's the generalised expertise of that committee that the legislation is designing to get that diverse viewpoint to the regulator. It's set up so that if there's a vote taken, there's an automatic majority in the hunting representatives because the department representative doesn't have a vote. I've not seen a similar context where there is so obviously a statutory majority given to one voice, regardless of the location of that voice.

TARA WARD: I've thought of the other thing. In its current proposal, it's nothing other than a lobby group for the hunting community. To pretend that it's anything other than that—that's fine, but go and form such an entity privately, not via public law.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: In relation to invasive species control programs, we heard earlier from the Natural Resources Commission, which is an independent agency that provides advice to government, particularly in relation to things like invasive species control. They provided a report to Premier Minns specifically—Minns asked for a report and advice on invasive species control management in New South Wales, because it's a threat to ecosystems and so on. In that report, they make quite clear that recreational hunting can pose a problem to well-designed, strategic and coordinated invasive species control programs. Do you have any comments on that from an animal welfare or animal cruelty perspective, through the lens of clearly we have to do some invasive species control? Do you also see from a harm minimisation that coordinated, strategic programs are better than recreational hunting programs?

KATHRYN JURD: I will only comment that that appears to replicate conclusions from the CSIRO in 2019. There's a reference in our submission—I can find it—that drew the same conclusion, that is, that recreational hunting doesn't necessarily—although I thought that that witness, who I've not heard or seen before, gave a fairly tempered account of what the role might be for recreational hunting in an invasive species management context. I don't know if Dr Fowler wanted to add anything about that.

SUZIE FOWLER: We would suggest that we support those statements that it is not effective and can distract from effective and appropriate control programs, not just from a financial perspective of the money going to the wrong initiatives that will not work because, as other interviews have shown today, you just can't address the sheer number of animals that are needed for effective invasive species management, but also the motivation is wrong. The motivation for recreational hunters—not conservation hunters but recreational hunters—is not there to manage populations, despite some of the interviews today.

The RSPCA would call for a much more evidence-based government oversight of appropriate control programs with efficient and effective public moneys being spent where there can be monitoring, evaluation, public reporting of a control program if needed. Of course, lethal control should be a last resort but we do acknowledge that there is a pest animal invasive species issue in many areas of New South Wales and across Australia. They just need to be much more thought out and evidence based than recreational hunting achieves.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Dr Fowler, how do you reconcile the way some of this has been presented? Can you see any actual legal or characterised distinction between recreational hunting and this thing that now is being labelled as conservation hunting? I'm open to anybody commenting on that.

SUZIE FOWLER: I can't reconcile it from a description basis. I think it's putting a different name on something to try and dress it up in a way that perhaps is more palatable to the public. It doesn't actually change the effectiveness of the control method at the end of the day. I did listen in to some of the interviews earlier today where many of the recreational shooters were admitting to low numbers being able to be achieved night by night and therefore going to speak to that lack of effectiveness of those sorts of controls. I would throw to Kathryn about the legal aspects, if she's got any other comments.

KATHRYN JURD: No.

TARA WARD: No, other than noting that the term is not defined, as far as I'm aware, in the bill, so everyone is at a loss to know what it actually means.

KRISTINA VESK: "Conservation" is an adjective. It doesn't change the fact that the action here is hunting. You can put any name on it. It makes no difference. It modifies the noun; it doesn't modify the practice. I think it's meaningless. To earlier issues, government authorities and agencies federally and in States have been working over decades on complex environmental issues. I think that we should be working with them on a sound evidence base in a One Welfare framework that acknowledges that each environment is unique and may need different approaches to management. At the end of the day, if we're just losing habitat at a rate, there isn't much left to protect anyway.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Can I start with Ms Tara Ward? I will follow up with the others. How does support for this bill from the Government align with what you have inferred has been their approach to biosecurity and animal welfare so far?

TARA WARD: In a word, it's inexplicable. From a commonsense, rational perspective, it's inexplicable and, again, nothing short of astounding that they are throwing their weight behind this bill when there are so many really important animal welfare priorities that languish in someone's bottom drawer, which just means that New South Wales is lagging further and further behind when it comes to meaningful animal welfare reform.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Have you got any indication as to what has led to this shift of approach?

TARA WARD: No, none. Then again, we are based in the ACT, so we don't live and breathe New South Wales politics, regrettably. But, again, it goes to that earlier issue that news about the whole bill came as a surprise to so many members of the community or stakeholders. That's just one of the many surprising aspects of the whole package.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I'll let anyone else comment on that if they want.

KRISTINA VESK: Out of the blue.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I wonder, then, Ms Vesk, if we can try and find some common ground. Someone, perhaps RSPCA, acknowledged the need for invasives control in some of these areas. What is the approach to how we do get rid of pigs, deer, feral cats out of these areas—this bill aside?

KRISTINA VESK: There is, and has been, a lot of work that has been done in that area. Cat Protection would always prefer that any approach to management of animals is humane and respects the inherent dignity of the animal, but we acknowledge that not all animals belong in all places. We're not naive on that. But we do very strongly think that the investment needs to include taking a very strategic One Welfare approach that is based on each unique environment. I believe that there is a lot of good work that has been done in this area. There is more work to be done but I think a lot of collaboration has gone on over the past 10 years, and conversations and more evidence. Science is a process of constant inquiry as well. Things can always be improved.

As a short answer, we would say that we think good work should continue, and we acknowledge that there are pressing environmental concerns and our membership love all animals. Members of Cat Protection invariably also love wildlife and dogs—all animals. I think there is a lot of capacity to work with the knowledge we have and to continue working with the good work that's been done. I know on this matter, many of those agencies are very distressed by this as well.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Do we think it is unusual that an organisation called the Cat Protection Society wouldn't be consulted on legislation that's been pinned as a conservation bill—rightly or wrongly—that is designed to remove cats?

KRISTINA VESK: We have in the past, on any matters that affect cats, been consulted. So I'd say on this, yes, it's unusual.

KATHRYN JURD: What we're talking about here is a recreational activity, and this bill attempts to insert what is inherently a recreational activity into a scientific question. When you first asked that question, I thought, "That's an interesting PhD." I'm not sure that the panel of the four of us can answer such a gnarly question in the hour we've got. By the same token, the answer from my perspective is obviously there are scientists whom we can task with finding the answer out. The concern I have, and that I reflect here today, is that this bill moves very far ahead towards effecting an outcome that we haven't worked out whether it's going to address any of the issues that it claims to be attending itself to. That's part of the problem, in my view.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: We had the Australian Gun Safety Alliance here earlier today. I asked them if they had been consulted and I know that they've been attempting to try to meet with the Premier and various Ministers in regards to this bill. While they've been able to meet with various others in Parliament, no-one from the Government has met with them. I asked them what their message to the Premier today would be if they could get that message across. Can I ask each of you—assuming the Premier also won't meet with you in regards to the animal welfare implications of this bill—what would your message to the Premier be today?

TARA WARD: It's going to be a short answer: Reject the bill. It's clear it's not going to achieve anything from a conservation perspective, and it certainly does nothing to further any kind of animal welfare issues. I can't see any reason for considering any aspect of the bill.

KATHRYN JURD: I think I would say a similar thing. It seems to me the department walked back a bit this morning. The earlier Tara appears to have confirmed a lack of support for the Weapons Prohibition Act amendment and the ministerial portfolio. They're big ticket items that you can fairly easily take objection to. I don't find it difficult, for example, to agree with Mr Mikac and the Alannah and Madeline Foundation on that point—and on, actually, most of their points. Of equal importance is the concern I have about the constitution of the hunting authority and the existence of a right to hunt. There is a lot about this bill and, frankly, I went and attempted to track the 11 amendments, colour coding them to work out what each of the various approaches might be to attempting to save some of this bill. I don't see that it can be done in a way that reflects how I understand gun safety, animal cruelty or environmental protection operates in New South Wales.

LOUISE WARD: We would request in very strong terms that the Minns Government rejects this bill and really focuses on legislation that reflects community values and protects animal welfare, which this bill clearly fails to do.

KRISTINA VESK: I'd say reject the bill and, indeed, focus on protecting habitat. Focus on investing in services that provide support for vulnerable people, for women and children leaving domestic violence. A committee of the upper House had an inquiry into loneliness. We have many things in our world that need attention. This isn't one of them. It should just be rejected. Move on with protections for animal welfare and take an approach of justice and compassion and stewardship to our world and our people and our animals and our plants and our water.

SUZIE FOWLER: I'm supportive of many of the other comments that have been made. I think acknowledging that we haven't got invasive species management quite right yet—but this is most definitely not the answer. There is no way that I can recommend that any component of the bill is considered acceptable.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: We also heard earlier today about permits that are available that allow anyone from the age of 12 up to 18 to use a firearm with an adult present. That was raised, obviously, as a human safety concern. Could I get your thoughts around any animal welfare concerns that there are also within allowing, say, a 12 year old to use a firearm on an animal? I'm happy for anyone to jump in and answer that, if they have strong thoughts.

LOUISE WARD: As I said before, there's a large body of evidence that demonstrates that recreational hunting causes serious harm to animals. We've seen that in the Victorian duck inquiry. It showed an injury rate between six and 40 per cent. We also saw evidence in the New South Wales kangaroo inquiry of 40 per cent of kangaroos not being killed with a single shot to the head. We've got those statistics with adults using firearms. I think with children—I don't have any research—but, potentially, those risks would be amplified and the harms to animals, potentially, a lot greater.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: We've just passed Federal legislation to restrict children being able to access social media from 12 to 16. Does it seem quite absurd to you that we would have 12- to 16-year-olds going out and shooting animals?

TARA WARD: Absolutely. It's just common sense that that is a complete double standard. If people want to allow their young children to use guns, go to a shooting club or something. Go somewhere where you're not going to be inflicting a lot of harm and suffering on a sentient being. In this day and age, it's incredible that that's even contemplated.

The CHAIR: I've just got one question that I mainly wanted to hear from RSPCA about, but I'll obviously open it up to any of you that also have feedback around this. I wanted to ask about the impact that feral pests currently have on our native species.

KATHRYN JURD: I'm the general counsel, so I generally don't take animal welfare science questions. Suzie?

SUZIE FOWLER: Yes, I'm happy to take that question. There is no doubt that invasive species have impacts, everything from affecting the ground and compression of soils; eating the plants that our native species would eat; spread of disease; spread of weeds—there is a lot of negative impacts that come from invasive species. I don't think we would deny that. Our concern would be that any animal should still be treated as a sentient being, as per Tara's comments, and therefore any management of those invasive species should be done at the most humane level possible. Recreational shooters do not have the same level of marksmanship and accuracy requirements of other control methods. We would be very concerned about the welfare impacts on those animals by the implementation of this bill.

The CHAIR: We heard earlier about some of the impacts that feral pests have on cultural items and cultural things of significance to Aboriginal people in New South Wales. I wondered if you had any remarks or insights on that.

SUZIE FOWLER: I don't think I can comment on that. I would leave that to the traditional owners of the lands to comment.

The CHAIR: I'm just opening it up to any of our other witnesses here, if you had anything further to say about the impact that feral pests have on our native species.

TARA WARD: Well, I mean, where do we start with impacts on our native species? Sure, we can blame the animals whom we have introduced, but we introduced them, and the other impacts on native animals are immeasurable and extremely significant. They're all anthropogenic—they're all done by us—so why don't we

focus on those? We might go a lot further to saving a lot of these species if we focus on our behaviour and modify our behaviour rather than just blaming it on the low-hanging fruit, which in this case are the introduced species.

KRISTINA VESK: I think it's really important to note that the Invasive Species Council, Nature Conservation Council, National Parks Association and Biodiversity Council Australia oppose the bill. I don't think any of us are saying we don't have environmental issues caused by human-introduced species. I don't think anyone is saying that. I think we're saying this bill won't do anything and is likely to do harm.

The CHAIR: Picking up on something you said then, Ms Ward, what would be the best way to address the issue of invasive species, when you think about the options that we have open to us? You talk about modifying behaviour or something. You talked about changing behaviour.

TARA WARD: Yes, that's right. What we've heard, or the bits that I was able to hear from other witnesses today, is that what we're doing is not working. It doesn't matter who's doing it or from what sort of viewpoint—it's not working. We certainly wouldn't advocate some of the alternatives, such as using 1080 poison. That's a hideous product that is not used in most other countries or jurisdictions around the world. It's extremely incredible that we are still using it today. I think we need something that's a bit of a game changer. We need to change our approach to these things.

That's why I think, as a start, let's recognise animal sentience. Other jurisdictions are doing it—across the border in the ACT, but other, international jurisdictions like New Zealand, across the ditch. Also, the UK has just introduced and passed a bill or an Act recognising animal sentience and putting in place a whole infrastructure as to how we do that and incorporate that into our interactions with animals.

We've got to move away from this instrumental understanding of animals as mere objects that we use for our own purposes. If we start recognising their sentience, that might open up who knows what possibilities and what solutions that we just haven't been thinking of because we've been stuck in this vicious cycle of doing things that—as the proponents of this bill have pointed out—we've been doing since we were living in caves. We need a new way of thinking and a new way, especially, of dealing with sentient animals.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Ms Vesk, in your opening statement, you chose quite an interesting angle. How is your evidence relevant at all to your position as CEO of the Cat Protection Society? Can you elucidate that to me? I didn't hear in your evidence anywhere where you justified why feral cats should be protected.

KRISTINA VESK: I didn't talk about feral cats being protected.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: That's my question.

KRISTINA VESK: The Cat Protection Society's focus is on domestic cats and in relation to all animals, including feral cats, that we must treat them with respect and dignity. Any management strategies in relation to environmental concerns where there are programs to seek to reduce the impact of feral species should be taken and adopted based on scientific evidence. It should be informed by values and it should have an ethical lens applied to it.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Maybe this is a question for all of you, one by one. Do you believe the millions of feral cats in New South Wales should be protected? Maybe starting with you, Ms Vesk.

KRISTINA VESK: I don't think that's what this bill is about. This bill is about expanding gun ownership.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Please, don't obfuscate. Do you think all feral cats in the wild should be protected?

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Point of order: The witness wasn't allowed to answer the question. The question was put and then the member began to speak over the witness. I ask that the witness is given the time to be able to answer the question.

The CHAIR: I remind all members about the procedural fairness resolution for inquiry participants. Please, proceed with your answer, Ms Vesk.

KRISTINA VESK: I reiterate that all animals, including feral cats, should be treated with respect. Their sentience should be recognised as well as conservation management strategies, ideally within a compassionate conservation framework and, certainly, within a One Welfare framework. That means that they are not treated with cruelty and that any efforts to do anything with any animal do not put anyone else at risk.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Ms Vesk, are you okay with poisoning the cats with 1080?

KRISTINA VESK: No, we are absolutely opposed to that. I don't think the question is about recreational hunting expanded throughout New South Wales versus 1080. I'm sorry, I didn't see that in the bill. I don't think that's the question.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Ms Ward, I direct the question to you.

LOUISE WARD: From the Four Paws perspective, lethal control should never be the default. Our position is that it should be a last resort and used only when all other options have been exhausted. We would support structured decision-making that includes humane, non-lethal alternatives such as fertility control, habitat modification and selective removal only when necessary.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Can you please elucidate to me how you would do non-lethal control of the literally millions and millions of feral cats in New South Wales?

LOUISE WARD: As an animal welfare organisation, we're not experts in conservation science—

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: So you don't have any answers. That's fine.

LOUISE WARD: —and we're here to speak against the bill.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Ms Jurd, would you like to address the same question?

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Point of order—

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: I'm running out of time. We've got to move on.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: The member didn't allow the witness to finish her answer and I ask that she's given due process.

The CHAIR: I uphold the point of order and remind honourable members to allow witnesses to answer questions.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Ms Jurd, would you like to address that question?

KATHRYN JURD: I'd say two things. We were asked to attend and we've come with the best of our capacity as witnesses in this inquiry. I'm here as the RSPCA general counsel in that context. If your question is should feral cats be protected from cruel and inhumane deaths, the answer is yes, they should be.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: So you're saying it's fine to poison them?

KATHRYN JURD: No, of course not.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: And you're saying it's not fine to shoot them?

KATHRYN JURD: I've answered the question. The question was should feral cats be protected and I interpret your question to mean—

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Should feral cats be protected in New South Wales in the wild?

KATHRYN JURD: — from inhumane deaths and my answer was yes, they should be.

TARA WARD: It depends what you mean by "protected". My understanding is under the New South Wales Biodiversity Conservation Act, most native animals have a status of "protected". That's a starting point, and it really amounts to nothing, it just means that a licence can be obtained to harm them in whatever desired way, provided it's allowed for by the licence. If you meant that, I would say, protected or not, it's not going to guarantee any kind of treatment of them that would ensure that they are not subjected to unnecessary pain and suffering. Otherwise, I would regard them as our domestic cats. We wouldn't poison our domestic cats. In fact, many jurisdictions specifically exempt the ability to poison animals. They exempt domestic animals for that reason. If it's bad for our domestic animals, it's bad for any sentient animal.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Do you believe that our unique indigenous animals and birds should be protected from feral cats?

KRISTINA VESK: I believe that Australia and New South Wales within Australia should be investing effort, science and money into protecting habitats, into protecting people and animals from the harmful effects of climate change and to stop habitat loss. There are a lot of things that can be done, a lot of evidence-based knowledge that says what ought to be done. We have to start doing those things.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Ms Ward, do you believe that our unique indigenous animals and birds should be protected from feral cats?

LOUISE WARD: I believe that our unique native animals should have protections. I reiterate what Kristina said, that they need habitat protection and protection from the cruel effects of hunting as well. Nothing in this bill suggests to me that—

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: That's not the question, with respect.

The CHAIR: Order! Please proceed, Ms Ward.

LOUISE WARD: There's nothing that Four Paws can see in this bill that would contribute to the protection of native animals. In fact, there are so many examples of recreational hunting actually having a seriously negative impact on our native animals that are non-target but still will be seriously impacted.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Ms Vesk, do you believe that native animals have more of a right to life than a feral cat?

KRISTINA VESK: I think each living creature has an inherent right to be treated with respect for their inherent dignity, that we recognise their sentience. It is our values that inform whether we act with grace or cruelty, or whether as a community we choose compassion over cruelty. Complex areas of public policy, where you might have facts but you've got contested values, that is where you spend time on further examination and where you apply an ethical framework around it to make public policy decisions. I think the only absolute here is that we know animals are sentient and they deserve to be treated with kindness and respect.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Maybe just one last question from me, Ms Ward.

The CHAIR: I think one of the witnesses has to leave. Sorry, Mr Borsak. We might have to put it on notice.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: I've got one more question, that's all. I might put it on notice.

The CHAIR: Yes. I know one of the witnesses has to leave at 5.30 p.m. sharp. I want to take the opportunity to thank you for attending and giving evidence to this inquiry. The Committee secretariat will be in touch with you with regard to further questions or questions that were taken on notice.

(The witnesses withdrew.)
The Committee adjourned at 17:30.