

# **PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 4 - REGIONAL NSW**

**Monday 1 September 2025**

**Examination of proposed expenditure for the portfolio areas**

## **AGRICULTURE, REGIONAL NEW SOUTH WALES, AND WESTERN NEW SOUTH WALES**

**CORRECTED**

**The Committee met at 9:15.**

### **MEMBERS**

The Hon. Mark Banasiak (Chair)

The Hon. Scott Barrett

Ms Abigail Boyd

The Hon. Greg Donnelly

Ms Cate Faehrmann

Ms Sue Higginson

The Hon. Emma Hurst (Deputy Chair)

The Hon. Mark Latham

The Hon. Sarah Mitchell

The Hon. Cameron Murphy

The Hon. Peter Primrose

### **PRESENT**

**The Hon. Tara Moriarty**, *Minister for Agriculture, Minister for Regional New South Wales, and Minister for Western New South Wales*

## **CORRECTIONS TO TRANSCRIPT OF COMMITTEE PROCEEDINGS**

**Corrections should be marked on a photocopy of the proof and forwarded to:**

**Budget Estimates secretariat  
Room 812  
Parliament House  
Macquarie Street  
SYDNEY NSW 2000**

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**CORRECTED**

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**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the second hearing of Portfolio Committee No. 4 - Regional NSW for the inquiry into budget estimates 2025-2026. 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 Mark Banasiak. I am the Chair of the Committee. I welcome Minister Moriarty and accompanying officials to this hearing. Today the Committee will examine the proposed expenditure for the portfolios of Agriculture, Regional New South Wales, and Western New South Wales.

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. I welcome witnesses and thank you for making the time to give evidence. All witnesses will be sworn prior to giving evidence. Minister, I remind you that you do not need to be sworn as you have already sworn an oath to your office as a member of Parliament.

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**CORRECTED**

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**Mr STEVE ORR**, Secretary, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, affirmed and examined

**Mr JAMES BOLTON**, Deputy Secretary, Regional Development and Delivery, Chief Executive, Regional Growth, NSW Development Corporation, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, affirmed and examined

**Ms RACHEL CONNELL**, Deputy Secretary, Agriculture and Biosecurity, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, affirmed and examined

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

**Mr ANSHUL CHAUDHARY**, Chief Executive Officer, Forestry Corporation of NSW, affirmed and examined

**Mr ROB KELLY**, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Local Land Services, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, affirmed and examined

**Dr THOR SAUNDERS**, Acting Executive Director, Fisheries, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** Today's hearing will be conducted from 9.15 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. We are joined by the Minister for the morning session from 9.15 a.m. to 1.00 p.m., with a 15-minute break at 11.00 a.m. In the afternoon we'll hear from departmental witnesses from 2.00 p.m. to 5.30 p.m., with a 15-minute break at 3.30 p.m. During these sessions there will be questions from Opposition and crossbench members only, and then 15 minutes will be allocated for Government questions at 10.45 a.m., 12.45 p.m. and 5.15 p.m. I note we have quite a few people in the gallery, including those from eastAUSmilk. There is a rule for those in the gallery that you can't heckle or cheer; leave that to us members. You are most welcome. We will begin with questions from the crossbench.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Good morning, Minister. Thank you for attending today.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Good morning.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Minister, I would like to start by asking some questions about shark nets. The nets ordinarily go back in the water each year on 1 September. Can you advise if they have gone back in this year?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Good morning, Ms Hurst, and everybody else. It is a perfectly reasonable question, today being 1 September, which is the day that the nets will be—are at the moment being—put into beaches where they usually go at this time of the year. As you would be aware, the Shark Management Program in New South Wales is an over \$21 million program. Part of it includes using technology and part of it includes using nets at certain times of the year. Today is the day that nets do go in for the summer period. That is occurring, as far as I'm aware, across beaches between Wollongong and Newcastle today.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** So all the nets have gone back in, despite the discussions around removing some of those nets?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Yes, nets have gone in on all of the usual beaches today, or they will be. It's still the morning; I'm not sure what time they're rolling out today. But I'm happy to confirm with the Committee later on. As far as I can tell, the weather is okay. It's all subject to those kinds of things. But they are scheduled to go back in today.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Sorry, Minister, my question is more about the trial removals of shark nets that was being discussed with various councils. You said that every single net is going back in at this point. Can you confirm that the trial removal of shark nets from one beach from Waverley, Northern Beaches and Central Coast councils is still planned to go ahead at some point?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Fair enough. That is a reasonable question. As people may or may not be aware, the Government has engaged with councils across New South Wales, in particular in recent times and over last summer—councils that have beaches that do have nets. We have been engaging with those councils for some time, including consultation over last summer. That has been publicly available. I did say that we would be consulting with councils—

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I don't need to hear about the consultation.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm trying to answer the question.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** But I don't need to hear about the consultations. The question was really quite specific. Can you confirm if the trial removal of shark nets from one beach from Waverley, Northern Beaches and Central Coast councils is still planned to go ahead?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** And I am answering the question. The context for all of this is important. We have been consulting—

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** But, Minister, I've already spoken to you a lot about context. I understand the desire to talk down the clock, but it's a very, very specific question. Just a yes or no answer would be a sensible answer. Again I will put the question to you: Can you confirm the trial removal of shark nets from one beach from Waverley, Northern Beaches and Central Coast councils is still planned to go ahead? I don't need to hear the 10-minute background information because obviously we've been talking about this issue for a long time.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Respectfully, Ms Hurst, I am going to answer the question. I will continue to answer the question. The nets are going in today, as I have indicated, or they are supposed to be. If anything changes in relation to that, I'm happy to update the Committee. We have been engaging with councils across New South Wales about the program. That has been going on for some time. That included over the last summer, where a number of councils indicated that they didn't want nets to go back in but they did want more technology. We listened to that feedback.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** So will the trial removal go ahead this year?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Ms Hurst, I'd like to answer the question.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I just want to know whether the trial will go ahead this year.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** We have listened to those councils and heard that feedback over the summer. Based on that feedback, we reached out to three councils to ask them to participate in a trial for a nominated beach to have the nets removed from.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Minister, will the trial be happening?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Those councils have provided feedback to the Government, including just a couple of days ago.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Minister, will the trial be happening?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I will continue to engage with those councils, and the Government is considering doing that. I can't give specific information or details today because we will continue to engage with those councils. We asked them to nominate a beach and they didn't, but we will continue to work with those councils about what the program will look like.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** So are you planning, at this point in time, to still run a trial with those three councils this year?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** We would like to run that trial. I have to consider the feedback that's come through from those councils, and we will do that.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Can you explain why this decision-making is all happening so last minute? The councils that were earmarked for a trial were only contacted in mid-July. Now we've got a situation where the nets are going back in but there is still discussion about a trial, which means that those nets could be removed in a few days, in a week or two. This all seems to be a bit poorly managed. Why wasn't the consultation with those earmarked councils started earlier, so we weren't in this bizarre situation where the nets are going in today but they might be removed tomorrow?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I would refer you to my previous answer. That's why I've explained that the consultation has been occurring over some time. People are aware that the Shark Management Program has been in place in various forms for decades. We've made adjustments to it since we've formed government, including putting lights on and taking nets out a month earlier. As I have indicated, the consultation in relation to the future of the program began late last year and over the summer. We listened to the feedback from councils. The nomination of three councils to trial and nominate beaches to trial no nets is a part of that. Councils have provided feedback in relation to that and we'll consider it. If we're going to be making changes, which the Government is continuing to progress as we continue to trial this new technology, we will be bringing the community with us.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Minister, I have an image here, which I will ask someone from the secretariat to get to you. I have copies for everybody else as well. This is an image of the shark net at Bondi Beach. I am sure you have probably seen this image before. It's only 150 metres wide. When you actually look at this

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**CORRECTED**

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image, you can see how much of the beach is not actually—and obviously sharks can swim either side of the net, they can swim under the net and they can swim over the net. We've had researchers from universities for a very long period of time tell us that this technology is not actually protecting human safety at all. We've heard that there are much better alternatives. Why isn't the Government investing in alternatives that are genuinely going to protect human lives rather than spending millions of dollars of taxpayer money when you don't need to be an expert looking at this image to see that it's not going to do anything to protect swimmers or beachgoers?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Thank you for the question. We are. We are investing in and trialling technology on beaches around New South Wales. That technology is very, very expensive. It's labour-intensive. We're continuing to use it, including at the moment, so we are—

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Why are we still putting these nets in when experts at universities are telling us they do nothing to protect human life? We're hearing from environmentalists that they're killing a whole lot of native and threatened animals within our oceans. We have councils that want to take the nets out. But you've come here today and told me that every single net has now gone back in. Why would we still be putting money into these programs when we know that they're doing nothing to protect human life, they're harming animals and the councils want help to work with your department to actually get the nets out? You're telling me you've had all these discussions and yet today every single net has gone back in, despite all of that evidence.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** As I've indicated, we are having those conversations. We are using a range of technologies on beaches across New South Wales, including SMART drumlines, including drones—we invested more money into drones last summer.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Why are we still using nets?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'd like to answer the question. These are reasonable questions. I know there's a lot of community interest—

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I'm not saying that we're not using alternatives. I'm just asking, very simply, why are we still using these nets despite all the evidence that they're not doing anything to protect human life? Why are we still putting money into shark nets when we could be putting that money into alternatives and working with councils to transition away from this entirely, and make sure our beaches are safe for people?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** We're doing all of the above. We will continue to embrace technology. We're investing a significant amount of money—a \$21 million program—to use the technology. The nets are the cheapest part, I think. I'll have to check the details of the drone program, but they're not very expensive. The technology is. We need to make sure that it is doing the job that we want it to do. We'll continue to engage with the community as we have been doing. We did invite councils to nominate beaches that nets didn't need to go into today. They didn't nominate beaches. But that doesn't mean the door is closed. I want to continue working with councils across New South Wales and particularly those that have nets about what the future looks like.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Minister, what is your plan now to transition away from using shark nets? What timeline are we looking at to get rid of this outdated technology that doesn't do anything and move towards these alternatives, and support councils to do so?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** We'll continue engaging with councils just as I've outlined we have done. We received feedback from three of them in relation to particular questions recently. I'll consider that feedback. The Government will consider that feedback and the Government will make a decision about future shark management program options.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** The NSW Shark Management Program's annual report is usually released at the end of July or beginning of August. Why has it been delayed this year? Why has it not been released?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'll take on notice about whether it's been released. I don't know. I'll check the details for that.

**The CHAIR:** Minister, are you able to provide an update on where you and your department are at with the virtual fencing regulations, whether you have a specific timeline that will see a regulation?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Yes. Great question. I know there's also a lot of interest in this, particularly from farmers—dairy farmers—and others across the State. We've indicated that we will be, or we are, drafting a regulation to allow virtual fencing to be in operation here in New South Wales. This is something that the Government has been considering since we were in fact in opposition. I'm pleased to have announced a couple of months ago in Orange that we will be legalising virtual fencing in New South Wales.

**The CHAIR:** When will we see that legalisation? I appreciate you've made that announcement, and it's obviously welcomed by many farmers that want to take advantage of those productivity gains and animal welfare

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**CORRECTED**

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improvements. But I want to drill down: When will they be able to do that? When will there be a regulation in place? Do you have a timeline that you're working towards?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Yes, we'd like to have it done this year. When I made the announcement I said we needed to do some work to ensure that we could get it right, factoring in animal welfare considerations, factoring in biosecurity and other things. The department has been undertaking a range of consultation with interested stakeholders over the course of the last couple of months, I'd say. That consultation has concluded. I look forward to getting some advice on what's come through that. We wanted to hear from farmers and other stakeholders, suppliers, about the types of technology that could be used. The regulation will now be drafted and I do want to have this in place in the next couple of months. So this year.

**The CHAIR:** Going to Bowdens mine. Minister, are you aware that several peak agricultural bodies in the Mudgee region have called for a lead exploration, lead mining exclusion zone, including the wine association, some quite high-profile farmers like Mr Inglis and the olive oil association. Have you seen those concerns or have you had those concerns raised with your office personally?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm generally aware of issues or concerns that have been raised by people in that community. I'm also aware that there are views about the use of land and the competing uses for ag land in New South Wales. I don't know that anything specific has been raised with me from farmers in that part of the world specifically about this, but I'll check.

**The CHAIR:** I'm happy to provide you the correspondence. I believe some of it is just recent, over the last couple of days. It's been forwarded to me as well. There are concerns from the Mudgee Wine Association, concerns from the olive oil growers association and concerns from high-profile farmers within the region around exposure of lead and the accumulation of lead on their products and what that does to their certification as clean, organic produce. My question to you is, firstly, are you prepared to meet with these industry associations and understand their concerns and try to get an understanding of what clearly is a land use conflict issue here that probably falls squarely in your position as Minister and also the ag commissioner's position?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Yes. There are a couple of things there. Thank you for the correspondence. I note this first letter is dated 29 August. I haven't yet received it, although it's probably in the inbox. I am happy to take feedback or concerns on board from people in the ag sector in that part of New South Wales or any part of New South Wales. There's quite a lot of detailed correspondence here that you've just provided to me. I will undertake to go through it, of course.

**The CHAIR:** Have you received any advice from the ag commissioner on this?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** The ag commissioner is doing work engaging with people about ag land and doing the mapping program or has begun the mapping work that we've asked her to do. I'm also happy to talk to her about this and see if there are some things that she can do about it. In relation to the latter part of her question—will I meet with people—of course. Again, this looks like it's come in on Friday. I'm very happy to give consideration to any concerns that have been raised, happy to meet with anybody working in ag who does have those concerns to see—

**The CHAIR:** Part of that correspondence includes a letter from Johnson Legal, which has a draft SEPP amendment that would solve the issue in terms of putting in an exclusion zone. Are you prepared to take a look at that and get some advice as to whether something like that would be amenable to your Government?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Again, I'll have to have a look at this correspondence. What you've just provided me is dated just in the last couple of days and quite lengthy. I'm very happy to undertake to go through all of this information and to work with anyone about concerns or suggestions that they may have, and also across Government.

**The CHAIR:** Does it concern you that the proponent of the mine has failed to actually cover the accumulation of lead and contaminated dust on agricultural produce as a potential risk in the EIS?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I will get some advice on any of the specifics that people are raising. As I said, I wasn't aware that people had raised it. These letters are dated pretty much the last 48 hours. I'm very happy to go through it, seek advice and meet with people about any concerns that they might have.

**The CHAIR:** Can you take on notice whether you've received any other correspondence earlier on than these ones that have obviously come through this week? Have you received any other correspondence or had any meetings or just general advice as to whether you've known about this prior to these things coming through in the last couple of days?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm happy to check.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The CHAIR:** Going back to the EIS issue, once you get your advice regarding the accumulation, are you prepared to write to or discuss with the planning Minister to that have EIS amended to include that risk?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'll need to go through all this. I'll need to seek some advice on the circumstances and I'll give consideration to it once I've done that.

**The CHAIR:** I will go to the Rural Assistance Authority. In terms of recovery grants, how many farmers have actually been paid since June and how many are still waiting to receive a payment?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Good question. I will take on notice the specific numbers. We'll see if we can come back to you ASAP about the details for that.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** How do you not know that?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** There has been work happening over the weekend.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** The Premier knew it.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Excuse me, I'm trying to answer the question. I don't really need heckling from the sidelines. Let's be respectful. This is an issue that I have intervened in. It is really important that we're getting money and financial support to farmers who have been impacted by floods and natural disasters.

**The CHAIR:** If you don't have the data in front of you, can you also take on notice also what's the oldest claim still sitting on someone's desk waiting to be processed?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Sure. What is important to say is that it has taken too long in some cases for people to get feedback from the department. I have intervened and the department has now doubled the resources to make sure that we can get on top of the situation and get money out the door to people. I appreciate that people have now been doing that. Everyone—as far as I'm aware—who does have a claim in has been contacted, including over the weekend. We had department officials working over the weekend to get this matter dealt with.

**The CHAIR:** You said you've doubled staff. What was the original number?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** We've now got 50 people in total dealing with claims. The breakdown for who's doing what in relation to that I will take on notice, unless of course the secretary wants to provide specifics. It is important for people to understand that we have put additional resources into this. I don't want this to be taking a long time for people to be getting money, so we have put additional resources into this just in the last week to make sure that we can clear the applications through. That has been occurring, including over the weekend, because we need make sure that people are getting their money in a more timely way.

**The CHAIR:** Perhaps you'll have to take this on notice as well, but how many people have actually got money in their accounts, not just approved on paper?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I can get you that.

**The CHAIR:** And what's the average payout? Is it \$5,000 or are people seeing the full \$75,000 grants—maybe an average, a median et cetera, if you could get us some data.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Yes, I'm happy to provide it. I'll see what I can get for you in terms of the information. I'm happy to be as transparent as possible.

**The CHAIR:** If there's an average wait time, longest wait, how many people are getting knocked back, potential reasons why they might get knocked back. You don't need to identify the individual people, but just some general reasons that might help people sharpen up their applications in the future.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** The other thing that we've done, which I think is important for people to know, is there is additional information required this time around. The Auditor-General did do a review of previous grant allocations through disaster recovery and made recommendations about collecting further information so that we can make sure that money is going where it's supposed to go. We have taken that on board. We are asking people to provide more information. I understand that it's new for people who might have been through this before, so we've also prepared a guide to assist people with what information we need in order to, again, speed up this process. I do want to make sure that people who've been through these very traumatic circumstances get money as soon as we can get it to them.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** How important is it for you to have good relationships with regional stakeholders including mayors?

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Very important. I engage with regional stakeholders and mayors on a very regular basis.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** How's your relationship with the mayor of Dubbo at the moment?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm happy to engage with anyone on any community issues that they want to advocate for. I don't deal with people based on their politics; I deal with people based on the issues that need to be addressed in regional New South Wales. I would say that, generally speaking, people do engage with the Government in a constructive, respectful way. There are exceptions to the rule.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Interesting. It was reported on Channel 10 news last week that you cropped the mayor of Dubbo out of one of your photos on Facebook. Why did you do that?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I didn't.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Well, he's not in the picture and he was at that meeting, so why was he not included in your Facebook post?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I think you're referring to a meeting that I had with mayors through the Regional Cities organisation. That's mayors who are part of a group called Regional Cities. They come to—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** With respect, we've seen the larger photo where he's in it. Then, on your Facebook page, he's conveniently cropped out. My understanding is that you've also blocked him on social media.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I have.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Why have you blocked a regional mayor? You're also the Minister for Western New South Wales. It's arguably the biggest regional city for Western New South Wales. Why did you block the local mayor?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I have great relationships and constructive relationships with people across Western New South Wales. I've got great and constructive relationships with mayors of every persuasion—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I'm asking about one in particular.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm answering the question—across New South Wales. Again, I think people tend to approach working with Government in a constructive way to get outcomes for their community. I certainly want to provide assistance to regional communities for the services that they need. I don't cop harassment. I don't cop bullying. I haven't cropped anyone out of any photos. I'm not really interested in—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Are you accusing the Dubbo mayor of bullying and harassment? Is that what you're saying?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm not interested in who does what on Facebook. It doesn't matter.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** To be fair, Minister—

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I am interested in delivering for regional communities. I'm focused on making sure that regional New South Wales gets its fair share out of this Government.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Thank you, we'll get to that, Minister.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I will work with anyone of any persuasion—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** You've said that.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** — in a constructive manner to achieve those outcomes.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I want to pick up on something you've just you said. You said you don't work with people, and you talked about bullying and harassment. Are you accusing the Dubbo mayor of bullying and harassing you?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I think people should work—and I try to work with people—in a constructive way to get outcomes.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** That particular mayor has called you the "Anti-Minister for Regional New South Wales" and the "Anti-Minister for Western New South Wales". You talk about wanting outcomes. The \$33 million Dubbo sports hub—you've ripped the money out of that. Is that why you won't work with the Dubbo mayor, because he sees what you've done to that community?

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Got a great outcome coming for regional communities—that funding from a project that, unfortunately, didn't exist. For six or seven years, people failed to deliver it.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Minister, you pulled the money. What do you mean there's "a great outcome coming"? You pulled the money. You chose not to fund it.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** If council was so keen to have delivered that project, they would have. Instead, they withdrew. I've dealt with that issue. What I will say—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** How have you dealt with that issue?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** —is that \$33 million is now in the Regional Development Trust.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** No, I'm asking about specific funding for that project.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm also really pleased to say that I'm working closely—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** You've pulled it, haven't you, because you don't like the local mayor? That's why. This is all politics.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'd like to be able to answer the question.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** It's all politics, isn't it, Minister?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I want to be able to answer the question. I think this is of interest to people across regional New South Wales.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Yes, people in Dubbo would like to know where the money is for their sports hub that you've pulled.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm trying to answer the question.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Well, there's no money available for the project, Minister.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Point of order—

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Are you just going to interrupt me?

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** It's nonsense.

**The CHAIR:** I will hear the point of order.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** I do it most reluctantly. Procedural fairness is a process we all observe and follow. The opportunity is to provide questions followed by answers. That's the way we operate.

**The CHAIR:** At this point, I won't uphold the point of order because there was plenty of banter going back and forth between them. I would ask both the Minister and Ms Mitchell to allow each other a bit time between question and answer, mainly for the benefit of Hansard.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Just one more on the mayor of Dubbo, Minister. Obviously we've all seen the photo of his notes where he basically said you were a no-show to the meeting that and you've to go. Was your office responsible for that photo being leaked to the media?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No. The first I found out about the photo was when I saw it in the media. The first I found out that there was some sort of bizarre investigation in the Parliament was when I saw a media story about it last Thursday night, I want to say, or maybe Wednesday night. I think we can be doing better things with our time. I again want to engage with regional leaders of every persuasion to get good outcomes for regional communities.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Just as long as they're not the Mayor of Dubbo. You don't want to engage with him.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I think people posing in lifts and trying to create stunts is not really a way of getting good outcomes for regional communities.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I want to move to the issues of staff salaries in your office. Can you advise why you had an increase in the last financial year for your staffing arrangements?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I believe people might have got an increment, but I will happily take on notice any specific details.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Did you put on any additional staff, or is it that everyone there got a pay rise?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Additional staff compared to what?

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** To the previous financial year. There is an increase of about \$125,000 in your staff salaries and costs. Was it a new position that was created? How do you account for that increase in funding into your office?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'll have to take the specifics on notice. I think I've had roughly the same size team the whole time. If there is an amendment to that or anything different over the course of this financial year compared to the last, I'm happy to provide any further information.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** But there is more money going into your salaries. At the same time, you've got hundreds of jobs being cut from your department. Can you understand how people would find that a little bit hard to take when you're paying staff more or putting on additional staff and you've got 165 people losing their jobs in your agency?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** There is just short of 5,000 people working in the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development. I think we're at 4,800. I'll take the specific numbers on notice. There is a change management program underway in the department which is being conducted inside of the department. I'm not interfering in that, nor should I. We've got to make sure, as I've said many times, that the resources that we've got are being spent in regional communities to support regional communities and that we're doing it in a financially responsible way. That process is well underway. There is a consultation process underway with people across the department. That's got another little while to run. No final decisions have been made, but that may well be the impact.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Let's just go back to that. Who made the decision to cut those jobs? You're talking about a "change management process" which, with respect, Minister, is waffle for "people are going to lose their jobs". That's what is happening. Did you make that decision? Was it because of the Premier's direction to have less public servants? Where has the genesis for this "change management" come from?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** How the department is run, the day-to-day operations of the department and how resources are allocated are a matter for the secretary and for the department.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** You have no ministerial oversight. You've got no interest in where the jobs are being cut from—no direction from you at all. You just wipe your hands of it.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No, I didn't say anything of the sort.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** You literally just said it's up to the agency. That's what you said.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No. What I said is that the management and day-to-day resourcing and making sure that what needs to be implemented by the department on behalf of the Government is done is a matter for the secretary. I am not—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** If it's on behalf of the Government, was it your direction to say, "We would like less jobs within this agency"?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** You've got to let me answer the questions here.

**The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE:** Chair, can I raise again the same matter that you raised. Questions are being asked. The Minister is seeking to answer them and then is being spoken over.

**The CHAIR:** We were doing reasonably well there for a little while. Let's try and get back to that point.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Sorry, Chair.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** The Government makes decisions about our priorities and what we'd like to see delivered across regional New South Wales. The department implements those. We've got nearly 200 offices, as a department, around regional New South Wales. I don't sit in my office and allocate who answers the phone or who does the research or who is in each office around regional New South Wales. That would be silly.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** You've now just said, though, that the Government makes its plans and directions and then you get the department to implement it. So it's the Government's initiative that you cut jobs at your agency. That's what is happening now.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** The Government has an allocation of resources in this particular portfolio. The department—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** And you're losing jobs—that's what is happening.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Again, you've got to let me answer the questions. There is interest in this. This is something that people are paying attention to.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Yes, there is a lot of interest from the nearly 200 people that are going to be unemployed, Minister. Let's talk about some of those specific ones. The Wollongbar Environmental Laboratory is being shut down—13 highly skilled jobs being lost. They test soil and water for the department, farmers and general public. They also support communities following emergencies like flooding and fires. Do you think they're frontline staff?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Wollongbar is going to continue to operate as a really important facility for the department and for the people of regional New South Wales in terms of research and for other work that goes on there. There is well over 100 people—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** But 13 positions are going, aren't they, Minister?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Again, you have to let me answer the questions. You've just got to let me answer.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Point of order—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Well, how do you offer the same when you're cutting peoples' jobs?

**The CHAIR:** I'll hear the point of order.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** The Minister has got to be provided with a reasonable opportunity to answer questions, not just be cut off with what is a rhetorical statement.

**The CHAIR:** I will uphold it this time. Can we just allow a few seconds gap to let the Minister start her answer before redirecting or changing tack?

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Sure. I'll just be really simple then. How many frontline staff are losing their jobs at Wollongbar?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I haven't finished the last answer. That was what the point of order was for. That particular facility on the North Coast has over 100 people working in it. Most of the functions will continue. There is a particular service that has been, as I understand it, a fee-for-service situation, which hasn't been operating in the way that it needs to. No final decisions have been made, but that is part of the considerations that are underway for how the department will be providing services to regional communities going forward.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Can you confirm that there are 64 roles being cut in the agriculture sector, including livestock and technical staff?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** For the specific details of that, I'm going to hand over to the secretary.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** We'll come back to Mr Orr in the afternoon.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** As I've said, the intricacies of who works in what section and in what office around the 200-odd offices that we've got around regional New South Wales—people would appreciate that I'm not determining the specific numbers in each office and what the specific roles are in each office around the community. That would not be a good use of a Minister's time.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** But, Minister, I think people would—

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** The details of that can be answered by the secretary.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I'll come to Mr Orr. We've got him all afternoon. Happy to talk to Mr Orr about that this afternoon.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Happy to provide information.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Happy to have him. I just want to know, I guess, what your oversight is. I'll pick another example, the Trangie Agricultural Research Centre. It's also in western New South Wales. You're Minister for Agriculture, Minister for Regional New South Wales, and Minister for Western New South Wales. I would hope you would be across that particular centre. We're told that approximately 25 per cent of staff there will lose their jobs. Is that correct?

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Again, this is something that is being worked through. The details of what kind of services we need to be providing from where are being worked through by the department. I am confident that the work that the department needs to be doing to service ag, biosecurity and regional communities will continue. Specific questions of who is working out of what office and what station is something that is currently being worked through.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Who is losing their jobs? That is what I'm asking.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** It is something that is being currently worked through. There is a process underway. No final decisions have been made. I'm very happy to hand over to the secretary to provide the specifics of anything that you're looking for.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I'm very happy to ask him this afternoon. Minister, I just think it is quite astonishing that you don't know. You just said then that you're confident there won't be an impact. Are you sitting here today telling the Committee that the loss of 165 jobs and all of that important work that those employees are doing, day in and day out, will have no impact on research, biosecurity and emergency responses?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I think it's tough for people who are going through this situation, but I am confident that the department will be able to provide the services that it needs to provide for people across regional New South Wales.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I think they might be famous last words, Minister. I'll hand over to my colleague.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** You spoke earlier about the boost to funding and the boost to resources that you said you've demanded out of the RAA as far as the flood recovery assistance. You said you look at the stats every day, so for three months you've been looking at the stats and only now you've decided that we maybe need to ramp things up. How come it has taken so long?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I have been looking at these stats, and we have done better. In some cases it has taken too long to be getting money out the door so I have intervened to tell the department that they need to put extra resources into this—they have. They've doubled the staff allocation to deal with processing claims and making sure that we're engaging with people who have submitted claims on whether they need more information, where their claims are up to. It was taking too long. It is important that we are putting extra resources into that. As people expect, we do need to do that during emergency situations: have an increase in workforce and then back to normal outside of it. We have boosted the resources into that area to get these claims dealt with. That's very important.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Last week you said you were doubling the resources. You also said there was 50 people. So you are doubling 50?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No, that's the number that is now—

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Okay. So you announced last week you were doubling, but doubling from when?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** This has happened over the course of the last week, that we've put more resources—the department has put more resources. The specifics of who is doing what particular role in the RAA can be dealt with by the secretary. I am happy to provide more information through that channel.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** We can grab that this afternoon.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** It has been too slow, so ensuring that we've put more resources into it to get money out the door more efficiently to the people who need it, and more quickly, is something that is now occurring—and it should be.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Minister, does it feel weird to you to say that you're intervening in something that's just your day-to-day job?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No. Why would that be weird? There has been an issue where things were too slow. I have seen that. I've intervened and said we need to speed it up, and now we're speeding it up.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** But earlier on you specifically said you don't allocate who answers phones in different offices. Haven't you intervened to have more people answer the phone in specific offices?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No. As I've said, for the specifics of who is doing what role inside the RAA, I'm very happy to hand over to the secretary to provide specifics about the actual detailed work that has been occurring. I have received feedback, as the Minister and as the Government, that claims processing was

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**CORRECTED**

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taking too long. My intervention is to say it shouldn't be taking too long. We need to get this money out the door faster. That's a conversation I've had with the department. Resources have been put into it, and now the processing is happening faster.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Minister, a lot of the feedback we're receiving—and this has been reported in the media as well—is that farmers have been made to feel like they're being interrogated throughout this application process. One oyster farmer has said that he feels guilty until proven innocent. Is it fair that farmers who need help after this flood are being made to feel like criminals?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** It has been a really tough time for people who have been through these flooding events and natural disasters, particularly recently around the North Coast. I certainly don't want anyone to feel that way. We want to make sure that support that should be provided to people is being provided as soon as possible. As I have indicated, we are asking for more information this time around, as people submit their claims. That is to make sure that we're getting money to the people who should be getting it. It is also based on a review done by the Auditor-General on previous disaster funding rollouts, recommending that we collect further information in order to make sure that we're doing the right thing with taxpayer dollars. There is more information that does need to be provided in some cases this time around. That is part of the process.

We're assisting people and in touch with people about the details of each of their claims, what information needs to be provided and, if things are missing, how to assist them to put the proper information through. The department has also prepared a guide to assist people in getting that further information, which I believe is now on the department's website. That includes, for example, photos that people need to provide, the size that they should be, advice on how to collect it and what kind of further data is required in order to process things more quickly. In many cases, part of the reason that claims payments have been delayed is because we're having these conversations about the additional information. We're doing everything we can to make it as clear and streamlined as possible for people, but we are requiring more information.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Minister, can I come back to this. I know the Chair asked you. Can you tell us right now how many applications have been received for the primary producer grant so far and how many have been approved?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I did say that I would take that on notice.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** But how do you not know? You come to budget estimates today—

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I can give you a ballpark, but I've said I would take that on notice, which I'm entitled to do. I want to give accurate, proper information.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** You said you look at these every day.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** The Premier could give it to me a week ago, and you said you look at it every day. Isn't it the fact that we asked the Premier in budget estimates, and then, suddenly after that, mysteriously you're putting all these extra resources in? You sat on this for 100 days and did nothing to speed it up. It was only when it was raised with the Premier that you actually decided to put some more effort into getting this money out the door for farmers. Isn't that what happened?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No. That's not true at all.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Then why can't you tell me the number of applications? The Premier could. Why can't you?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I want to make sure that I'm providing specific details for you.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** You said you could give me a ballpark. What's a ballpark, then, if that's the best you can do?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I've said that I'll find the information. I've also said I would try to find it as we're going. I'll give you the information that I have. There are 1,510 applications for the \$75,000 special disaster grant and 265 applications for the \$10,000 Rural Landholder Grant.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** How many for that first grant have been approved?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** You've just made a really big deal of wanting this information.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I said how many primary producer grants—

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Chair, I'm literally providing the information, and I'm still getting cut off.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Received and approved, if you can.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** You've got to let me answer the question.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Point of order—

**The CHAIR:** Do you want to answer it?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Yes. The figure for the \$25,000 natural disaster grants is 596, the total being 2,371.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Do you have the total approved? They're the applications. How many have been approved?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I will come back to you with those details.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** Thank you, Minister, and to the witnesses. Minister, when did you first learn of proposals to legalise virtual fencing in New South Wales?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** When did I first learn of them? I announced them.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** But you said you'd been working on them for a long while. When someone says, "When did you first learn?", it would be in the normal understanding of English to be "When did you first hear of these proposals?"

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I have been working on the proposals that have come from interested parties for some time. When we were in opposition, there was discussion about trialling virtual fencing through the Roads portfolio and making sure we can have a look at it through that portfolio. In terms of ag, this is something that has been raised with me from farmers. It has also been raised by members of Parliament, including the member for Orange and the member for Barwon.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** So the answer to my question sounds like it's three or four years ago, or five years ago, in opposition?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No, I don't know the specific time in opposition. When we were in opposition, we looked at this.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** You were involved in those discussions?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No. The Opposition was—

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** You weren't involved, but know about them?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Yes.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** So when did you first hear of proposals to legalise virtual fencing? It's not a hard question, is it?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I've just answered the question.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** No, you haven't.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** People have raised this with me since I've been the Minister.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** Soon after you became Minister, you first heard about the proposal. That's the answer?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No. I'm pretty sure we made an election commitment in the Roads portfolio, but I'll have to check the details of that.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** Chair, seriously, this is embarrassing, isn't it?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** For you, perhaps.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** The Minister can't answer this straightforward question.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** It's not surprising.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** It's humiliating that someone supposedly of above-average intelligence can't answer a question like that.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm not interested in being attacked by Mark Latham this morning.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** You're not being attacked. You're taking us to be some sort of joke here, where you can't answer the question—

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No, I'm answering the question.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** —when did you first learn of proposals to legalise virtual fencing?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I've answered the question.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** Have you? Okay. How did you learn?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** As I've said, since I've been the Minister, this has been something that has been raised with me. It's something that has been raised with me by members of Parliament. It's something that has been raised with me particularly by the member for Orange and the member for Barwon, who have raised this as something that they've been seeking on behalf of constituents.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** When did you first discuss it with the Premier?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I don't know if I've had a specific conversation with the Premier about it. The Government has considered it in broad terms. I don't think there has been a specific conversation.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** How did the Government come to consider it? By what process?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Some processes, particularly by Cabinet, I'm not at liberty to discuss in this forum.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** So it went to Cabinet. Have you got a timeline on when it went to Cabinet?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm not discussing anything that may or may not have gone to Cabinet.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** Even just to say when the Cabinet meeting was? It's not giving away any Cabinet confidentiality, is it, just to say the meeting was in the middle of 2023?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm not in a position to answer that.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** You're saying it went through Cabinet. Obviously the Premier chairs that meeting. On 21 March 2024 the Government in the LA opposed the private member's bill of the member for Orange to legalise virtual fencing. What impact did you have on that decision, and why did you make it?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** It actually went to a parliamentary inquiry. This is something that has been considered by this Parliament and by—I can't remember which committee, but I know people here have been involved in the parliamentary committee that gave consideration to it. It made recommendations to the Government in relation to virtual fencing. I am also undertaking work on delivering our election commitment to review the POCTA Act, which is where this matter will be dealt with. There's work underway from that perspective, as well.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** You've mentioned the role of the member for Orange. In his second speech on his private member's bill for virtual fencing in the other place on 8 February 2024, he said:

As recently as last week I visited Gallagher's animal management facility in Queensland to see their virtual fencing technology in operation. Gallagher is one of very few manufacturers worldwide which produces virtual fencing technology.

Why did you tell our House that you thought it was a competitive industry?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** It is.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** The person who has approached you and stimulated your interest says very few manufacturers worldwide produce this technology. How many are you aware of?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Both things can be true. There's more than one.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** You think a duopoly is a competitive industry, do you?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** There's more than one.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** Okay, we'll take that back to year 10 commerce and see how it goes. If legalised, what market share do you expect Halter and Gallagher to have in this industry in New South Wales?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** If and when we legalise it—which, I am doing the work to do it this year, as I've indicated—the people who are offering this as something for farmers to purchase will offer it. If we

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**CORRECTED**

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do legalise it—it's currently not legal in many places in Australia—I would imagine more people will be interested in offering this as a service for farmers. That's a matter for the market.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** But at the moment you can't say what market share you'd expect Halter, the dominant player in the market, to have?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm not really interested in the market share of anybody.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** You're not? Okay.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Farmers have asked for this to be something that is made legal in New South Wales. I am trying to facilitate more modern farming practices, embracing technology, working with farmers to do that across the board. This is an option in that space. The role for the Government will be to amend the law and that's what we're working to do. And as we do that, putting whatever rules we decide to put in place, which we have been consulting with people about—even when we do that, it'll be a matter for companies and farmers if they choose to use this kind of technology or not.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** Minister, was there any reason for the timing of your announcement in Orange on 30 April?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Yes, I was in Orange. I was there for a safety forum. I was looking, as people would expect, for an appropriate place to make an announcement such as this. I was there in that community for a number of reasons. In fact, I was continuing further out west on a trip. This is a topic that has been raised with me, as I have indicated many times, by the member for Orange, on behalf of constituents. It seemed an appropriate place to make the announcement.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** And this followed a whole-of-government consideration that gave you the authority for the announcement?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I make announcements on behalf of the Government through many channels.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** But had there been a whole-of-government consideration that gave you the capacity to make that announcement on 30 April?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I make announcements on behalf of the Government and there are many mechanisms enabling me to do that. I don't just wake up in the morning and make announcements.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** When you met with Halter on 7 May, who was in that meeting representing the company?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'd have to check the details of the name of the CEO. It was a meeting that I did have with them after the announcement—some time after the announcement. I met with another company involved with this, after the announcement also. I met with the companies here in Parliament to talk to them about the announcement and to hear from them about their ideas.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** You mentioned the CEO. Was the director of strategic relations part of the meeting too?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'd have to check the details.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** You know Brent Thomas, don't you, from the Labor Party? He was Labor's candidate in Hughes in 2010 and you've known him in other capacities. Was he part of the meeting?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Sure, yes.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** Did he tell you that he'd just recently started at Halter, coincidentally?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Yes.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** He said what, in that regard?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I can't remember the specifics of what was said at the meeting. It was on a Wednesday, which is a complicated sitting day in this place. I remember them sitting in my office while I had to come down to vote on two or three divisions, so it wasn't a productive meeting.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** You poor thing.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** That happens. But I was surprised to learn that he was working at the company post the time that I'd made the announcement. So what?

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**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** You say, "So what?" What was the nature of your surprise?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I didn't know he worked there.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** Were you surprised by the fact that he'd left TikTok seven months earlier and hadn't had a job? This would have been quite a change in career direction, having worked at Mastercard, Airbnb and then TikTok. Without having any employment listed on his LinkedIn, pretty well on the day you made the announcement he started working with a cow-zapping company in New Zealand.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I have absolutely no idea. I don't track the career history of people in the Labor Party.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** But you said you were surprised, when you met with him, that he was now working for this New Zealand outfit called Halter?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Yes.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** Were you surprised only on the basis that he was working with them? Knowing him as you did, wouldn't you be surprised that it was such a radical change in career direction?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I don't know what you mean by "knowing him as you did". This is a person that I'm aware of. I made an announcement on behalf of the Government about a policy change that we were looking to implement. I then met with stakeholders in relation to that change, including companies who supply this product. It turns out I happen to know somebody who works at one of the companies.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** How long had you known Mr Thomas from his Labor Party role?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I don't know. I don't think we know each other well. I just know of him, as you do around—

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** I'm not asking how well you know him, I'm asking from when.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I really could not answer that question. I do not know.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Good morning, Minister. Is the Government establishing a new peak body for recreational fishing in New South Wales?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Yes, we made an election commitment to do that. Work is underway to create that body. There is a budget allocation for it. I have asked—

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Do you know how much that is?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'll take it on notice. I want to say \$1 million.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** That's right. It's \$1,050,000.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I've asked the advisory councils that I have to have a look at some suggestions on what a structure for that could look like. It is now available for consultation publicly with people across fishing. The commitment that we've made to establish this—it's not a government body. It's just like we have done in the commercial sector. We made election commitments to facilitate the set-up of these bodies and then it will be over to them.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** If it's not a government body, why is the chair being paid as though it's an advisory body to government, a committee? The chair is going to be paid \$10,000 per year. Other members will be paid \$5,000 per year.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** That's the proposal to help it establish itself. It's not a long-term proposal from the Government to fund this organisation. If it does come to fruition—

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Why is the Government doing it at all?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** We made an election commitment to—

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Why did you make an election commitment?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm trying to—

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Is this another deal with the Shooters?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm trying to answer the question.

**The CHAIR:** We don't like the model.

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**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** We, in opposition, made commitments to assist with the establishment of a commercial peak body. That has been done. I'm sure there'll be questions on that today. The work on that has been completed. We also made a commitment to assist with the establishment of a peak fishing body. There is a budget allocated to that. The role for government is assisting, as per our election commitment, to establish it. How it determines itself after that will be a matter for that body. But this is an election commitment.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Did the Government write the objects? Who wrote the objects of this supposed body that you are helping to establish that will not be government at all?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Well, it's not established yet. We're consulting on it.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** The objects are here.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** They're out for consultation.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** The objects are here for people to consult on.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Yes.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Who wrote them?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I sought advice from—there are advisory councils. I sent it to my advisory council to say, "Hey, give us some suggestions on what you think, as people who are in this space, this might look like." Some suggestions have been made. I didn't agree with all the suggestions, but it doesn't matter. It's currently out for consultation. That consultation, I believe, is due to finish—someone will correct me—in October. Once that consultation is completed, that work will come through and the Government will consider the feedback.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** I'm confused in terms of what it's actually got to do with the Government at all.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** It's because we said we would help establish these committees. It's very transparent. We made an election commitment.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** It's not a committee.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No, it will be—we did this in the commercial sector as well. We took to the election—

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** It's a peak body.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Yes, I understand that. We took to the election a number of commitments in fishing. Two of them were to assist and facilitate the creation of a peak body for commercial fishing. That work is done. The sector came together and did that.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Yes, you've said that, Minister.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** We provided assistance for its establishment. Now it has to stand on its own two feet. A commitment was made for providing assistance—

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Who did you make the commitment to? Was it the Shooters?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I wasn't the shadow Minister. It was made publicly. It was made to the people of New South Wales. We made a number of commitments, as I've said, in relation to fishing; one of them was to assist with the establishment of a peak body for fishing.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Thank you, you've said that.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** We're doing that.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** You said you consulted with the advisory councils in terms of the objects of that peak body. Given the most recent State of the Environment report found that there has been a 9 per cent decline in fish stocks in New South Wales, why weren't conservation objectives included in the objects?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** It's open for consultation now. If people want to provide that feedback, the feedback will come through to me at some point, and to the Government at some point, in October and we'll consider it. Again, this is a commitment that we made—

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Yes, a commitment you made before the election. Got it.

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**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Yes, to assist with the establishment of this body. Work is underway to do that. It will then exist, if we support the proposals that come through as part of this consultation. You're welcome to provide feedback.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** So \$1 million is given to this organisation. That's a fair bit of money given to a body to just establish itself, that will be completely independent from government afterwards.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No. It hasn't been given any money. It doesn't exist at this point.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** It certainly says so on this document. You told me earlier that it's been given—

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** There is a budget allocation to deliver on our election commitments. There is a budget allocation for the election commitments that we made in fishing. There is a budget allocation for the establishment of this peak body to deliver the election commitment. That's very transparent. We took it to the election. We formed a government. I'm now delivering on that election commitment.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** It's certainly interesting also to look at the submission page for the Have Your Say. It's almost like push polling. In Have Your Say, the very first thing in terms of "Purpose and benefits" finishes with "and what benefits do you think this body could provide to the recreational fishing community?" That's basically the first question: "What would you like to see from an independent peak body, and what benefits would it provide?" Is that genuine consultation to get views one way or the other, do you think, or is that a bit push polling and "Let's just consult about this body we've already committed to establishing and giving \$1 million to"?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** We made an election commitment to assist with the establishment of this body. We said to the people of New South Wales, "As part of our promises to you in the fishing space, this is one of them. If we form a government, this is what we'll do." Our job is to deliver on the things that we told people we'd do.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Even if they're silly ideas?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** If there's any kind of issue with the questions on the feedback page, I'm very happy to take that onboard. This is genuine consultation. This is a peak body for recreational fishing.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Thanks, Minister.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Those are the people I imagine will be the focus of the consultation, but always happy to take feedback onboard.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** With respect, given how little your Government, and you as Minister, is doing in the marine conservation side of things, it is of concern that this \$1 million is being put towards this. Fish stocks are declining. There's no attempt and no commitment by your Government to conserve any more parks, any more marine areas for protection. I want to ask a few more questions in the time available to me about another issue. On 19 August it was reported by media that 32 turtles had washed ashore dead on beaches around Port Stephens in the previous weeks. Are you aware of that?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Yes.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** I know that the department as well as National Parks and others are looking into the reasons for this. I have been told by some people that there is concern that the New South Wales Estuary General meshing fishery or the New South Wales inshore trawl fishery could be responsible for the deaths of a number of turtles because New South Wales is the only State that has not mandated the use of bycatch reduction devices which assist turtles, if they're caught in nets, to be released quickly and not drown. Firstly, are you aware that commercial fishery operations could be responsible for some of these deaths?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** That has not been put to me.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Why has New South Wales failed to legislate? Why is it the only State that has failed to legislate and make sure that these bycatch reduction devices are mandatory on commercial fishing operations?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** It's awful that turtles, as I understand it, have washed up onshore. I know that my department is doing some work with other agencies. I don't believe we're the lead agency on this, but I'll hand over to them to give an update on where that's up to. The things that you're putting to me now have not been put to me as causes, nor has an outcome of whatever work is being done to have a look at the situation there. It's something that of course we would take seriously. I take it seriously. I'm happy to see if Fisheries have any—

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**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** I'll come back to the department. Finally, regarding the five sanctuary zones in the Batemans Bay Marine Park, where the department permits recreational fishers despite that they should be full sanctuary zones under the amnesty, under what head of power or what law are you, as Minister, allowing that fishing in those marine park zones, knowing that those sanctuary zones are legally protected as sanctuary zones?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** This is something that has been in place for a number of years. I know you're well aware of that. The Government will be doing our review, as we are required to do at this point, in relation to the rules around these issues. I'm sure these things will be considered as part of that.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Minister, after the floods on the Mid North Coast, you visited there with the Premier and met with oyster farmers a couple of times and promised a tailored package for oyster farmers. As far as the response goes, where's that up to?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** We've just covered the assistance that is being provided from disaster grants—

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Sorry, Minister, a tailored response to oyster farmers, as you promised.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm going to answer the question—to those who are entitled to those disaster grants. I know there will be a number of people who we likely met that day, but I don't know. I don't know the individual people who've applied for assistance. We'll be doing that and, if they're entitled to it, they should be. The department also has been working with people in the oyster industry in relation to assistance to help them get back on their feet and get through these periods. That's a normal piece of work that we do following these kinds of events. I'm happy to hand over to see if there are more details they might want to provide.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** No. Minister, are you able to provide for us the details of the tailored package for oyster farmers that you promised when you visited that area after the floods?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** The Premier and I listened to those oyster farmers who were impacted that day. That formed part of the reasoning for us submitting and working with the Federal Government to create the disaster assistance that is available now and that I encourage people, if they're in need, to apply for.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** There is support for oyster farmers within the broader package, but there is no tailored package for oyster farmers, as you committed to with the Premier.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** This level of support was not available at that time, so meeting with farmers at that time following the floods formed part of the considerations we gave to working with the Commonwealth on disaster assistance work.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** One of the things they asked for when you were up there, Minister, was a waiving of their lease fees and licensing fees. Has that happened?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** There hasn't been a waiver of fees. I'm just going to double-check if that's right. But, again, happy to work with people about any specifics or further assistance they might need.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Minister, you've had three months to work with these people. You promised them the tailored package that they don't have. Another promise was made at the oyster grower conference in 2024 for a new aquaculture opportunity. What's happened with that?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Yes. There will be more to say about that soon. I'm not in a position to announce our new initiatives in that space just yet, but stay tuned.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Okay. Minister, oyster farmers in particular have had a lot of difficulties applying for this \$75,000 as part of the broader support that is offered. They're getting emails asking for more specific details around numbers of oysters, age, size, proof of payments and time needed for maturity of replacement oysters. How is this level of red tape fair on farmers who've lost so much?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** As I've indicated, I certainly acknowledge that this has been a really difficult time for people across the community. We are getting the disaster support out faster than we were before, but there is a requirement to provide further information this time around. We are working directly with applicants in relation to that. We have asked for more information this time around based on advice, including from the Auditor-General, about the need for that further information to ensure that we're getting taxpayer dollars to the people who need it, and not people who don't.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Are there many people out there that don't need it, Minister?

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**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** We've got to make sure that we've got proper robust processes in place for how we allocate taxpayer dollars. I think that's a reasonable proposition from anyone's perspective. I want to make sure that this support gets to people who need it and who are entitled to it. There is a requirement for more information. We are working with people to be able to assist them to provide that. But this is based on advice from previous programs that didn't have the proper processes in place. We've followed that advice and we are asking people to provide more information.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Minister, one of those oyster farmers is John, who does need help up there. He is really struggling. In his words, he has said, "I've lost a million bucks worth of oysters and I'm being held to ransom for the \$75,000." Minister, what do you say to him? Do you understand the impact that this has on these people already going through so much stress?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm sorry, I'd need more information about this particular person's circumstances in order to address him and his particular circumstances. He is welcome to reach out—

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** That sentiment then, Minister, if I—

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I understand that. He is welcome to reach out if he has particular circumstances for the department to provide assistance with. What I can say, in general terms, is what I have said. I understand this has been a really difficult time for people following these flooding events. It is a difficult and precarious sector to be working in. I know that people who work in it do understand that. We do not want to make it more difficult for people, which is why we've put additional resources into it to assist people getting the support that they need and that they're entitled to, but we have had to collect more information or seek further information from people. That is part of the process.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Some farmers, Minister, have been told that they can't apply for the \$75,000 because they don't meet the 50 per cent threshold. They're being directed often, we're told, to the small business grants, which specifically says in the guidelines that it can't be a farm enterprise. Will you remove that clause from the guidelines to allow these farmers to access those small business grants?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** It's not something that we're looking at, but what I will say is that we are having a look and we do need to, as a community and as a government, have a look at how these programs will continue to operate into the future. We are seeing more of these disasters at an increasing scale on a more regular basis in New South Wales. The amounts of money that have been allocated in recent times under this Government compared to the previous Government, which I'm not saying to indicate any kind of politics—but the amount of money that now has to go out the door for this kind of assistance is something that needs to be looked at. What we need to move towards is assisting people with mitigation, assisting people with setting up their farms in ways that assist them when these kinds of disasters strike, rather than waiting until after the fact and then going through these same processes. We need to do some work on what that looks like going forward because, as everybody knows, they're happening far more frequently and far more extremely than they have at other points in history.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Minister, can I just clarify that you're adamant that there will be no change to the small business grants to remove that clause to allow farm enterprises to be eligible? If the answer is no, can I implore you to consider that?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** As I've indicated, we're looking at how these things should be operating going forward. At the moment, I'm focused on making sure that we can get this money out the door as soon as possible. It's not something that I'm looking at now, but I'm very happy to take feedback and consideration on board from people who've been through this situation over the last couple of months so that we can look at what structures should be in place for dealing with these things going forward. Again, it's more frequent, more difficult and the State is not going to be in a position to continue dealing with things in these ways. I know this is something that farmers consider. They want to work with us on that as well, and I want to work with farmers about the kinds of things that we can support people with to prepare and be more ready for, rather than waiting until afterwards.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Can you take this as feedback: through local members like Tanya Thompson and Michael Kemp, we're asking you to seriously consider removing that clause. Minister, Josh Hack is an agronomist and a beef farmer at Kempsey. He was quoted in the media recently saying that primary producers are telling him:

... they feel like they (the state government) just want to make it so hard that we just give up ...

Minister, how can we have gotten to the situation where farmers are feeling that after one of the most traumatic experiences they've ever had?

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**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** It has been a really traumatic experience for people, and I continue to acknowledge that. I've met with many farmers from this part of New South Wales who have been through this recent flooding event, people up further north who were impacted by ex-Tropical Cyclone Alfred. This is a terrible experience for people to go through. How we can assist people to get back on their feet, what the role of Government is in doing that in the long term is something that I'm very alive to.

I make a point of getting out and about and talking to farmers directly to get this kind of feedback. It's a terrible situation that people have been through. We don't want to make things more onerous for people, but I do have to have proper robust processes in place for the allocation of taxpayer dollars. As I've indicated, these more robust processes are based on recommendations from the Auditor-General. We'll continue to work with people about the best way to provide assistance, including, as I have done over the last week, to ensure that additional resources are put in to get money out the door faster.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Part of those additional resources have been so everyone gets some sort of contact. Minister, a generic email went out on Friday titled, "Update on recovery grant applications to all customers with RAA". Is that what we're talking about—contact with applicants? Is that enough for people like Emma from Hunter Turf Co, who has lost almost a million dollars' worth of stock, to receive nothing but that generic email from RAA? \*\*

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No. Emails have been sent out and 1,027 customer phone calls were made. Text messages have been sent out. Contact has been made in various ways if the team at RAA weren't able to get in touch with people specifically. We'll continue to engage with people about what is needed. We're telling them where their claim is up to, what the status is, if more information is needed, if it is not going forward, the processing times—all of those kinds of things. That has ramped up over the last week, as it should. We'll continue to engage with people to get this money out the door.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Minister, I want to take you back to the small business grants and that change that has been asked for, because some farmers aren't qualifying for the primary producer grants because you have to have at least 50 per cent of income to be derived from the farming business. They've been told to apply for the small business grants instead, but then those criteria say that you can't be a farm enterprise. Our understanding is that some farmers have been told by the Reconstruction Authority that that has been changed, that that has been approved, that they can now apply. Are you aware of that?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** The reconstruction agency is not one that is in my remit, but I'm happy to—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** But that's a grant under your purview as Minister. My point is that farmers are now being told that that guideline has changed, that clause. Do you know if that is correct?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'll have to take advice on that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Does Mr Orr know?

**STEVE ORR:** Ms Mitchell, my understanding is the small business grants are administered by Service NSW. It's not administered by the Rural Assistance Authority.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Do you know whether that farm enterprise clause has changed?

**STEVE ORR:** No, I'm not aware of that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Thank you for the clarification. Back on the oyster farmers, you were saying before that obviously people need to go through processes to receive the funding. Are you aware of what some of the oyster farmers are being asked to provide in terms of their applications?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm happy to hear from you if there is specific feedback about—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Do you know what that process looks like for an oyster farmer?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** They've got to provide the information that is required to be provided as part of the application. That'll include the breakdown. Some of it has just been given in questions today. That'll include details about the nature of their business. That's part of the process for the application.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Some of the oyster farmers are telling us that they're being asked to provide things like how many oysters died and what sizes they were, how many they had before the floods, full business plans for the next two years. Others have been asked to detail, as I said, the specific number of oysters, age, size, proof of payment. You have some farmers who are literally tipping out up to 10 wheelbarrows of oysters a day and being asked to measure and count each one. Do you think it's reasonable for people who have been

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through an incredibly tough time, that those sorts of details are holding them up from getting money that would help them survive and stay afloat?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Look, people who are running these businesses would have an idea of the stock that they have, the details of what they have as part of their business. We are asking people to provide that information as part of an application. I think that's appropriate.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** So you don't think that's unreasonable, asking them to go to that level of detail and that specificity? You're comfortable with that?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** That people would provide detail of stock as part of an application?

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Down to measuring and counting each oyster in 10 wheelbarrows of oysters per day that they're tipping out. Do you think that's fine that people are being asked to do that?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I think people who run these businesses have information about the nature of their business and their stock and their produce. That is what's being asked for.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I'll move on now, Minister. Can you tell me how much of New South Wales is currently categorised as being in drought or drought affected?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Drought affected is around 44 per cent; in drought is less than 1 per cent. We'll just double-check that. Drought affected is around that 44 per cent, though. That has dropped over the last little couple of weeks.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Are you able to tell me how many applications have been received through the Drought Ready and Resilient Fund?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Yes, I probably can. Let me see what I can find for you. While I look for the specifics, it's around 250, but I'm happy to provide specific details for you.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Can you tell me how many have been approved as well, if you've got that there?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Let me see what I can find. I'm happy to provide—I'll get the specific numbers for you.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** You will have to take that on notice as well?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Yes.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** So you can't tell us how many people have applied for disaster funding or drought funding as we sit here?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I have told you that, actually. I gave you the breakdown.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** No, you took most of it on notice.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No, I provided the answer.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** No, I asked for how many applications have been approved.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** You kept cutting me off while I gave the answer, but I gave the answer.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** You didn't have it when it was asked by the Chair. Can you tell me, then, how much of the \$250 million has been allocated through the Drought Ready and Resilient Fund?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Yes. It's around 8 or 9 million, plus we had to complete—so the number of applications received, 223; applications approved, 49; value approved is \$8.97 million.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** How many applications, then—of only 49 approved, have 200 been rejected or are they still being processed?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'll have to seek further information about that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Do you know how many have been rejected and why?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I would have to seek further information about that, but I'm happy to come back—

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**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Are you briefed on that, by any chance? To me, if you have \$250 million sitting in that fund and you just said you have got close to half the State who are drought affected, not a lot of money has gone out the door, Minister. I'm asking why do you think that is.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** This isn't the only fund that was providing funding to people. There was a previous fund that gave out well over \$100 million worth of funding. This is the fund that is now available. I don't get a specific briefing on the individual claims that are approved or rejected, if that's what you are asking.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I appreciate that, but surely—you have got a \$250 million fund. You have half the State experiencing drought conditions. You've only had, what, \$8 million or \$9 million go out the door. Is it because you are making it too hard for farmers to access this support? Is it because they have got to spend the money first and then claim it back? Is it because the interest rate on the program is too high? People are needing support. You're only spending barely any of that money, or barely any of it has been allocated. I'm just curious as to how you don't know more about why farmers might have been declined, what that process is. I'm just not sure how you don't know that.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No, there is more than one channel for people to receive support from—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** But I'm asking about this one, where people have been rejected for funding. Have you been briefed as to why people have not been successful through this fund and the reasons for that?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No, but I know that the department are having a look at the structure of how that process is working. If there are issues in relation to that, then I will be looking forward to receiving that advice.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** So what's being looked at?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Just last week the Prime Minister, the Premier and I announced a \$43 million fund to provide further support for people dealing with drought, business resilience planning—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I just want to concentrate on this Drought Ready and Resilient Fund, though.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** So there are a number of channels for people to be receiving support.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Yes, and I am asking about this specific one. Can you tell me what the interest rate is that is applied to this program?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** The interest rate—published rates are 4.6 per cent and 5.3 per cent for five- and 10-year loans, respectively.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** What has been put to us is that this program is actually designed to make it harder for farmers to get that assistance. The perception is that farmers have been set up to fail with their applications. Do you agree with that?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** That's certainly not the intention of the Government. We want to make sure that people get the assistance that they need, so money is being provided. As I've said, there are additional channels. Just last week the Prime Minister, the Premier and I announced an additional joint funding announcement of \$43 million for continuation of the farm business program to assist people with drought. This particular fund is to assist with preparation and other things. The department is having a look at how those processes are working. We want support to be provided to people who are experiencing these dry conditions in order to get through, and so those are the systems that I'm trying to ensure are in place.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Hurst for two minutes and then back to the Opposition for two.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Minister, I understand that you recently received a letter from Naomi Rose, a leading marine mammal scientist. She wrote to you about Coffs Coast Wildlife Sanctuary. As you know, Ms Rose is an international expert. She raised serious concerns about the welfare of the dolphins at Coffs Coast Wildlife Sanctuary and she particularly had concerns that the facility is calling itself a sanctuary, given that they are still allowing the public to interact with the dolphins and they are looking to really raise money, rather than actually function as a specific sanctuary. She described it as highly misleading and said that it's not consistent with the international standards regarding what a sanctuary actually is. I know you're looking at reviews around the animal welfare laws. Would you be willing to look at the definition of "sanctuary" and ensure that places that misuse that term in an attempt to mislead the public about the purposes of those facilities are looked at in making sure that that term can only be used for genuine sanctuaries?

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**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I haven't seen the correspondence. I accept that, if you're saying that this person has written to me, I'm sure that is the case. I am not familiar with that correspondence, but I will make sure to have a look out for it. This is a place that I know you've raised with me before. I'm familiar with your concerns in relation to it. I'm happy to engage with people about how these places should be operating in New South Wales. But, so long as at the moment they're operating lawfully—

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Sorry, Minister, my question was about the use of the term "sanctuary". There are quite a few different facilities across New South Wales, such as roadside zoos, that use the term "sanctuary", and that goes against the international standards regarding what is considered a sanctuary. I'm asking if you would be willing to review the use of the term "sanctuary" within your broader animal welfare review to make sure that they're not misleading the public in regard to the actual operation of that facility.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I understand the question. I don't know that anyone is misleading or not, but I accept the question that you're raising. Of course, happy to have a look at the use of titles, the use of words, and, if that is the case and is something that we need to address, very happy to give consideration to that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Minister, what is your understanding of the damage to the Manning Point seawall after the recent floods?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I haven't received any specific information about that, but I'm happy to get some information about it.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Residents of Manning Point and Harrington are really concerned that the seawall could break the next time that there are rough seas and ocean swells, potentially causing flooding in both localities. Are you aware of any work being done so far to that seawall?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I am not aware of that, but if anyone else has some information—otherwise, I'll take it on notice and I'll come back to you.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Mr Orr, do you?

**STEVE ORR:** No.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I'll hand over to my colleague.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Minister, why doesn't Forestry Corp participate in aerial shooting programs?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** There are aerial shooting programs that occur in forests, yes.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** In the recent inquiry we had into the conservation hunting bill, Bryce Wilde from the NRC stated that Forestry Corp does not participate in aerial shooting programs organised and fully funded by Local Land Services. This creates a significant risk to the overall program's efficacy. Was he incorrect in saying that?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** There are pest management programs. The aerial shooting program works with LLS. Those programs are in operation.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** In Forestry Corp?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Yes.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** We also learnt in that inquiry that, when we look at the spending per hectare on invasive species control, LLS topped the chart with \$8.64 per hectare; National Parks, \$6.74; and Forestry Corp, \$1.79 per hectare. Are you able to direct some more resources to Forestry Corp—as you've done earlier—to help manage some of the invasive species that are quite prevalent in those areas?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Part of the work that Forestry Corporation does in managing forests does relate to pest control and dealing with invasive species. We have a whole piece of work that I'm doing and that the Government is doing to look at how we are better using resources to deal with pest management in New South Wales across agencies, within agencies, across different pieces of land in New South Wales. That work is well underway. We need to do better, including with the Good Neighbours Program, which has been rolled out to look at how we can better deal with these things across different pieces of land in New South Wales. That is a really important piece of work and it is well underway.

**The CHAIR:** I now go to the Government for any questions.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** Thank you, Chair, not at this time.

**The CHAIR:** We will now break for morning tea and return at 11.15 a.m.

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**CORRECTED**

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**(Short adjournment)**

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back after that brief interlude. Minister, I'll hand up some documents that I want to go through with you regarding commercial fisherman and Jerrinja native owner Frank Connolly Jr, and what has happened with his fishing entitlements. He was set to inherit the entitlements from his father, Frank Connolly Sr, who was a commercial fisherman as well. His father passed and, unbeknownst to him, the shares were signed—essentially illegally—over to his mother, who was suffering from dementia at the time. Someone from DPI Fisheries has gone to her house—there is a document—and given a false signature on the very last page. I can attest from Mr Frank Connolly Jr that that's not his mother's signature.

They've used Frank Connolly Jr's ABN number rather than a different ABN number. Essentially, significant shares in the ocean haul category have disappeared from Frank Connolly Jr's business in that transfer, which is an illegal transfer because I would put to you that Rhonda Connolly was not of sound mind to sign anything as she was suffering from dementia. The second set of attachments is the doctor's record showing that, at the time that this transfer occurred, she would not have been of sound mind to do so and that they were not hers to do so anyway. My first question is does that concern you that someone from your department went to a person's house and signed the sale and transfer of shares to a second business that no-one knows who that belongs to, and did so with a lady who was suffering from dementia?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I am concerned to hear allegations of that nature. I appreciate the documents that you've just provided me, which I will take some time to go through outside of this hearing and have a look into. The proposition that you're putting to me—

**The CHAIR:** In 2017 a duplicate business was created in Rhonda Connolly's name. The missing ocean haul shares, we believe, disappeared from Frank Connolly Jr's business through the illegal transfer committed by getting Rhonda Connolly to sign over shares to be sold off, in part. The accusation is that someone from your department went to Ms Connolly's home knowing that she was suffering from dementia, got these shares signed off—that she wasn't entitled to in the first place—and sold them off Mr Frank Connolly Jr's business. He only found out about this when he ends up in court because he's thinking he's fishing legally and then he gets pulled up by fisheries compliance and they say, "You don't have those shares on your business." He says, "Yes, I do." We now find out that they were transferred illegally.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** This is Frank Connolly?

**The CHAIR:** This is Frank Connolly Jr. He was set to inherit those shares—or he thought he had inherited the shares—from his father, and we now found out that someone went and clearly coerced a woman who was fragile of mind to transfer these shares and sell them off to God knows who. They're quite lucrative shares, ocean haul, particularly in that region.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** And you're not sure where they have gone to? Again, I appreciate that you've given me the information. I will absolutely have a look.

**The CHAIR:** Can we find out where those shares went to, who from the department actually went and did this and signed the sale of these shares off with a lady suffering from dementia, where have they gone, and what's the potential recompense to Frank Connolly Jr, who has now lost out. He didn't get \$20,000 compensation for those shares that were illegally transferred, so where's the compensation for Frank Connolly Jr on that?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** And he's looked back from when he's—so an incident has occurred where fisheries officers have penalised him?

**The CHAIR:** Yes. He ended up in court having to defend himself. He was successful, but that obviously opened the door to say, "Where have all those shares gone?" We find out that someone from your department coerced a dying lady to sell them off when they weren't hers to sell.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I appreciate that you're putting these things to me. It's the first time I've heard of it. I will take all of this on board, of course, and take it very seriously. You've provided me with some correspondence, which I will go through and seek further advice on. Some of the dates on this—which I appreciate were some time ago—are 2016 and 2017.

**The CHAIR:** I know a lot of it predates your time, Minister, but it's still your department.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I will give you an undertaking that I'll go through all of this and see what I can find out in relation to the allegations you have put today.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The CHAIR:** Going back to the Mudgee mine situation, have you had any correspondence from the Opposition, particularly the National Party, regarding concerns over this, given that the mine sits on and near two Nationals-held electorates? Have they raised concerns about the land-use conflict between the mine and farmers?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Not directly with me, but that doesn't mean that there isn't correspondence. Let me check with my office to see, as I undertook to do this morning, in relation to any correspondence on this issue. I know that you've provided me with some today, which I will go through and have a look at, but I'll have to check.

**The CHAIR:** I've got some more too, Minister. I'll provide you a copy. These are emails that have gone back and forth from your office with the Olive Oil Association, going back to September last year. I'm just wondering whether you were advised of this correspondence. If so, why didn't you act sooner in terms of instructing the ag commissioner to do this mapping work if it was known to your office in September 2024?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** That there are concerns in relation to—

**The CHAIR:** The land-use conflict between the Bowdens mine and all these high-value agricultural products—olive oil, wine, cherries—all concerned about lead contamination. They've asked your office to jump on board and do this mapping sooner rather than later. I'm just wondering why the time lapsed between September 2024 and now, where you've only just asked the Agriculture Commissioner to do the work?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** As I indicated this morning, I will take all of these concerns from various parts of ag on board and have a look into any of the specifics. That broader question of land-use conflicts and different views about land use is a bigger piece of work that we are looking at. I have tasked the Agriculture Commissioner with putting some maps together. That work is underway. I met with her last week to get an indication of how she's going and where she's up to with that.

**The CHAIR:** What is the timeline for that work to be completed?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I don't know that there's a deadline, but I do need the—

**The CHAIR:** You haven't set a deadline?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No, because it's quite a complicated piece of work, but it is part of the work that we've tasked her with doing. I'll provide updates as needed, as she gets about doing that work.

**The CHAIR:** You don't think a deadline might encourage her to get on with the job and get that task completed?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** It may well, but it's not a question of putting a deadline on it. It's a complex piece of work, so we need to get it right. We need the work to be done carefully and properly so that these things can be properly considered. I understand there's a lot of interest in these issues. Again, I met with her last week to get an update on where that's up to. These kinds of issues come across my desk in various forms and are things that the Government has to work through in terms of multiple uses for land across New South Wales. Getting that piece of work right is a really important thing to do. I'll take all of this on board.

**Ms ABIGAIL BOYD:** Good morning, Minister. A couple of quick ones and then I'll pass to my colleague. In relation to the second-generation anticoagulant rodenticides known as SGARs, given the growing concern of the deadly impact that they have, particularly on the environment and our native wildlife, will you commit to legislate to ban the retail sale of SGARs in New South Wales?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I do take advice on the use of these products, which have to be used carefully and safely, in general terms. If there are specific things that you want me to look at, I'm always happy to do that. These things are regulated outside of my remit, but I'm happy to take any feedback on board.

**Ms ABIGAIL BOYD:** At the moment you can go into a Bunnings or a Coles or something and buy these SGARs. Once they're out there in the environment, we're finding that they are really leading to the deaths and poisoning of lots of native wildlife, particularly endangered native wildlife. Back in 2022, the local government conference passed a resolution calling on the Government—on yourself—to ban the retail sale of SGARs. What have you done since then to restrict the use of these SGARs?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** It's actually not within my remit to restrict their use. These things are governed by the EPA. But I'm happy to take feedback on board and to provide information to them, or any other concerns that you might have that are not within my area of responsibility.

**Ms ABIGAIL BOYD:** So the regulation of SGARs is EPA's remit, but the actual decision to ban their use falls under the Minister for Agriculture's remit.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** They need to be used in an appropriate way. The regulation is done through them. We need people to be using these things, where they are available, in the appropriate way. I take the feedback on board. If there are particular concerns that that's not occurring, I'm happy to have a look at it.

**Ms ABIGAIL BOYD:** The APVMA is due to deliver its final regulatory decision on its review of SGARs. In answer to supplementary questions in March, you said that the APVMA consults States and Territories before releasing preliminary decisions. Have you been consulted on their preliminary decision in relation to SGARs?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No. I am anticipating—it is somewhat due. I believe they are planning to do something in relation to that soon. I am happy to follow that up. I haven't been advised of when they're looking to do that.

**Ms ABIGAIL BOYD:** Can I turn to something different, and something I've raised with you before. There's been an alarming rise in incidents at New South Wales rodeo events involving horses and riders getting injured. Rodeo events are largely unregulated due to exemptions in the animal cruelty laws. Since we last spoke, have you done anything to investigate or tighten the regulation of rodeo events?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** It is something that we're looking at. I have met with some of the organisations involved in rodeos in New South Wales. There are people who operate properly and within the rules; there are those who probably push the boundaries. It's some time since rodeo rules have been looked at. I am also looking at the fact that the remit of rodeos has expanded to include machinery and the like at some shows. This is something that we're looking at. You would be aware that we made a commitment to review the POCTA Act. That work is well advanced. Whether we do work on rodeos as a part of that or as a separate piece of work is something that I'm still considering. I have had discussions with people in the sector. I'll continue to do that. Again, I'm happy to take any feedback on board.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Good morning, Minister. Thank you for being here. I just want to ask about Forestry, obviously, and the \$14.9 million in hardwood losses just in the first part of the financial year of last year. Tallaganda now—29 charges. Maximum penalties for those offences—we're somewhere in the order of \$50 million, but who knows. The Great Koala National Park is coming online. Are we at that time where you are ready to recommend that the hardwood division of Forestry shuts down and we do the proper, full transition out of hardwood logging in New South Wales?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** There is a lot in that question. I know there is a lot of interest in this area of policy and this area of industry in New South Wales. I know you're aware that we made the commitment to establish the Great Koala National Park. Work is well advanced on that. I can't make any announcement or provide any details on that today, which I appreciate you'll be frustrated by. I'm not in a position to do that. The Government will have more to say about the creation of the park soon. As people would also be aware, we've taken some time to consult on what that should look like and engaging industry and other bodies for that. In addition to that, the Government is doing work on a Forestry Industry Action Plan so that we can be clear about what a sustainable industry looks like into the future. That work is also well underway. We've got a panel of experts doing that work.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** When is that due to report back?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Soon. There will be more to say about the future of the industry soon.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Will that come at the same time as the Great Koala National Park announcement, do you think?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Of course we are committed to establishing the Great Koala National Park, as people are aware. That work is underway. We are also committed to a sustainable industry into the future.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Is the park the whole 170,000 hectares?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm not in a position to give any details about the park announcement today—nice try! There will be—

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Live a little. Is it the whole 176,000 hectares?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** The Government will have more to say about the creation of the park soon.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** What do you say, though, about the fact that anybody who is looking, and, as you say, lots of people are—\$14.9 million in losses. Is this financial year any better? That was double the predicted losses, which were pretty dramatic in and of themselves. Does this part of the financial year look better?

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** There is a lot of reasons for the industry and Forestry Corp being in the circumstances they're in, which is the reason we're doing this work on a Forestry Industry Action Plan and looking at what a sustainable industry should look like into the future. Forestry Corp, of course, are tasked with managing our State forest estate in New South Wales. That includes dealing with the costs of managing forests. There have been implications from protest activity, floods, fires—

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Would it be much easier for you if that money was being put into repair, regeneration and recovery of the forest estate rather than losses haemorrhaging and destroying it?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** It is a complex set of circumstances. We are, as people would expect, dealing with all of the things that cause those issues for the financial bottom line of Forestry Corp. They have expenses for a range of reasons. There have been a number of impacts on forests over the last number of years, including fires, including natural disasters and including protests.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** But Minister, the NRC recommended changing forestry management practices after the fire. Forestry didn't do that. They kept logging. It's just haemorrhaging, Minister. The Treasurer said in estimates just the other week that he wished it wasn't like this. It's a sector losing money. Will it be easier for you, as the manager of Crown land forests, if we weren't destroying them and haemorrhaging money?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I guess I'd say I'm not wishing for that. I'm doing the work on it. The Government is doing the work on—

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Is there a financial saving or any recovery from the \$14.9 million loss in the first part of the financial year?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** We're doing work on what an industry can look like into the future.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Does that include closing down the hardwood sector if that's the advice?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** We're looking at what an industry can look like into the future. I'm not in a position to give details.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** We know it's in plantations. Everyone knows that. When will you, as the Minister, announce that—everybody else knows—for the workers' sake and for everyone's sake?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** The Government is working through all of these issues. Increasing our plantation estate in New South Wales is a 10-, 20-, 30- or 40-year proposition. It should have started 10, 20, 30 or 40 years ago. It didn't.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** That's not an excuse to continue haemorrhaging public money and destroying forest, Minister.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm not suggesting that's the case. What I'm saying is we're doing a lot of work on all of these issues together in a Forestry Industry Action Plan so that we can give certainty to everybody involved in this sector and everybody who has an interest in it as to what a sustainable industry looks like into the future.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** This is a very quick one and you can take it on notice. When did you first become aware of the Shooters' recreational hunting bill?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm not sure when I first became aware of it. It's something that has been discussed. I know it's before the Parliament.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Would you take it on notice and give us a date?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I will try. I don't know that I could give a specific date for when I became aware. I know there have been conversations about it, but I'm happy to try.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Roughly? This year, last year, two years ago?

**The CHAIR:** She has taken it on notice. You are now eating into everyone else's time.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Minister, your Government recently announced a continuation of the Farm Business Resilience Program. What will that do to help primary producers who have already been impacted for the last 12 months?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** This has been an incredibly successful program over a number of years. Thousands of people have been assisted in various ways and will continue to be. The work that this program does is assist farmers with preparation, with business planning.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** It's workshops and things, isn't it? Is that correct?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Yes, which a lot of farmers participate in. It's relevant, up-to-date information and advice about things that they can be doing to mitigate the impacts of dry conditions. Many thousands of people have been involved in this program, so I am very excited to have announced with the Prime Minister, the Premier and the Federal Minister last week a continuation of funding for that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** But you'd appreciate that a workshop doesn't help a farmer who is handfeeding cattle at the moment. You would appreciate that, yes?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I think people participate in these workshops to get up-to-date information and advice on how to manage issues. The feedback that I've got from farmers is that people find it very useful. That's why we are continuing the work of that fund, with the Federal Government.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** But in the past it has also been paired with, for instance, the Farm Innovation Fund, which has now been exhausted. My concern is that those sorts of programs are meant to operate in conjunction with other funding. As you said earlier, you've only had 49 applications approved under Drought Ready and Resilient. Do you accept that there is actually a disconnect between what you're offering and what farmers need on the ground?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Okay—

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** You have to let me answer the question, Sarah. You ask questions and then you cut me off.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** You did.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** You did. You said no.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** You have to let me answer.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** It's the first time you've given a yes or no answer. It was quite refreshing.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** The Drought Infrastructure Fund has been utilised, and \$141 million has been expended through that. We've now moved to the drought resilience and infrastructure fund from which almost \$9 million has gone out. That's \$150 million that has gone out supporting farmers with assistance to be able to prepare for, mitigate and get through these drier periods since we have been in government.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Back on that Drought Ready and Resilient Fund, we're aware of farmers who have been denied application for funding through the program, yet they have gone to the bank and the bank has agreed to provide them with funding support and cover their costs. Why is it that your Government is declining farmers while banks are approving them?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** If there are specific examples of particular cases that you would like me to have a look at, then I'm happy to have a look at it, but this fund—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Do you accept, though, that in the past there was almost \$1 billion of drought funding relief, and under your Government there's a lot less going out the door?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No. We've allocated, as I've indicated, the remainder of the Drought Infrastructure Fund \$141 million out to farmers.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** But that was leftover money from the previous Government, wasn't it?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** There's now a new fund—it's not new now—in existence which has an expanded remit, including animal welfare and infrastructure and the like. Almost \$9 million has gone out through that, so that is support that has gone out to farmers across New South Wales to assist with the circumstances they're in now. It's certainly tough—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** It's tough under your Government and under you as Minister.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** —particularly in the Riverina region, where I was last week, where it is dry. I am pleased the drought-affected regions have dropped, but this is something that we'll keep working with communities on, and keep working with the ag sector on, to assist people to get through it. I know farmers are used to this. They have plans in place, and we're assisting them with further information and assistance to get through this period.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** What I'm seeing here is a bit of a consistent theme, to be frank, under your leadership as Minister, where money is not flowing to people who need it and support is not reaching the ground. In terms of flood recovery, we know that under the previous Government there were more than 10,000 applications received after the Lismore floods. Nearly 9,000 were approved. The approval rate was 85.5 per cent.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** You took twice as long as we're taking to get the money out the door. I'm not interested in being lectured by the National Party about getting grant funding out the door.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** As we sit here today, you can't tell me how many applications have been approved in terms of flood recovery. We know that farmers are finding it harder to get support under your drought funds and going to the banks instead. We have emails from farmers who are literally saying that the Labor Party is no friend to farmers and one could be excused for thinking that the RAA is tasked with exercising that hatred. That's pretty damning under your watch, isn't it?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** That's a ridiculous proposition that you're putting. We are providing support—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** That's not me; that's farmers telling us that about you and what you're doing.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Is this a question?

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Yes.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Would you like me to answer the question?

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I'd love an answer. I'm sure the farmers would too.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** We are providing support to people through various means through the Rural Assistance Authority, as we've covered today. We have had the need to enhance and boost resources into that over the course of the last week to get money out faster.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** After the Premier intervened. He needs to intervene in everything to get you to do your job, doesn't he?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** We have provided support through the Drought Infrastructure Fund. We are providing support through the Drought Ready and Resilient Fund. I did announce an additional \$43 million—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I've already asked you about that.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** —for the continuation of the business program last week.

**The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE:** Point of order—

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** We're working to support farmers in every way that we can.

**The CHAIR:** Do you still want to call the point of order?

**The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE:** Only if the interjections persist.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** In some case, there are additional amounts of paperwork that are required for drought assistance. We've halved the time in which your Government put funds out, and I'm still not done. There's still more work to do to make sure that we can get funds out faster. We do have to collect further information, because the systems under your Government were not robust enough to protect taxpayer dollars whilst providing that support to farmers.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I think a lot of farmers listening to this would find what you're saying very interesting in terms of how you think there's enough support going out, because that's, again, not what we're hearing. I want to take you to one more issue. The Premier last week announced a new rural advisory council to better understand the needs of regional New South Wales. Minister, isn't it your job to talk to him about what regional New South Wales needs?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm delighted that you've seen the announcement. I was part of the announcement. We will, together, have another forum to engage—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Another forum to engage.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** —particularly with regional mayors.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Isn't that your job?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm doing it all the time. It's great to have these kinds of formal processes.

**The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE:** I persist, then, with my point of order. These are important questions and important answers, and I would ask that the honourable member cease interjecting while the Minister is seeking to answer.

**The CHAIR:** Just like my previous ruling, can we allow some time between answer, question, answer, question, please, Ms Mitchell?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I was part of that announcement. This will be a forum for mayors, the Country Women's Association and other agencies to come together and provide advice to the Government. Groups of mayors come through this building, as you would well be aware, on a regular basis.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I know. You don't meet with them half the time—that's the problem.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I do.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** That's not what they say.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** This is another forum for them to come together and provided advice to the Premier and the Government. I think any opportunity to have a forum where regional community leaders can come together to talk directly to government is a good thing. I know it has been welcomed by the people who have been invited to be a part of it.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Has the Mayor of Dubbo been invited to be a part of it?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I certainly look forward to participating in those processes. As many forums as we can possibly have to get feedback from regional leaders can only be a good thing.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** The Premier has had to set up a separate rural advisory council to bring all of those people together.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Isn't that a good thing? It's a good thing.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Just to be clear, isn't that your job? Shouldn't they be coming through you? Why does the Premier need to intervene again and set up a new forum? Why aren't you just meeting with these people and doing your job?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I am, and we'll be doing it together. It's fantastic to have—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** So you need the Premier to hold your hand?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** How good to have yet another formal forum for regional leaders to come together and give advice and information on the ground from their local communities directly to government. I think that's a positive thing. I'm not sure why you—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I just don't know why that's not what you're doing now.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** —would think that it's a negative to invite leaders from regional communities to come and provide advice to government.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Once again, the Premier has to come in and bail you out, Minister. It's a common thread.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I think the more forums to have these conversations, the better. More opportunities to get feedback from mayors and the Country Women's Association and other groups across the regions can only be a positive thing. I certainly get out and about and talk to people in regional communities as much as I possibly can. Having them come through the Parliament to give advice to us can only be good news.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** When you show up for the meetings. It's helpful if you're there. I'll hand over to my colleague. We don't have much time left, Minister.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Minister, what do you think of the contrast between Queensland taking biosecurity seriously and putting on an additional 100 frontline workers at the same time that you are sacking frontline workers?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** We've put a significant investment into biosecurity in this year's budget—more than any other government before. That is a very important investment in how we're protecting the

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**CORRECTED**

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State's biosecurity, how we will be dealing with biosecurity issues across New South Wales—the existing ones—and how we'll have better structures in place for dealing with things that arise into the future. Putting resources into protecting the State's biosecurity is certainly a priority for this Government. We have invested significantly more funds than your Government did in dealing with things such as red imported fire ants and the like. Making sure that we're setting up the structures that we need both in the agency that I'm responsible for but also across government to deal with these issues and be prepared for them is a good thing.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** I want to talk specifically about cattle tick. Minister, can you guarantee that you are maintaining the eradication approach to cattle tick, to keep New South Wales tick-free, and not moving towards a management situation?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** There isn't any change proposed at the moment. The Cattle Tick Program is continuing. We have a new biosecurity commissioner, who I believe starts work today, actually. She is very welcome. I have tasked her with having a look at the Cattle Tick Program as one of the first pieces of work that she'll be doing. I certainly look forward to getting any information or advice that she might have in relation to the program. I will continue to engage with people who use the program and will work through how it's working, what needs to be done to manage this and other issues into the future.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Have you given the biosecurity commissioner any parameters about what to look into as far as considering zones such as they have in Queensland?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I have asked her to look at the program and to give advice on—

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** The Queensland program?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No, the New South Wales program and how that's working. I think that's an appropriate thing to do. Let's have a look at it and get advice on what's working and what's not in relation to that particular program, which I know there's a lot of interest in, particularly in the north of the State.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** The former biosecurity commissioner completed a review into the governance of pest and weed management. When did she hand that to you?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I have got that. We have a response to that. I will be releasing a biosecurity plan very soon. I'm not in a position to give a sneak peek today.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** When did she give you that report?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm not sure of the exact date, but I can take the date on notice. I have it.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** This month? Last month?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm not sure, but I have it.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** What about the compliance and enforcement report that she's done?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** The Government is considering those reports, in addition to all of the other pieces of work that we have commissioned in this space, and we've got a plan, which I will be releasing shortly, based on some of those pieces of advice.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Do you not think that you have had the reports for a reasonable amount of time to consider them?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** As I said, I have considered the report and I'll be releasing a plan soon. This isn't the only piece of advice—

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** The Biosecurity Act provides that reports must be published on the commissioner's website after complying with the requirement that the Minister be given "reasonable time to consider the report". I'm wondering why we cannot see those reports if—

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** You will. They're required to be tabled in Parliament, in fact, at the end of this month. There is no secrecy about it. We are working through the details of those recommendations. We have put together a plan. I do have a plan. I will be releasing it shortly. I know there'll be interest in that. We have commissioned a whole range of work into how to better coordinate and better use the resources that we've got for how we're dealing with issues like biosecurity. The reports will be tabled and a response will be provided. We've got a plan. I'm sorry that I'm not in a position to give you details about that today.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** I'm asking about the report.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'll be releasing it shortly.

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**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** The NSW Invasive Species Plan talks about the State Weeds Committee being responsible for "ensuring a coordinated and strategic approach to weed management" in New South Wales. Who is the chair of the State Weeds Committee?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** We've made changes relating to, and will continue—as I've just talked about—a whole piece of work relating to how these issues are being dealt with by government, how we're allocating resources to dealing with these issues. If I just go to that weeds funding issue—

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** No, the question was about the State Weeds Committee.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I understand. We're looking at how these things will be dealt with in a different way. But while we're doing that, four years worth of funding through this year's budget to give certainty to how we're dealing with our Weeds Action Program for the next four years is a good thing for committees and action plans across New South Wales.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Who is playing the role that the State Weeds Committee played under the management plan?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** The Government is doing work with the department on what these things should look like going forward. We still have local weeds authorities, local plans and decisions, and priority weed programs in place from a local perspective. One of the good things that we've done is provide, through this budget, certainty for how they operate. I'm confident that work is continuing in that space in the way that it needs to.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Minister, since the start of this year, what communities have you visited to discuss the impacts of renewables on farming and regional communities?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm constantly travelling around regional communities. That includes—

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Which ones have you specifically met with on that?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** That includes communities that are part of the opportunities that come from renewable energy zones.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Can you give me an example, Minister?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Some months ago I visited the Central West region—Orana, Mudgee and the like—with the environment Minister, when funding was announced for those communities to take advantage of these programs that are being rolled out. I fully appreciate and understand that things are happening at a rapid pace. There is a lot of change happening in communities as we deliver what was a bipartisan renewable energy future. We are working with those communities, as we do this quickly, to make sure that they can take advantage of the opportunities that come from this. I am conscious that there are impacts on—

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Sorry, Minister, if I can just get to the question. Apart from the announcement that you made—and I'm not sure if that was this year or last year—which community groups have you met with specifically to talk about the impacts of the REZ and the rollout of renewables on farming land?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Community groups is a different question.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Or an individual farmer, maybe, if you can give me one example?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'll give you an example around Dunedoo.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** When was that? I have looked at your diaries—

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm not sure. I'll have to take the dates—

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** —and it's not in your diary.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** It wouldn't be in the recent diary. It was some time ago.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Last year?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'll have to take the specifics—I travel a lot, so I couldn't give you a specific date of when I was in a particular region. When I'm not in this place, I try to be out on the road as much as possible talking to people. I appreciate that farmers are taking advantage, as they should, of these opportunities. I'm also aware that people have concerns and want to be heard in terms of their views, and the Government is working through this whilst we are making sure that this infrastructure is in place so that we can deliver our energy future.

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**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Minister, I've had a look through your diary for this year and I can see that you met with ClubsNSW, AGL, EnergyAustralia and the Bell Shakespeare company, for example, but I can't see anywhere in there where you've met with farmers, individually or in groups, to talk about the rollout of renewable energies. Given the impacts it is having on our agriculture and on our regional communities—you are Minister for both—how do you justify not visiting and meeting with these people?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm out and about in regional communities, meeting with people, all the time. You would also see there are regular meetings with NSW Farmers in my diary. They are great advocates—

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Not you.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** —for the members that they represent. As we push through, there are a number of farmers who are also taking advantage of the opportunities that these changes present. I know many of them will have income as a result of some of these changes. For others, we've got to make sure we're including everybody in the conversation about the changes that we're making—and, I acknowledge, at a very rapid rate. Again, that was bipartisan. It was supported by this Parliament and was begun under the previous Government. We have to get this done quickly, but I want to make sure—and we are making sure—that people are heard.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Minister, you've said a couple of times now that we need to push through and this needs to be done quickly. Can you understand why farmers, particularly in the Central West-Orana area, are so angry and feel like they're not being listened to when you're not visiting enough and you're not engaging with them about this issue on any real level?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I understand this is a significant and rapid change that needs to occur for New South Wales. Again, this was something that was done on a bipartisan basis through the Parliament under the previous Government. I will continue to listen to and be an advocate for farmers, many of whom are benefiting from the changes. Others have concerns, and they're very validly raising those concerns. I'll continue to work with them.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Minister, I want to ask you about your progress in implementing the Labor election commitment around battery cages. I would like to give you a petition with 11,200 signatures of people calling on you to legislate the phase-out of battery cages in New South Wales. In response to these over 11,200 signatures, can you provide an update on where we're up to in legislating an end to the use of battery cages in New South Wales?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Sure. As you're aware, and I know there's a lot of interest in this, New South Wales has committed to being part of the national standards across the country. A number of supermarkets and industry committed to making changes for the products they sell this year. There have been shifts. As a Government, when we did the POCTA regulation—I know that was done quickly over the summer but that was because the Parliament asked us to do that quickly—we made some changes in relation to moving forward with the standards in that regulation. We're continuing to work with industry. What I can say is the Government is looking to set 2036 as a deadline. I'll continue to work with industry on getting to that point.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Will we see that legislation in this term of Parliament?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I've just given an example of how we amended the POCTA regulation over the summer to begin some of the changes.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** But that didn't legislate a phase-out. I am wondering when we'll see the legislation to make sure that that phase-out occurs by that date of 2036, which you've indicated.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** How and when we go about that, I'm not in a position to give you further detail about today. But what I can indicate is that I'm looking at that 2036 year as the deadline.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Is the plan at this stage to do that if Labor has a second term of Parliament? I'm just trying to understand. You've made the national commitment to phase out battery cages, which obviously has to be done by legislation. You've said that you're committed to the phase-out by 2036. We've obviously seen many instances in the past when there's voluntary phase-out and they don't work. We've had voluntary phases-out of sow stalls and mulesing. Obviously, a lot of live lamb cutting is still going on and a lot of sow stalls are still being used. When will we see the legislation so that New South Wales can be part of that national process? I know other States have already committed to their legislation. Some have brought in earlier dates. The date you've indicated with Labor is 2036, which the national standards and guidelines have called for. When will we see that legislation so that we can really start moving forward on this?

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**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I can't give you a timeline today. I understand the interest in it. Giving that date today is not something that we've done before. That's what we're working towards, and I'll continue that work.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Minister, in May this year, your department was provided with footage of Cowra Meat Processors that reportedly showed shocking conduct, including pigs drowning in vats of scalding water and sheep and goats having their throats cut while fully conscious. My understanding is that three months later the investigation into Cowra meats is still ongoing and no criminal or civil action has been taken. Can you explain why your department is taking so long to take action on this really extreme animal cruelty?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I am aware of the allegations in relation to that facility. Those facilities have to operate in accordance with the law. Any specifics on work that might be being done in relation to them—I will seek information from the department. Otherwise, I'll come back to you.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I will ask them this afternoon. Minister, do you have any assurances or evidence that this type of conduct is not ongoing at Cowra meats?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** They're obliged to operate within the law. They have to be operating lawfully. No new allegations have been brought to my attention. They have to operate within the law.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Clearly, there are allegations that they haven't been. I'm concerned that some of that cruelty is continuing. Minister, I have a couple of questions about the hunting bill as well. How do you respond to concerns from the community and key stakeholders that this bill will relax gun laws and create safety risks for families seeking to enjoy public spaces? Does that concern you in relation to the bill?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** The bill is not a Government bill. The bill has been introduced into the Parliament by the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party. It is before the Parliament at the moment. In fact, it was referred from the Parliament to an inquiry. I know the inquiry held hearings. I'm not sure where the committee is at with its work or recommendations on that, but I look forward to seeing what the committee resolves in relation to that. The Government already has indicated our support for the bill. We have some amendments, which I outlined on the public record when this was debated in the upper House. I am confident that there is no relaxation of gun laws proposed. Having an expanded allocation of land, if it is appropriate, for hunting to occur on is something that we can consider.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Minister, tomorrow Walter Mikac is coming in, along with the Australian Gun Safety Alliance. I know they have reached out to you. They've tried to get a meeting with you to indicate some of their concerns. Their position has been very clear in saying, "The amendments that the Government has agreed to support go nowhere near far enough to actually protect families and provide public safety." They say that a right to hunt conflicts with the National Firearms Agreement and that \$7.9 million to set up essentially a gun lobby will have some very negative effects. Walter Mikac has been a very strong advocate in this space. His wife and children were murdered at Port Arthur, and he's lobbying very strongly against this bill. Will you agree to meet with them to hear about the significant concerns they continue to have about this bill despite the amendments that Labor has agreed to support?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Of course, I'm happy to meet with him. I can't commit to doing that tomorrow, I'm afraid, if that's when they're here. But that doesn't mean I'm not open to having a conversation with him. Obviously, I acknowledge his personal experience in this space. People are entitled to raise issues with Government, so no problem agreeing to do a meeting.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Can you commit to having a conversation with them before the bill's debated?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** The bill has been debated, to a point, in the upper House.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** It has, yes. Will you commit to having a conversation with them prior to the bill coming back to the House for consideration?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Sure. I'm sure we can coordinate. I'm sure we can organise a time—I'm not sure when it's next scheduled to be before the Parliament. But I am confident that the bill, as proposed, with the amendments—I have indicated, on behalf of the Government in the second reading debate, the amendments we will be pursuing. I'm confident that the proposal, with the amendments we have, won't weaken gun laws. Allowing for additional pieces of land, potentially for hunting to occur on, is what is proposed.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** But, Minister, the bill as it stands still enshrines a right to hunt. Legal experts are saying that we don't know what that means until it's challenged in court. It conflicts with the National Firearms Agreement that was put into place. We needed these very strong gun laws and this national agreement

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was put into place. We don't have a right to bear arms in Australia. We don't have a right to hunt. The National Firearms Agreement states that it is a privilege to have a gun, not a right. Obviously this bill challenges that National Firearms Agreement by flipping the argument and saying that people have a right to hunt and, therefore, there is a legal argument that people could put forward that they have a right to bear arms. That is part of the argument and obviously other parts of this bill are highly concerning. How can you possibly say that that isn't weakening the gun laws in New South Wales when John Howard has come out against this, Walter Mikac has come out against this? How is it that you can say that you don't believe that that is weakening gun laws when everybody else is saying that it does?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I respect everybody's views in relation to this. I don't accept that everybody else is saying that. The bill is before the Parliament; it's currently before a parliamentary committee. The Parliament will consider it. It got through most of a second read. The Opposition supported it—if not all of it. It didn't pass the second read, I don't think, from a technical perspective, for those watching the Parliament. But it is before the Parliament. It will be debated. From what I recall, when it was last before the Parliament there were more than 100 amendments proposed. The Parliament will have a chance to consider these issues and will deal with those issues in the Parliament. The concept, the premise here, of potentially allowing more land other than just State forests for hunting to occur on is not a weakening of gun laws.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** Minister, you might need to take this on notice, but when did Halter first ask your office for the meeting with you that then took place on 7 May with the CEO Mr Piggott and strategic directions—Brent Thomas attending?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm not sure. I will take that on notice. A little further context is that there was a function that evening with others who were involved in that area of policy that I was attending. I believe they were here for that and it was an opportunity when people were in the building. But, in terms of when they asked me to have the meeting, I'll take that on notice.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** It was a virtual fencing event in the Parliament. Is that what you're saying?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No, they were going to be in the Parliament. People were going to be in the Parliament. That was the nature of the timing for the meeting. As we do during sitting days, it's good to coordinate—

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** But normally to get this meeting with you, as you say, on a busy Wednesday, they'd need to be asking weeks in advance for the meeting, wouldn't they, to schedule something?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Not necessarily. I made an announcement. There was interest in the announcement. It was a pretty big story. There are a lot of stakeholders. Often, when I make announcements, there are a lot of people who reach out, wanting to have conversations about them.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** Is that your recollection? They asked for the meeting after the announcement?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I don't know—well, I would imagine; they wouldn't have known I was making the announcement. I will have to take the specific request on notice. What I'm saying in general terms is, I made an announcement, there was a lot of interest in it, a lot of interest in having further conversations about it. That's not unusual.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** It would have been your expectation, from a probity point of view, that they wouldn't have had advanced knowledge of the announcement on 30 April?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I didn't engage with anyone before I made the announcement because I don't tend to foreshadow announcements because it takes away from the opportunity to make it a good story.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** Sure, but you're not the only one in the Government. Can you take on notice, too, that in requesting the meeting it was a request that Brent Thomas would be attending?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'll have to take that on notice.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** That's what I'm expecting. When you had the meeting, you said you were surprised to see Mr Thomas there. Did you think to yourself, "He is a close friend of the Premier. He wouldn't be here and wouldn't have gotten involved with Halter to sell an illegal product in New South Wales"? That would be nonsensical. Did you think to yourself you needed to take some probity advice as to how Mr Thomas was tipped into this industry unexpectedly?

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**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I have no idea how he came to work in this industry. I gave no consideration to who his friends are. I don't know or factor in who the Premier's friends are or who this individual's friends are when I'm organising meetings about a policy announcement, a change to the law where I've engaged many stakeholders and the department has done a whole range of consultation on before we change it.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** But you wouldn't accept a proposition of common sense that a reasonable person would think, "How has Mr Thomas ended up in Halter?"—in this virtual fencing enterprise that is totally inconsistent with his previous work and career history, having been—according to his LinkedIn—out of work for seven months unless someone had told him it was a worthwhile thing to do, given that he wasn't there to be engaged in selling an illegal product in New South Wales?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I am not familiar with Mr Thomas's career history. I haven't seen him for many years. I do not know how he came to work there or anywhere else.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** But wouldn't you think a reasonable person would have that expectation that he's gone into this believing it'll end up a legal industry from which he can profit?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No. I have no idea how he came to work in the business.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** There's this thought—

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** The Government made an announcement—

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** When you say you were surprised to see him in your office on 7 May—

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** That's not what I said.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** —this thought never crossed your mind, "What's he doing here?"

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** What I've said, Mr Latham, is that I made an announcement on behalf of the Government to change the law to allow for some technology that farmers have been calling on us to allow them to be able to use. As part of that announcement, I also announced that we'd be doing a piece of work in consultation on what the details of that change would look like. Subsequent to that, or following that, I spoke to people about that announcement and about work that we'll be doing. The department has done a whole range of consultation since. I will now consider the feedback that has come from that. A regulation is being drafted. That's it.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** But you've also said that the announcement on 30 April was on behalf of the Government.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm a Minister in the Government.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** So others in the Government have known this. Given he is a very close friend of the Premier, wouldn't you have a concern about a form of political insider trading here—that he was tipped into it?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I have no concern about that.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** No concern at all?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** It's not something that's—

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** Did you ever seek advice from the department or anyone else about the probity implications of this?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I had no idea he was working for any individual company anywhere when I made the announcement on a policy decision on allowing some technology to be able to be used legally in the State of New South Wales. As part of that announcement, I said we'd talk to people, we'd consider what would be allowed in relation to animal welfare and biosecurity protections, we'd undertake some consultation. I said this as part of the announcement. It caused some frustration because there are a number of people who would like for us to have changed the law immediately when I announced it. I said we were going to do the work that we've done. We've done that work. Now we'll give consideration to what the regulation looks like. Where individual people work, how they got their jobs, who they're friends with is not something that I felt any need to consider as part of this, so no.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** So that's your evidence, but didn't you say earlier on you're not sure whether or not Mr Thomas requested the meeting before or after the announcement?

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**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I made the announcement. A number of people, a number of organisations, including NSW Farmers and others, had cause to have conversations with me about it. There's nothing special here.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** But you said earlier on you didn't know if it was before or after the announcement that Mr Thomas sought the meeting.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I've said that I'll take on notice when a request was made. I didn't talk to anyone about the announcement before I made it—obviously other than inside of government.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** You didn't talk to anyone? Are you saying that the Premier and his office didn't know you were making this announcement on 30 April?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No, I just said, "Obviously"—

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** Obviously they knew, didn't they?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Obviously, Mr Latham. As I said earlier, I don't wake up in the morning and drive to Orange and make random announcements. The announcement was made on behalf of the Government.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** What involvement have Halter and Mr Thomas got in the consultation process now?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm sure the company would have been consulted. I would have to take on notice—but a range of stakeholders were consulted, interested parties, NSW Farmers and the like. The department did—eastAUSmilk, who, I understand, have representatives here today, were part of the consultation. Consideration has been given to national guidelines that the Federal Government has been working on in relation to the use of virtual fencing. Since we've made the announcement, other States are interested in the use of virtual fencing in other States. These national guidelines have been worked on by the Federal Government through national committees for some time. I don't know if they've been released, but they are now national guidelines into virtual fencing, which is yet another layer of consideration that people have been giving to allowing virtual fencing in New South Wales or in Australia regardless of who they might know or not know. Those guidelines have been provided to people as part of the consultation for what we might prepare as part of a draft reg.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** When your submission on this went to Cabinet, did the Premier declare an interest given that his very best friend was now working for the major company in this industry, a position that was advertised in February?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I think you're drawing a pretty long bow here. I've indicated that I've gone through an announcement and worked with stakeholders.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** That's not answering my question about the Premier declaring an interest, as logically you would, given your very best friend is working in this industry, he's invested in it, he's got a senior position—

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Mr Latham, I am here as the Minister for Agriculture, outlining what I have done in relation to this particular announcement. If you have questions for others, you'll need to raise it there.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** No, I've got questions for you, Minister. If the Premier didn't declare an interest—and I think a reasonable person would think it was essential—what concern did you raise at the Cabinet meeting or elsewhere about the impropriety of that?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** There is no impropriety here, Mr Latham. I've indicated that the Government has been looking at an issue. We announced that we were looking at an issue. We've literally been looking at that issue. We've been consulting with stakeholders in a transparent, open way. We'll now give consideration to what a draft regulation would look like. A number of stakeholders have been consulted as part of that process. I don't see any issues.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** Is the Government providing any research funds for the development of virtual fencing, such as under the sustainable farming program that was announced in the budget?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** There's no consideration for that at this point. We are simply looking at its legality or otherwise. The consultation on what we would make legal—what we would allow the technology to be used for, for example—is now complete. The regulation will be drafted. I would imagine we'll get to a point where we say that it's legal and people will be on their way as to whether they want to use the technology or not.

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**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Minister, of the 165 jobs that have been delimited, for want of a better euphemism, how many of them have worked on biosecurity responses or disaster responses in the last two years?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** As I've indicated, there is a change management program running across the department. There are various sections of the department and people who work in various sections of the department that may be impacted by that. No final decisions have been made. In answering your question, I don't know the individual names of the people. I don't know the details of who works in what section. I'm happy to get as much information for you, to assist you and the Committee, through the secretary. But as you would appreciate, it's not a case of me knowing individual names and individual work that they might have done two years or four years ago. I don't have that information.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** You don't see that as information that might have assisted you in responding to this issue?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Assisted me in responding to this issue, no. The department is undergoing a change management program. This is a normal program for when these kinds of decisions and structural changes are being made. I don't know where individual people are impacted or not, or what their history is or not. That's not something that people would expect a Minister to spend time going through. But I'm happy to try and get as much information as possible to assist, through the secretary, on the work that is being done in general terms. I can't speak to individuals; I can't speak to individuals' history. What I can say is that the department will be financially responsible, operate within its budgets and continue to provide the services that it is required or in place to provide to people across regional New South Wales, including in biosecurity.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Minister, we're being told—and when I say this, people are coming up to me in supermarkets and telling me this; I can't believe you haven't asked the same sorts of questions. But we're being told senior trainers, people that have worked in diagnostics and people that have responded to fire ants are all part of this delimiting. You say it hasn't been finalised, but these people know who they are. Are you not concerned about the impact this is going to have on our response capabilities, the expertise that is going to be leaving the department and, on top of that and perhaps most importantly, the damage this is going to do to the already low morale of your department?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Let me start with the last bit first. I think the people who work in the department are incredible. They do incredibly important work. Everyone at this table does incredibly important work inside the department and for the people of New South Wales. They are responsible for teams that are doing really important work across New South Wales. The specific details of how that work is undertaken and which individual people with what skills do that work is a matter for the secretary. Of course I'm concerned. I get briefed on where things are up to, and I understand there'll be some impact on some individuals, and that's tough. But the department will be continuing its work to support people in regional New South Wales after this process. At this stage, the process will continue. It is well underway. Once it's completed, then people will get on with doing the work that they're doing for our regional communities.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** And this will have no impact on our fire ant response?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I don't see—I'm confident that there won't be an impact on the services that the department as a whole is delivering within the remit that it has. Where there is a need for operating within financial responsibilities—the old section of DPI was \$230 million over budget at one point. Having these things operate within budget whilst delivering the services that need to be delivered is very important. Everybody who runs an organisation—everyone who runs a household—knows that you've got to live within your means. We still will continue to provide the services that need to be provided, and I'm confident that that will continue to be the case.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Minister, on 18 and 19 July the Premier and the environment Minister were up on the North Coast meeting with different stakeholders in relation to the Great Koala National Park. Why weren't you there as part of that visit?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Because I was on leave—my one and only holiday that I've had since I became a Minister.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Were you invited to attend? Would you normally go to something like that?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Yes. But like I said—I've scheduled leave before; it's been cancelled because of biosecurity issues. I take this job very seriously. On this occasion, I was comfortable that the trip could occur. We're all across the issues. I understand the details of how it came about, but I was on leave.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Did you have any feedback from timber stakeholders after that visit and any concerns from them in terms of what's being proposed by the Government in relation to the Great Koala National Park?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I engage with the industry on a very regular basis and am always listening to their views. I'll continue to listen to their views. The Government has an election commitment to deliver the Great Koala National Park. We've been working through processes to create that park. Work is well advanced. We'll have more to say about it soon. As I have also indicated, we are working on a Forestry Industry Action Plan so that we can give people certainty and be clear about what an industry will look like into the future. I think that's the right thing to be doing. I appreciate and respect that the timber industry, and industry, have been a part of these processes. They do want some certainty about the future and I absolutely respect that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Just on that, Minister, you've now been in government for just over two years and three budgets. You've got the timber stakeholders very concerned about the fact that up to 40 per cent of the hardwood resource on the North Coast could be wiped out by the Great Koala National Park. You say you're listening and you're working with people, but you can't announce anything today. When will you provide that certainty to the timber industry, particularly as you are the Minister responsible for them?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** The Government is delivering on its election commitment to create the Great Koala National Park.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** But you can't even tell us how big it will be. You wouldn't answer those questions today.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm not in a position to announce the details of that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** When will you be?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** The Government will make some announcements about the details of that soon.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Like, this year?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm not in a position to give you the specifics on that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** But you can understand the frustration coming from stakeholders when you are supposed to be the champion for the timber industry sitting around that Cabinet table, and yet you sit here today and can't provide any certainty or even a time frame. Do you think that is good enough?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I do work closely with the industry and I am an advocate for the jobs that it contains across regional New South Wales. We can also deliver good environmental outcomes whilst making sure that we've got good regional jobs in New South Wales. That work is underway. It's well advanced. I'm not in a position to make an announcement on behalf of the Government about the specifics of it today, but the Government will be providing information about it soon.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Minister, when will organisations and communities in the Central West be informed if they were successful in the Regional Economic Development and Community Investment Program?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Soon. I've been making a series of announcements in relation to the \$50 million amount that we had allocated for organisations to apply for. Most of it has been done, as I've been out and about over the last little while.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Applications closed in February. We're now in September. Specifically for the Central West area, when would you anticipate that announcement being made?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Soon. I've been announcing details from this fund over the last couple of weeks. It's very recent.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Okay, so within the next couple of weeks you would hope to have that done, just so that those people are aware?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Yes. And there'll be some very good news. I'll be opening some more opportunities for people very soon too.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** One more issue before I hand to my colleague: Challenges around riparian repair. I'm sure you would agree that farmers are the best stewards of the land. We have had some specific examples coming in from landholders and I just want to call out one case. Jason, who's a farmer in the Macleay

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**CORRECTED**

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area, has been quoted up to \$20,000 to pay for some of the engineering reports to do some of that work. Do you think that's acceptable, or is that just red and green tape blocking a farmer trying to do a good job?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** There are processes that need to be undertaken in relation to this. I do think—and always say, and will say again today—that farmers do understand very well how to manage land from an environmental perspective. I like to work closely with them on making sure that that's well understood.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Just on this specific example, if I could, Minister, this has been going on for 18 months. At the moment, Jason has, as I said, up to \$20,000 worth of engineers' reports, but there's no guarantee at the end of that that the project will be approved. He's got \$100,000 of his own earthmoving machinery to repair and restore riverbanks. But this has just been tied up in red and green tape. What will you be able to do about that and would you commit to helping someone like Jason if we can provide those details to you?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I just don't know the circumstances. I accept that you're raising this on behalf of somebody called Jason—I accept that—but without further particulars it's difficult for me to be able to provide a response. I'm happy to receive more information if you want to put that to me, or if he does, and if there are things that we can work through, I'm happy to take that on board.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Sure, because this just adds to that endless frustration of farmers feeling like, with respect, the Labor Government is standing in the way of them wanting to do work like this. It's yet another example of being bogged down. If you could commit to looking at that, I'm sure that that would be appreciated—not just by him, but by other landholders.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Sure. If he or you want to provide further details on that particular circumstance—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** The member for Oxley, Michael Kemp, will come knocking on your door next sitting week—

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm sure he will.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** —because he's a strong advocate for his community.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Yes, for sure. I'm happy to take specific cases on board.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Minister, to consultation on the land management codes, submissions were open from 6 June to 1 August, an extended period, I believe, thanks to some lobbying from the member for Cootamundra. When will you release those submissions?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** We extended the period because the Government decided to extend the period. I wanted to get good feedback, genuine feedback, from stakeholders, so we did provide an extension for people to provide feedback through that consultation process. It has closed. There have been quite a lot of submissions, which I appreciate. That is being worked through now. I believe it closed only a couple of weeks ago and I'll work through all of the feedback that's come through as part of that.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Will you release the submissions?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm happy to. I don't know the nature of individual people who've made it and what might be confidential or not, if they've put things in about their individual land. I've got no problem providing, in general terms, the feedback that's come through if people are comfortable with their submissions. I'm happy to work through that too. I want to be as transparent as possible about it. We extended that period in order to get feedback. We hadn't received a lot of feedback and the extension period did allow for a significant amount to come through. Happy to be as transparent as possible about the feedback that's come through.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** If you wanted feedback on this, why wasn't the consultation period that long anyhow and what changed halfway through to, all of a sudden, lead to an increase of submissions?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Sometimes these things can be open and, respectfully, people don't necessarily pay attention until it gets close to the deadline and then they reach out and say, "We need more time to put in the detail of our particular situation." Or, if they're advocating, for example, like NSW Farmers do on behalf of groups of people, when we get close to deadline and people get a little stressed that they want more time to put a proper proposal through or some proper suggestions through, they reach out and say, "Hey, we need some more time." I had no problem providing that extension. It resulted in more feedback coming through. That's a good thing.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Minister, I understand on 2 July there was an extension of the support offered to white spot affected farmers and families. Have these payments started yet?

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** The existing payments are in place, I believe, until October, but I'm going to check the details for you and I'll come back. What we announced recently was an extension of that support until the end of the year. I actually was up in that region and met with a number of the prawn farmers. I met with the industry in relation to their concerns and it was good feedback from them about what they're thinking the Government support can help them with to get through this period and set them up for the future. We've got that financial support in place now until the end of the year. At the same time I am also—and have been and will continue—lobbying the Federal Government for further support here. We've tried to get some changes made in relation to biosecurity zones so that they can continue to operate as an industry. Part of the reason that the white spot is an issue is not so much because of the prawns in that particular part of the State, because they're still safe to eat, but trade abilities, which is something that impacts other States, so I have been pursuing this with the Federal Government.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** But those grants aren't yet available—that second round of grants?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** It's available, but it's a continuation—

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** They haven't started rolling out.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Yes. If there's any issue in timing, I'm happy to raise it, but it's a continuation to the end of the year.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Minister, just in relation to the international flight training centre in Tamworth, they've applied for \$5 million in funding for that facility. Are you aware of that application?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I am.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** They were advised they'd be notified of the outcome of that application by 26 May and it's now 1 September and they still haven't heard. Is that good enough?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** There's been a number of conversations in relation to that particular opportunity, so it's not a question of people not knowing; it's a question of how we're working through to progress it. I'll have more to say about it soon.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Have you got a brief on this? Have you been briefed on it? Is that sitting in your office at the moment on your desk?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm aware of the issue and I'll have more to say about it soon.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Minister, *Budget Paper No. 01*, page B-13, refers to funding to establish the Conservation Hunting Authority and support regulation of additional hunting activity. I asked specifically with a question on notice what this money was for and you told me it was for an anticipated increase in hunting across additional identified areas of public land. Which are the areas identified for additional hunting?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** This is the Government being very prepared and anticipating, or potentially anticipating, a bill that is before the Parliament. We've covered it today. It's a matter for the Parliament about whether those changes occur or not. We will consider that based on what the Parliament decides to do whenever it decides to do it.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** As I said, we asked specifically what this money was for and you didn't mention the bill or the hunting authority; you said it was for an anticipated increase in hunting across additional identified areas of public land.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Correct.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Is that not contradictory to what you just said?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** So you have identified areas for additional hunting?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No. Where people can hunt now is State forests, and many people do that, and there is a potential for expanding that.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Minister, at last budget estimates we learned there were seven ministerial-appointed vacancies on the Local Land Services Board. I had a look at the website over the weekend. There are six. How have you only managed to fill one board position in six months?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** The rest have been progressed.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** In six months they've been progressed?

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** They have, very recently.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** My recollection is that when Local Land Services was formed, incorporating the LHPAs, which were ratepayer-run organisations, they were to maintain some level of autonomy. Each board has done that, so we had local elections so we could have ratepayer representation. Under the structure as it stands, do local boards still have that autonomy, or do they operate at direction from the Minister?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No. We did a review of this in the early period of government. We did a review on how these structures were working, and we have maintained the local decision-making. The local boards continue to be in place, and there is a State board that local boards are represented on. That local decision-making is still in place. How we coordinate these things—it's important to have local decision-making with local perspectives. It's also important to make sure that that's coordinated from what we need across the State, particularly when it comes to pest management programs and whether—some things that these boards will look at will be localised issues, but some of them are issues that can impact across regions.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** So local stakeholders would be identified by the local board?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I would assume so.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** So why, when a stakeholder is seeking a meeting for a briefing on cane toads, would they receive an email the day before that says, "Apologies, cancelling this meeting as it needs to be requested through the Minister's office"?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** You'd need to give me some more information. You said that someone asked someone for a meeting about something. I can't respond to that.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** If the local boards are in charge of who they meet with, it shouldn't matter who it came from, but I'll tell you it came from the member for Clarence requesting a meeting for an update on cane toads in that area.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Through the department?

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Through Local Land Services. They were told at the last minute, "Apologies, cancelling this meeting as it needs to be requested through the Minister's office". Do Local Land Services, the local boards and the local divisions not have the ability to meet with stakeholders without your approval?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I don't know the specifics of what you are putting to me. If you've got a document or an email, I'm happy to consider it. What I can say in general terms is, if members of the Opposition want to meet with a government agency, then, yes, they need to talk to the Government.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** So Local Land Services at a local level don't have the autonomy to decide who their key stakeholders are in that area?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Local Land Services is a government agency, so I'm not sure what the proposition is.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** The intent of them being set up was to maintain some level of local autonomy—which, you've just sort of explained, is not the case.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** But not the government agency part of it. That's a department. There are local boards that are representatives of the local community. They're elected and appointed by me for board members. But the department itself, if people want to get information from a government agency—if the Opposition wants information—there are proper channels to go through.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Does that count for all non-government members?

**The CHAIR:** Order! Mr Barrett.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Ms Higginson got one follow-up question.

**The CHAIR:** This is now a second.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Does that rule apply to all non-government officers?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm not sure who I'm talking to at this point.

**The CHAIR:** I'm not going to allow a second one, Mr Barrett. I was probably generous in allowing Ms Higginson one. Minister, can I go to the commercial fishing peak body? Why is taxpayers' money still going to a body that hasn't even held an AGM in the last 18 months?

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** This is an interesting question. I have recently met with some people involved in this new entity who have raised concerns with me about processes and structures. If you can indulge me for one second to just give some background to the people who are watching this—I know you'll appreciate this. It was an election commitment—

**The CHAIR:** I know all of that.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** But just very briefly—

**The CHAIR:** I've only got two minutes. I don't need the background. I know it's an election commitment. You've given taxpayers' money. The concern is that they're dysfunctional already. They haven't had an AGM within 18 months. I've got more than half of Wallis Lake fishers saying they're walking away; the same with Hawkesbury. How can we have a peak body funded by taxpayers who claim to represent fishers when half their members are walking away in frustration? It's dysfunctional.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I have concerns about it, so I'll continue to look at the structures that are in place. It is important, if I can just explain as I was trying to before, the election commitment from the Government was delivered by us providing financial assistance for it to be set up. That was a matter for industry about how it was to be set up. They're now doing that. It's not functioning the way that it needs to.

**The CHAIR:** I'll stop you there. You've issued taxpayers' money for a project. There is a level of accountability that money is spent wisely and has an impact. Clearly, it's not having an impact. Have they been given the whole funding?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No.

**The CHAIR:** Will you hold the remainder of the funding back, then, until you're satisfied that they are going to function?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I wouldn't go so far as to say that they're not at this stage, but I am taking this—

**The CHAIR:** Well, their fishers are walking away.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I have met with some of them. There have been some things put to me recently. I am looking into those. That's as far as I would take my public comments at this point, but I am looking into the issues.

**The CHAIR:** Have you sighted any audited financial statements from them?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I haven't, but that doesn't mean that people aren't seeking that information. This is something that I'm actively looking at.

**The CHAIR:** Do you know what the CEO is being paid at?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I would have to take that on notice.

**The CHAIR:** Do you know what his role is or what his role should be?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Remember, this is not a government agency. We provided support for it to be set up. The industry then needed to run it. If that is not working, then that is something that needs to be looked at.

**The CHAIR:** Do you know that they don't even have a public-facing website?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** That's a matter for the organisation, but I am looking into some of these issues.

**The CHAIR:** Can you, on notice, report back whether or not you are satisfied with their performance, and whether you will be continuing the funding?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I'm happy to come back on notice about what I'm currently looking at.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Minister, in the last budget estimates we learned that you've got a discretionary fund titled the Minister's Community Benefit Fund. How much was the original allocation for you to utilise through that fund?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Not much. Let me find the details for you and I will come back to you.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Has it been topped up since the original allocation that you were given?

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** I don't believe so, but let me take that on notice.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Can you tell me how much is currently in that fund?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Again, I'll take it on notice.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** The website for the fund states that it's not open for applications, so what's the process for that funding to be distributed?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** At the moment, it's not a thing that opens for applications in the same way that the Regional Development Trust or other funds would be open for, but it's an opportunity for some organisations to apply for funding. I'll get more details for you.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Just on that, it's not an open fund, so what is the process for the funding to be distributed? How does an organisation access that money?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Let me get the details for you on notice, but it can provide ad hoc grants for concepts from community organisations. It has funded things like the women's Magic Round and other good programs through ad hoc applications. I'll provide the details for you.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** That NRL women's round—is that the only funding allocation that has come out of it so far?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** No. There was a partnership between the PCYC for a program for youth empowerment. The John Fordham House—the Ricky Stuart program that you guys promised but failed to deliver—we are now delivering that project, which will provide disability housing in Queanbeyan. So it's projects like that, but I'll provide all the details.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Is it basically, Minister, that people just write to you and say, "We'd like this money," and you pick and choose where it goes? Is that the process in simple terms?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** There's an opportunity for people to have support for good projects—for example, the Ricky Stuart house project, which, again, you guys failed to fund.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** But I'm asking you about the process. The only one that's on the website is actually the NRL round, but you can't tell me how it opened, how much money is in it or what the process is.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** It's an opportunity for ad hoc ideas. It's not an unusual—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** So any organisation or community group could write to you and say, "Minister, we'd like to access some of this money," and it would be considered?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** Organisations engage with government all the time. There are a number of mechanisms for them to apply.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** For this fund specifically, an organisation could write to you and say, "Minister, we'd like some funding"?

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** There is a number of opportunities for community organisations to apply for funds through the Government. I would encourage them to do so. The Regional Development Trust is a great opportunity for people to apply for funding.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I'm not asking about that; I'm asking about your discretionary fund.

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** The Sustainable Communities fund is one that I recently announced—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I'm asking about this particular fund.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** Point of order—

**The Hon. TARA MORIARTY:** A number of opportunities for community organisations to apply to me—engage with me—or the government across the board, in relation to great ideas that they may have.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Well, you'll get some letters about this fund, Minister, given that it's at your discretion. I look forward to seeing how many you approve.

**The CHAIR:** I'll hear the point of order.

**The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY:** We're in Government time, Chair. The time for asking questions has expired.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The CHAIR:** I did hear the bell, but the Minister and Ms Mitchell were still finishing their exchange. That's why I did let it go, as I always have. I now turn to you.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** We'll reserve our position with respect to questions. At this point, no, we don't have any.

**The CHAIR:** That concludes our time with the Minister. We'll now break and return at 2.00 p.m. after lunch.

**(The Minister withdrew.)**

**(Luncheon adjournment)**

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**CORRECTED**

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**Dr ADAM TYNDALL**, Executive Director, Strategy, Media and Ministerial Services, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, sworn and examined

**Dr LISA SZABO**, Acting Executive Director, Biosecurity and Food Safety, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, affirmed and examined

**Mr PETER DAY**, Executive Director, Strategy and Regulatory Policy, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, affirmed and examined

**Mr ANGUS BEGG**, Chief Financial Officer, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, affirmed and examined

**Ms HARRIET WHYTE**, Executive Director, Regional Programs and Partnerships, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, affirmed and examined

**Ms KATE MEAGHER**, Deputy Secretary, Delivery and Engagement Group, Premier's Department, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to this afternoon's session. We'll start with questions from the crossbench.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I think these are best directed to Ms Connell, but please redirect me if that's not the case. Firstly, I want to ask about the "right to release" reforms. We know that they passed a few years ago now. These reforms require researchers to make efforts to rehome dogs and cats after three years or at the conclusion of a research experiment—whichever is sooner. Section 54C (4) (a) allows researchers to make an application to keep a dog or cat longer than three years in certain circumstances if the Animal Research Review Panel approves. Are you able to provide me with any advice on how many applications ARRPs has received to keep a cat or dog longer than three years?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** I don't have that information before me at the moment. I might see if one of my colleagues, Ms Szabo or Mr Day, can come to the table with the information.

**PETER DAY:** In regard to that, we had one application from Blayney pet care, but they've subsequently withdrawn that because of their intention to remove their animals completely from that facility.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** One application, but the outcome of that is that it's no longer progressing.

**PETER DAY:** That is correct.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I have also got some questions in regards to DPIRD's involvement with the NSW Pet Registry. Is it best to go through you, Ms Connell?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** That is correct, but I will note that the hearing for the Local Government portfolio is tomorrow.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Yes, and I'll have some more specific questions tomorrow with that. I do know, obviously, that it relates specifically to the puppy farm legislation. I wanted to ask it from that angle here and then I've got some different questions for tomorrow. I'm just wondering what DPIRD's role is right now in relation to working with the OLG at helping to get the Pet Registry functioning to match with the puppy farming legislation.

**RACHEL CONNELL:** We're working very closely with the Office of Local Government. We have worked quite closely with them since the legislation passed on a number of fronts, including implementation of the exemption scheme. We provide advice to them on an as-needs basis. Our teams meet together regularly. In relation to the progress on the registry, I would refer you to the Office of Local Government and the Minister for Local Government.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Has DPIRD contributed any funding to the Office of Local Government to build that section of the puppy farm Act into the Pet Registry?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** I would have to take that question on notice.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** If you could. If you're able to also find out how much funding has been provided and, if no funding has been provided, whether there's plans to provide funding from DPIRD towards OLG for that work.

**RACHEL CONNELL:** Yes, I'm very happy to take that on notice.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** My understanding is that the Office of Local Government has already conducted work in this space. It has cost them \$4 million so far, and they have been trying to get money from DPIRD for that first part of that work—for the \$4 million. Is that your understanding?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** I can't speak to the costs that have been incurred by the Office of Local Government. As I said before, I will take on notice the issue of whether we've provided or are in the process of providing funding for other parts of implementation of the Pet Registry reforms. I will note that the Pet Registry is a responsibility of the Local Government portfolio.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** It's not so much the Pet Registry part of it. It's the part of the implementation of the puppy farming legislation which was put forward by the agriculture Minister. That was her legislation. One part of that legislation required the Pet Registry to have a particular function to oversee the breeders. My understanding is that the Office of Local Government has started that work on behalf of DPIRD. That \$4 million cost isn't for the puppy farm register. That \$4 million was for implementing the puppy farm bill. They haven't been able to get those costs recovered yet from DPIRD.

**RACHEL CONNELL:** As I said before, Ms Hurst, we're working very closely with the Office of Local Government on implementation of the reforms. That also includes working with them in relation to how the funding for the reforms is being applied. I'd need to take on notice the specifics of that funding.

**STEVE ORR:** There is an intention to provide funding. I think the discussion is about the amount.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Thank you, I appreciate that. Is this something that the Minister has been briefed on as well in regards to how that is worked out and in regards to how much comes from DPIRD and how much the Office of Local Government contributes to that part of the puppy farm bill.

**RACHEL CONNELL:** We obviously provide advice to the Minister on budget matters. In relation to the specifics, as Mr Orr said, those are being worked out with the Office of Local Government at the moment. The intention is to provide them with funding. We're working through costs and amounts. The intention is for that funding to be provided to the Office of Local Government.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I want to ask some questions about where the Government is up to in terms of legalising the use of shock collars. I understand the Minister has previously said she wants to introduce regulations by the end of the year. Is that still the intention?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** I refer you to the evidence that the Minister gave this morning. It's a matter for government. I think the Minister gave quite clear statements about what is proposed in relation to the review and reform of POCTAA. It's a matter for the Government.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I've still got some quite specific questions in regard to what the department is doing beyond what the Minister is able to say. At the moment we're trying to understand what consultation has been going on and whether there is continued consultation on those regulations. Is that consultation process still underway?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** I'll pass to Mr Day in a moment, but what I will say is that we are undertaking consultation with a broad range of stakeholders across a number of animal welfare issues. We obviously did extensive consultation around the draft regulation last year. We've done consultation across a range of matters in years leading up to that. We've recently done consultation in relation to the proposed reforms to enable virtual fencing to be legalised in New South Wales, and we're continuing to consult with stakeholders in relation to the poultry standards and guidelines as well. But I'll pass to Mr Day.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Can I ask, when you said that you've been consulting on this in the years leading up to this, how long has this consultation been going on, given that this has only been proposed very recently?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** I'm referring to consultation that we've been undertaking into a range of proposed reforms to the POCTA legislation. I think you're aware that there are various codes that we're also looking to reform. But in relation to the specific matter, I'll see if Mr Day has anything further to add.

**PETER DAY:** In terms of actual specific consultation with virtual fencing, we've done a number of meetings with relevant stakeholders. All relevant stakeholders were provided written information, and we also held meetings with stakeholders on 14 July and also 31 July this year. Feedback from that consultation, which was primarily on the national guideline that has been developed through the Animal Welfare Task Group, closed on 22 August. The intention there is that we will consider that feedback in terms of going forward.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** My question was, is consultation now concluded or is it still ongoing?

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**CORRECTED**

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**PETER DAY:** There may be a requirement to go back to some parties around issues they've raised for clarification, but substantially that period has now completed to inform where we go with that national guideline.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Will there be any restrictions on the species of animals that the collars can be put on?

**PETER DAY:** Yes. They will apply to cattle only.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Will there be any restrictions on the level of electric shock that can be delivered to those animals and, if so, what would be that level?

**PETER DAY:** I'd have to take the actual specific range on notice, but I'm aware that the national guideline does prescribe that, yes.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** If you could take on notice what that level is, that would be great.

**PETER DAY:** Yes.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** How come there was no specific consultation process on this proposed change?

**PETER DAY:** It was fairly broad consultation. Both the ACOs—the RSPCA and the Animal Welfare League—the suppliers, Gallagher; Halter, who is a third provider; NSW Farmers; Cattle Australia; dairy farmers; eastAUSmilk; Meat and Livestock Australia; SAFEMEAT; Australian Organic Limited; Dairy Australia; Dairy NSW; Sheep Producers Australia; the Animal Welfare Advisory Council; Animal Care Australia; the Animal Defenders Office; WIRES; and FOUR PAWS Australia were informed of the proposed reforms. The Police Force was informed as well—as a POCTAA agency—and AVA, CSIRO and the School of Veterinary Science for Sydney. Also, Local Land Services, DCCEEW, DPHI and others were advised.

**RACHEL CONNELL:** I might also just note, Ms Hurst, that virtual fencing technology is now permitted in various other States and Territories in Australia off the back of work that has been done federally, which has undergone a process of developing a draft guide over a period of a couple of years, I understand. There has been engagement on a number of levels. As Mr Day said, we're drawing on that draft guide in terms of looking at what the regulatory framework should be in New South Wales.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** To Ms Connell or Mr Day, when did the department first provide advice to the Minister about virtual fencing?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** I'd have to take that on notice. As I said before, Mr Latham, the development of the draft national rules or standards has been in development since 2021, so we'd have to take that one on notice, but I assume it was early in—

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** After the election, the book you provide to new Ministers—what colour is it? The blue book? Is that what you do here?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** Yes, but I wasn't in the department at that point in time, so I'd have to take that on notice in terms of when she was first advised.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** The Minister said it was a Labor Party election promise, so it would have been in the blue book after the election. Can you take that on notice as to whether or not that's right and what was, generally, the advice that was provided? Was that advice any different to the handling of the Donato private member's bill later in 2023?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** I obviously can't give you any advice on that front, given I don't have visibility of the advice that was provided in the first instance. I do understand that the incoming Government briefs are generally subject to Cabinet in confidence, but we can take that on notice and confirm for you.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** I'm just after dates for when these advices were provided.

**RACHEL CONNELL:** It's quite standard for a department to provide advice to the responsible Minister when there are private members' bills in Parliament.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** Does the advice you provide then go through to the Cabinet Office for collating and then presentation to the Cabinet meeting?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** It's also standard practice for Cabinet to consider Government positions on private members' bills.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** Does the Cabinet Office ever say that the Premier can't be party to considering this because of the interest he has with his very best friend being involved with one of these companies?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** I'm not privy to the way the matter was considered by Cabinet.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** By Cabinet Office or by Cabinet. Did the department provide advice about market structure—that this is a duopoly, effectively, and there wouldn't be any New South Wales company or jobs provided?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** Not to my knowledge, but I will point out that I understand we consulted with at least three commercial providers during our recent consultation.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** Who's the third? There's Halter, Gallagher and—

**PETER DAY:** Vance.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** Like JD Vance.

**PETER DAY:** With an E, not an A.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** Is it two Es?

**PETER DAY:** Yes.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** Vance. Who are they, and where are they from?

**PETER DAY:** I'm not across where they're actually from, but I'll take that on notice for you and come back.

**RACHEL CONNELL:** I will note that we are not the only State currently consulting on a proposal to make virtual fencing legal. I understand South Australia and Victoria—

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** Sure. It's legal in Queensland and Tasmania, and Victoria is doing a trial and South Australia is talking about it. But that's not the thing that I'm questioning. Could I ask Kate Meagher from the Premier's Department, have you been involved with virtual fencing in terms of delivery and engagement?

**KATE MEAGHER:** No, I haven't.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** Who in the Premier's Department or the Cabinet Office has looked after it as it has gone forward to this point in time?

**KATE MEAGHER:** I'd have to take that on notice.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** What happens at the Cabinet Office and the Premier's Department if the Premier has to declare an interest because of a certain reason? What is the process by which it's handled internally? Do they send it over to the Deputy Premier?

**KATE MEAGHER:** I'll take that on notice. It's probably best for me to refer that to the Cabinet Office.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** You've not had any experience with this issue as it has gone forward to Cabinet?

**KATE MEAGHER:** None at all.

**The Hon. MARK LATHAM:** But you can take that on notice and perhaps give me a chronology of how it was handled? The Premier obviously gets a blue book as well after the election. From the Premier's Department's point of view, could you take this on notice as well: The Minister said it was a Labor election promise. Was it addressed in the blue book following March 2023?

**KATE MEAGHER:** I'm happy to take it on notice.

**The CHAIR:** Through you, Mr Orr, can I direct my questions to Fisheries. That might be Ms Black, initially. How much money has gone to the Surf Life Saving association for their rock fishing safety program so far?

**TARA BLACK:** I'd have to take that on notice and come back to you this afternoon.

**The CHAIR:** In the first round there were concerns expressed, not only by me but also by very experienced rock fishermen, about the use of images of "Timmy Two Thongs", "Wally wearing his waders" and "Dazza with his gumboots"—all of them bad examples of rock fishing safety—being put forward as visual literacy cues for culturally and linguistically diverse fishermen. Are you aware of those concerns?

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**CORRECTED**

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**TARA BLACK:** I am, yes, and the department raised those concerns with Surf Life Saving New South Wales.

**The CHAIR:** And Surf Life Saving New South Wales have ignored that and continues to use those images in its round two program, as recently as a few weeks back, at Avoca. Are you aware of that?

**TARA BLACK:** Yes, although I wouldn't say that they've ignored the concerns that were raised. I think what has occurred recently was just a human error and an unfortunate mistake. Since that time, we've again discussed that with Surf Life Saving New South Wales and had an undertaking that those cartoon images won't be used again. I think it's important to say, Surf Life Saving New South Wales does a very important job protecting beachgoers and rock fishermen, and it's part of their core business—beach safety. So they do put out a lot of—

**The CHAIR:** But traditionally it hasn't been their core business to do rock fishing safety, because they're not the experts in it, and they've shown that, once again. With all due respect, I don't accept "We've done another whoopsie" as a credible explanation. They were spoken to about it the first time; they've been caught doing it again. This money comes from recreational fishing fees, from the trust fund. It's important that that money is expended wisely and to a benefit. Sending the message to culturally and linguistically diverse fishers that "you can get around in thongs and waders and you'll be safe" is the wrong message.

**TARA BLACK:** I understand the concern. I've personally spoken to the CEO and been given an assurance that that cartoon image won't be used again.

**The CHAIR:** Well, the CEO went on live radio and lied last time. He said they were old images, when they clearly weren't. They were live images. So I'm not too sure of the CEO's assertions that everything will be right. What's going to happen if those images reappear? Will funding be withdrawn? Is there going to be an official evaluation of this program?

**TARA BLACK:** I'm confident that those images won't reappear again from Surf Life Saving. They have been used by Randwick council as well—some social media of the original image was used. Surf Life Saving has spoken to Randwick council as well and asked them to stop using those old images. So I'm confident that it won't happen again.

**The CHAIR:** Have you checked your publications to make sure that none of your websites show these images?

**TARA BLACK:** I haven't personally, but happy to do that and make sure that they don't appear on any New South Wales Government or Surf Life Saving channels.

**The CHAIR:** Is there going to be a review of this program overall in terms of its effectiveness?

**TARA BLACK:** I think the Surf Life Saving program is very effective. It's a very important—

**The CHAIR:** What metrics are you using to make that assessment?

**TARA BLACK:** Surf Life Saving have had very good attendance and engagement at their events, and they put out very important messages to rock fishers.

**The CHAIR:** Has that led to a decrease in rock fishing deaths? That's the ultimate metric.

**TARA BLACK:** I'd have to take that on notice. But, yes, I agree, that's the ultimate metric.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Mr Orr, in relation to the restructure happening within the department, how and when was it first communicated to you that it was needed?

**STEVE ORR:** From whom, Ms Mitchell?

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Was it from the Minister? When did the discussion start about the change management—I think was the term the Minister used—within the department? When was that first communicated to you and by whom?

**STEVE ORR:** It came from within the department, Ms Mitchell. It's up to the department to operate within its resources. There are a number of factors which led us to making the decision that we needed to implement a change management plan. I can run through what those factors were. But in terms of my responsibility, it's my responsibility to ensure that the department is operating within the fiscal resources that we have. We believe that we needed to make the changes, which are currently out for comment and draft at this point, in order for us to run in a fiscally responsible way.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** So this was all instigated by you as the Secretary when you first took on the role? What was the timing of that?

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**CORRECTED**

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**STEVE ORR:** I took on the role at the end of April last year. Since that time, obviously, there was the formation of DPIRD on 1 July. When we did that there were a number of structural changes, which we've talked about in this place previously. A number of structural changes were implemented. Not long after that we went into the budget cycle and I think, through that process, it became apparent that there were some ongoing financial tensions in certain parts of the department. That's what led to the discussion about the need for change management plans.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Did you take that to the Minister to say that this was something that you believed you needed to do?

**STEVE ORR:** It was discussed with the Minister, that's right. But it didn't come from the Minister.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** No, but you had that discussion with her?

**STEVE ORR:** Correct.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Do you know when you first would have raised it with the Minister? I'm happy if you need to take that on notice.

**STEVE ORR:** I'll take that on notice.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** In terms of the process to determine which positions will go, what should be recreated and what should stay, how are you determining that?

**STEVE ORR:** It might be useful just to run through a little bit of history, if I could, and that might be helpful in terms of answering that question. If you look at the initial formation of the Department of Regional NSW back in 2020, the headcount of the department back then was about 4,400. Between then and June 2023 it had increased by about 1,200 people to 5,600. There were some good reasons in terms of why those increases occurred. They predominantly related to some of the challenges which the Government was dealing with, of the day—COVID, bushfires, floods and the like. Those things have come and gone, to a degree, but the headcount hasn't dropped to go back to some of those original numbers. Currently, we're at 4,900. The budget returned to those 2021-, 2022-type levels, so the number of people within the organisation in relation to the budget is certainly a challenge.

Since then, we have dropped away in terms of senior executives. Since June 2023, senior executives have dropped by 21 per cent, casuals by 26 per cent, temporary employees by nearly 30 per cent, contingent labour by 29 per cent, but ongoing employees have only dropped by about 2.4 per cent. So our ongoing headcount, while it increased quite substantially in that earlier period, hadn't fallen away enough. That was one of the primary drivers which led us to believe we needed to implement the change plans, which were about ongoing employees—the 165 which you'd be familiar with. As well as that, within certain parts of the department there were some fiscal challenges. The old DPI had historic challenges in terms of landing its budget, and they were embedded. We had structural deficits built into budgets, which were quite challenging. The implication of that was that others had to cover the overruns, if you like. That could be done a number of years ago, when money was a little bit of a different currency. But as things have tightened up, that's certainly not an option.

Then, perhaps the third factor is we've also had a number of reviews done. You'd be familiar with the R&D review which Professor Mary O'Kane did. That led to questions about "What are you doing, department? Where are you focusing your effort and your energy?" and "You need to make some changes"—so, R&D. The NRC also did a review in terms of biosecurity, and that was another factor. We had historical issues in terms of the structure of the department, in terms of its staff and the way in which the staff were structured; we had some issues in terms of the way in which there were embedded overspends in certain parts of the department; and then we had, strategically, people saying we needed to go in a new direction in certain areas. Those were the factors which led to us making the decision we needed to reduce headcount, and then each one of the groups went through a process of working through what they needed to do in order to reduce headcount to the level which would ensure that we were in a more financially sustainable position.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** In terms of the headcount figures, I think you just said it's currently 4,900—

**STEVE ORR:** Correct.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** —full-time equivalent. I appreciate what you said about the process still being underway in terms of that restructure, but what is the predicted full-time equivalent headcount once that's finalised?

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**CORRECTED**

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**STEVE ORR:** If you just look at our ongoing headcount—and it's not full-time equivalent; I'm just using a headcount number, which is different to an FTE number—we are currently at 3,402. That's the number of ongoing staff. That would reduce by 165, as proposed in the change management plans.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** You might need to take this on notice, but are you able provide a breakdown of exactly how many staff are employed in each role and where you would expect those to be found from those 165? Is that easier if I do that on notice for you because it's quite specific?

**STEVE ORR:** Yes. It's detailed generally in the change management plans themselves, Ms Mitchell, so we should be able to do that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I might put that on notice just in terms of the specifics because I'm interested in admin, research and development—who's in compliance et cetera.

**STEVE ORR:** By and large, I should just say as a general comment, we've very mindful of not impacting on service delivery. Equally, the department has close to 200 locations across New South Wales, and we didn't want any of those locations to close. They were a couple of driving factors to assist with the decision-making.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Mr Orr, when was that decision made? You talked about a number of factors that led to that decision about needing to reduce headcount? When was that decision made?

**STEVE ORR:** When? We were in discussions generally—we were aware of the need to do something, but in terms of formally signing off on change management plans in a draft sense, that didn't occur until, it would be, July.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Obviously, the conversation started before July, though.

**STEVE ORR:** Yes. The conversation started before July. There were certainly a number of conversations which occurred before July but, to be clear, the draft change management plans weren't signed off until July.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** When you were talking about the reviews that led to that decision, you mentioned the NRC review into biosecurity. Did anyone mention that fewer resources were needed for biosecurity?

**STEVE ORR:** No. The NRC review broadly talked about a couple of key themes. One related to we need to be better at taking a risk-based approach. The other related to the need in terms of compliance, and the other was we need to improve some of our governance arrangements. You mentioned this morning about the weeds committee. The Government will shortly respond to those things. That's what the focus was. There's this balance which we need to walk about shifting and changing where we put resources versus where we've currently got resources—hence the need to do some of the changes which we're making in biosecurity to pivot to some of the new direction, which is talked about within the NRC report.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** I'm not sure who, but this question might come to you, Ms Connell. Specifically the research going on into the Southern Multi Breed herd—can someone update me on where that's up to?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** The Southern Multi Breed research program was a joint program between the department and Meat and Livestock Australia. They are the research and development corporation that's responsible for the livestock industry, obviously. I understand UNE also was a partner in some of that work. That was a five-year funded program. MLA was obviously providing a significant amount of funding to that program of research. I'd have to take on notice the exact date it came to an end. I think it was June this year.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Was it always to end then?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** My understanding is that the parties had committed to a program of work. We entered into discussions with MLA, as you do. I think one of the things the department's done exceptionally well over the years is stay in front of the key areas of research for our key industries, and Southern Multi Breed certainly was a significant contributor to that. As the program was nearing its end date, we entered into discussions with MLA about what future research might look like. The parties agreed to transition to a low methane beef program. There's quite a bit of information on our website about that program, so that's going to be a critical focus for us going forward.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Was there a desire for any parties to continue the program as it was?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** One of the things we looked at was where we needed to take research around beef genetics going forward—what the critical issues were for industry. Obviously, one of the things we need to bring to the table is what the critical issues are for New South Wales. It's obviously a program that has national

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**CORRECTED**

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implications, but one of the key things, as I think you'd be aware, that the Government has subscribed to is net zero targets. That was certainly a priority for the department going forward. I'd refer you to the O'Kane review, which the secretary spoke about earlier. That looked quite closely at the areas of research that the department was undertaking. One of the things that the O'Kane review—and I'm happy to get you the page reference—focused on, or called out, was the fact that we really needed to swing into key risks and threats for the industry in New South Wales going forward. I believe that's what the low-methane beef program will do.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** That climate change section of the research—I think it's in your stream. Is that right?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** Climate is obviously a key focus across various areas in our portfolios of research. It's a lens in biosecurity research. We now have the benefit of a specific climate division, and there are staff in the agriculture division as well who are focused on research in relation to climate and climate risks.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** That climate division you mention—is that because of this change management plan or was that in place before?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** The climate and natural resource division was created earlier this year. It's something we talked to staff about last year—the need to have senior leadership at the table driving that area of research going forward. So that division, I think from memory, came into existence on 20 January.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Are any people in that division delimited?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** There is a draft change plan, which proposes to impact some roles across the climate and natural resource parts of that division. But as the secretary said earlier, it's a draft change plan at this point, and it's really important that we take on board the feedback we've received.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** So this area that was identified in the O'Kane report as the most critical part of the research moving forward is affected by this change management plan?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** I think there's the proposal to delimit one role and create another role with a slightly different emphasis in climate research. As you'd appreciate, like all areas of research in primary industries, you've got to evolve as the research evolves and as the issues that impact industry change. It's really important that we get in front of that to ensure that we can do the best by primary producers in terms of what are likely to be quite challenging conditions that they're going to confront in the future.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Ms Connell, has there been a change in the criteria we use to assess the benefits of partnerships and programs, like the Southern Multi Breed herd?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** Mr Barrett, I would refer you to the O'Kane review. It looked really quite closely at the importance of strategic partnerships going forward. I think there were some really quite explicit findings around partnerships and the need for the senior executive in the department to engage with our major partners on a more regular basis. There were some quite explicit recommendations in terms of us engaging at a strategic level at least annually, if not more often, with our key partners. Recommendation 6 recommended the department should implement a framework for engagement with research partners based on various principles. Recommendation 10 also provided a bit of reinforcement for that. Obviously, they're really quite significant recommendations and they are providing guidance for the way we approach our research going forward.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** So some of those changes led to the Southern Multi Breed program not going forward? You couldn't make an agreement with MLA on that one?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** As I said before, we had an engagement with MLA about the future of the research that we were undertaking around the herds. The decision was reached to reflect New South Wales Government priorities, in particular to move in terms of the next phase. You might be aware that genetic beef research has been something the department has been involved in over the last three, four, five decades. It's had to evolve over time. The decision was made that that evolution should support low-methane beef. It's one of the critical factors that our beef industries in New South Wales and Australia are confronting in terms of the national and the State governments having signed up to targets that are quite ambitious.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** So there is a bit of a mutual break-up.

**RACHEL CONNELL:** We're still partners. We're still meeting with Meat and Livestock Australia. We still have a number of projects with them across a number of areas, including in biosecurity.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** What's the strength of the team currently at the Glen Innes station, and what is the future for that station under the delimiting program?

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**CORRECTED**

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**RACHEL CONNELL:** In terms of the staff numbers that we have at Glen Innes—we've got quite a few sites. I think we've got a couple of staff based up there. In terms of the impacts of the change plans, as we've said before, they're draft change plans at this point. We are undertaking a consultation, and we've obviously had quite a lot of feedback and it's really important that we take that feedback into account.

**STEVE ORR:** There are 23. There's one impacted role at Glen Innes.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Sorry?

**STEVE ORR:** I've got 23 at Glen Innes and there's one impacted role.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** What about Cowra?

**STEVE ORR:** Cowra is 31 and there's six.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** And finally Trangie?

**STEVE ORR:** Twenty-five and seven.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Seven affected?

**STEVE ORR:** I trust you understand the distinction between impacted and delimited. When you go through a change process and you've got a structure, which may have 20 people in it, and you want to reduce that to, say, 15, 20 people are impacted and five roles are delimited. The numbers I'm just giving you here are people who are impacted in terms of they would need to go through a job process once the change management plans are finalised.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** This issue about the primary producer grants flood approvals that I asked the Minister about this morning—or a few of us did. In the Premier's estimates hearing, Mr Draper was able to tell me that, I think, for that specific primary producer grant, there had been 1,036 applications and 239 approvals. I think the Minister said that is now up to 1,500 applications. Do you have that data, Mr Orr?

**STEVE ORR:** Yes. So this is for the \$75,000 grant?

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Yes.

**STEVE ORR:** That's 1,510 and this is the data as of last night. So 1,510 applications have been received and 58 per cent of those have been determined—and determined means either approved, withdrawn or declined. In terms of approved, I don't have a percentage, but it's 549 have been approved. The initial, I think, \$5,000 has been paid to those people. Two hundred and ninety have been withdrawn and 32 have been declined. One of the reasons the withdrawn number is so high is that we had both a category C and a category D event. The category C event started at the beginning of June and we had people applying for the category C event. Then the category D was declared about a month later and we went through the process of switching those from a category C into a category D. So the withdrawals are really a reflection of the category C applications being withdrawn.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Of the 549 approved, have they received the \$5,000? How many of those have received the full \$75,000?

**STEVE ORR:** The 549 is they've received the \$5,000. Then the balance, assuming they've applied for the lot, would be payable on production of receipts.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Do you know how many have got the full \$75,000 yet, though? Do you have that data?

**STEVE ORR:** No, I don't have that number, Ms Mitchell. I can take that on notice if it's helpful. But the total value of the applications which have been approved to date is \$38,000,900. The total, if you want what has been paid actually to people, is \$2,000,745.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** My question before I got cut off by the bell was, in regard to the legalisation of shock collars, why was there no public consultation? I have seen the list of organisations that were consulted, but I just wanted to get a bit of a background understanding as to why no public consultation process was undertaken.

**PETER DAY:** In terms of the actual consultation process, I think, because it was basically being done on the national guideline that was being finalised through AWTG—so it was very much a targeted consultation, basically, on the technical aspects of that guideline, hence the need to engage with those relevant stakeholders who were intimately involved with that guideline itself.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Just explain to me why the national guidelines prohibit a public consultation.

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**CORRECTED**

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**PETER DAY:** Sorry, say that again.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Can you explain to me how a national guideline would impede a public consultation?

**PETER DAY:** There still would be consultation if it was going to be made into a regulation later on as well. But for the purposes of the guideline itself, it was around just trying to get some technical input from the relevant stakeholders around the operation of that guideline going forward.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** But our understanding is the Minister said that she is introducing regulations to allow for shock collars.

**PETER DAY:** That's correct.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** So my question was why was there no public consultation on any proposed regulations?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** I think Mr Day has answered the question. We took the nationally developed draft guidelines and undertook consultation on the specifics of those guidelines with a range of key stakeholders across various parts of the spectrum.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I understand the process. I'm just trying to understand why there was no public consultation process within that. I understand that there's a national guideline. I understand that there was targeted consultation with particular groups. I was just trying to get an understanding of why there was a decision made to not have any public consultation on the proposed regulations.

**RACHEL CONNELL:** We'll take it on notice in terms of any Government decision. But it's not unusual for us to do targeted consultation in terms of technical specificities of regulations and standards.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** The lower House inquiry into the shock collars recommended the development of a code of practice to specify animal welfare requirements. Is it still the intention to develop a code to go along with the regulations?

**PETER DAY:** For virtual fencing?

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Yes, for the shock collars.

**PETER DAY:** It'll be actually the guideline that will be—there's an Australian Animal Welfare Guide for Virtual Fencing, which is being developed nationally through the Animal Welfare Task Group. That would be the guideline that would be used to advise both farmers and also industry of the requirements of that.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** So we will now only have a guideline rather than a code?

**PETER DAY:** The guideline is quite broad in terms of its aspects. It is outcome based.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** But there's no requirement, obviously, to comply with the guideline compared to—you can often have a code where there's a requirement to actually comply with the code, whereas a guideline is, as it's self-described, a guideline.

**PETER DAY:** The guideline can be used as evidence around compliance.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Yes, but I've obviously been involved in this space for a very long time and I know how difficult it is, once there's a court case, to use a guideline as evidence of animal cruelty. So just to clarify, there won't be any code introduced with these regulations?

**PETER DAY:** That's correct. It'll be a national guide.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I've got some questions about the veterinary practitioners Act review. At previous estimates, I've asked questions about the review of the veterinary practitioners regulatory framework, which the Minister committed to undertake following the vet shortage inquiry. Can I get some advice on where this work is up to, please?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** Yes. The Government agreed to support in principle, I think, 33 of the 34 recommendations, so it's obviously been a key focus for the department. One of the things we've been looking at is doing the policy work around reforms to the Veterinary Practice Act, including consulting with the Veterinary Practitioners Board on options for amendments to the legislation. The next step is for us to brief the Minister in terms of options and possible ways of improving the legislation in light of the recommendations of the inquiry. I would also add that the inquiry has also informed work at the national level. Agricultural Ministers and senior officers are also oversighting a body of work at the national level which reflects some of the recommendations of the State inquiry.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** One of the key issues is the current lack of protection for vet nurses and vet technicians, who, as you know, are entirely unregulated at the moment. There's obviously a great opportunity for those skilled professionals to take on more work and actually assist with this shortage that we're dealing with, but they need to be properly regulated and supported to be able to do that. Has the department been doing any work specifically in that space to help sort of fix some of that gap around the vet shortage?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** We've been doing quite a bit of work in relation to the vet shortage. It has become a focus for our—I will get Tara to remind me of the name—Welcome Experience. We've incorporated some measures to support workers and attract workers into New South Wales. That's obviously in response to the inquiry. We are also doing some work with Local Land Services in terms of them becoming an employer of choice for vets and undertaking education and awareness. We're also working quite closely with some NGOs that operate in the space.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Sorry, and that work has anything to do with the title protection for vet nurses and vet technicians?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** And protection for vet nurses is part of, in my understanding, some of the work that we're doing in terms of regulatory options. But I'd have to take on notice the specific aspects.

**PETER DAY:** Sorry, Chair, I can answer that, Ms Hurst, on behalf of Ms Connell. Yes, that has been some of the work we are currently doing in that space. I think some of the inquiry realised before that the reg framework around those areas hadn't kept pace with modern arrangements, so that is certainly one of the things we're looking at.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Is it anticipated that the review into the veterinary practitioners regulatory framework will be completed in this term of government?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** I think that's a matter for the Minister and the Government, Ms Hurst.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** So you haven't been given a time frame, essentially. You're just working on it without a time frame from the Minister.

**RACHEL CONNELL:** It's a priority. The direction has been this term of government. But in terms of which part of this term of government, it's obviously up to the Government.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I've previously asked the Minister and Dr Filmer about the animal welfare advisory committee, who seem to be meeting very infrequently. Can I get some advice on how many times that committee has met since the last budget estimates in February 2025? I'm happy for that to be taken on notice, if it's not easy.

**PETER DAY:** Ms Hurst, the animal welfare advisory committee have met twice: on 19 March, where they were briefed on the puppy farming amendment Act, the staged repeal of POCTAA and ethical breeding of dogs and cats; and 18 August, where also they were briefed on upcoming reviews of codes and standards.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Is that the main work that AWAC has been doing, or have they been working on other areas of animal welfare to advise the Minister?

**PETER DAY:** To date, but they were also one of the groups we consulted with in terms of the virtual fencing as well.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I asked the Minister this morning about Cowra meats and the ongoing investigation into alleged animal cruelty at that facility. Could I get an update on that investigation?

**PETER DAY:** That matter is still under investigation so we can't provide much detail around that. We were last at the plant in July for an audit. There's also an increased audit frequency at that plant by our compliance officers as well.

**The CHAIR:** I might go back to Ms Black and maybe Dr Saunders. Can I talk to you about the Mulloway Harvest Strategy, please? Why did your department hide a more positive stock assessment from the working group that was advising on the harvest strategy?

**TARA BLACK:** Thanks, Mr Banasiak, Chair. I don't agree with the premise of that question.

**The CHAIR:** "Withhold", then. Is that a better term?

**TARA BLACK:** I don't agree that it was withheld. The draft stock assessment was shared with the working group while it was being peer reviewed by FRDC, and then it was published on the FRDC website over 12 months ago.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The CHAIR:** But you were asking the harvest strategy working group to make decisions on the harvest strategy without seeing that document. Isn't that correct?

**TARA BLACK:** The science was still in draft form at that point. It was discussed with the working group. But that's the appropriate process that we follow, that our scientific assessments do go through that peer review process.

**The CHAIR:** So why would you ask them to make a decision or finalise their views on the harvest strategy working group on 18 and 19 March 2024 when you were still going through a review, a proper check and balance on the harvest strategy? Wouldn't you want them to have the best information available to them before making that decision?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** Absolutely, Chair. At the November 2023 meeting the draft stock assessment was presented to the harvest strategy working group, and some of the uncertainties were teased out a bit and worked through. But it was recognised that for them to be overcome, it was going to be requiring a much longer process than what we could do conceivably in a couple of months. We do have an FRDC project that's underway to address some of those uncertainties. But the draft stock assessment at that stage had only just been peer reviewed internally, and the harvest strategy working group got an opportunity to have a look at it and comment on it in that working group meeting.

**The CHAIR:** You talked about the FRDC project. That's essentially the data refresh, is it?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** It's looking at a range of things. Obviously, a key component would be bringing the stock assessment up into a more modernised framework. At the moment it's what's called a weight of evidence approach. We did introduce a more numerical stock assessment into this one. That's why it took a fair while for the peer review process to occur. But we've already improved that since we published it in 2024.

**The CHAIR:** Why release a draft strategy for public comment when you haven't finished that FRDC—

**THOR SAUNDERS:** Because it's going to take five years.

**The CHAIR:** Right. Can you tell us what that stock assessment said about the mulloway stocks in terms of estimated spawning biomass? Have you got that, and how it compared to the previous study in 2021-22?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** Mulloway has been classified as depleted since 2004-05. The most recent stock assessment before the one that was just published still had it as depleted. With the new stock assessment there was sufficient information to suggest that, while the biomass was still hovering maybe just above that 20 per cent of un-fished levels, it was still down around that level, but the management that had been put in place and some of the signals in catch rate and size of the fish were positive enough for us to say that it's actually looking like it's recovering, which still means that the biomass is at a depleted state.

**The CHAIR:** But if it's recovering, why would the draft harvest strategy go for such a rigid framework rather than looking at other options?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** There was a range of options looked at with what's in the draft harvest strategy. The model was used to test whether that was going to effectively recover mulloway to the level that was desired under the harvest strategy, which is up to 30 per cent, and this was the level that was determined by that model with some uncertainty around it to recover it within the appropriate time frame.

**The CHAIR:** Are you able to table the options that were presented to the working group and any data around what came with those options?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** It was under the TAF committee, so it's on the public record, but I can provide that, yes.

**The CHAIR:** What engagement have you had on the commercial fishing peak body, Ms Black, or you, Dr Saunders?

**TARA BLACK:** I attended a meeting with the Minister a few weeks ago with the wild caught harvest coalition.

**The CHAIR:** Have you had any meetings with the commercial fishing peak body as it's been established?

**TARA BLACK:** I haven't. I've only been acting in this role for three weeks. But I have spoken on the phone to the chair.

**The CHAIR:** What about you, Dr Saunders? Have you had any engagement?

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**CORRECTED**

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**THOR SAUNDERS:** I've only met the CEO a couple of times. I haven't had any official sort of engagements, attended any of their meetings or anything like that.

**The CHAIR:** So you haven't discussed anything in terms of their work or what policy or anything that—

**THOR SAUNDERS:** Just in broad sense.

**The CHAIR:** Are any of you aware of how many members they actually have currently compared to when they first established?

**TARA BLACK:** I think we'd have to take that on notice.

**The CHAIR:** If you would take that on notice, how it compares to when they were first funded by the Government, that would be great. Is your agency doing any assessment on how they're spending this money?

**TARA BLACK:** I think the Minister's intention is to meet with the peak body representatives sometime soon. She's obviously met with a group of stakeholders and not yet discussed the claims that they've made with that group. That's something that's still going on. We do have a funding deed in place with the peak body that requires them to provide us with different information to support its establishment. I would just say the—

**The CHAIR:** Is there some sort of acquittal process that they need to show what they're spending the money on?

**TARA BLACK:** Yes, I believe so. I'll double-check that, but I believe so.

**The CHAIR:** Are you able to provide that to us so we can understand what they're spending the money on?

**TARA BLACK:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** As part of that funding deed, are there specific deliverables or outcomes that are attached?

**TARA BLACK:** Yes. Some of the milestones include providing a project plan to us, so bearing in mind this is very new and the Government is trying to support the peak body to establish itself. We also require an activity progress report, or a series of those, and I think there's been some discussion this morning about the AGM. That's not one of the milestones, but I would just say—

**The CHAIR:** No, but it's a basic function of any association or entity that you have an AGM. If you can't hold an AGM, you don't exist as an association.

**TARA BLACK:** That's right. But it has taken some time for the board to be established. The board was only elected at the end of March and my understanding is the AGM will occur in October.

**The CHAIR:** From my understanding, there was actually—

**TARA BLACK:** There was an interim board.

**The CHAIR:** There was an interim board, legacy members, and what's been reported to me is that there's been an attempt by the CEO and some of the former members of the professional fishing association to exclude some of those legacy members from the wild caught coalition. It seems like they're trying to create a rebadged version of the professional fishing association. Is that what was represented to you and the Minister at the—

**TARA BLACK:** Yes, there were a range of governance concerns raised and that's what I understand the Minister would like to discuss with the peak body when she meets with them.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Orr, can I go to you about the aerial culling questions we asked on notice, or my colleague asked on notice, a little while ago? I'll pass them to you to refresh your memory. Just so we can get a bit of a baseline, how do you make sure that the numbers that are reported by aerial shooters are accurate?

**STEVE ORR:** I think it's a question for Mr Kelly.

**ROB KELLY:** I've obviously read those, but in terms of accuracy of aerial culling, when we do aerial shoot programs the cull or the animal is confirmed killed by two sources: The pilot and the navigator.

**The CHAIR:** When they do a flyover, do they actually check to see that that animal is down?

**ROB KELLY:** They do. Once the animal has been shot, they do a fly back over. It requires a minimum of two shots and then more shots until confirmed killed.

**The CHAIR:** Okay, so they actually sight the animal being down?

**ROB KELLY:** Yes.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The CHAIR:** And deceased?

**ROB KELLY:** Yes.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Mr Orr, does the RAA sit directly under you?

**STEVE ORR:** Yes. Well, sorry, not in a direct way. The RAA sits under Ms Myers, who is the deputy secretary or chief operating officer for the department.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** When the Minister said last week, "We're putting additional resources in today," was that the first you'd heard of that?

**STEVE ORR:** When?

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Last week, when she made the announcement to double the resources into the RAA?

**STEVE ORR:** No. I discussed the matter with the Minister and we agreed we needed additional resources. When that was, I'd need to take that on notice.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** The talk of doubling the number of staff—was that to get to 50?

**STEVE ORR:** No. Just in terms of clarity, doubling the number of staff refers to assessment staff. This time last week there were 12 assessment staff. Now there's 24.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Where did those additional 12 come from?

**STEVE ORR:** I'd need to take that on notice, Mr Barrett.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** On *Country Hour* on Friday the Minister talked of 50 staff.

**STEVE ORR:** Yes.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** So we are going to get to 50 staff?

**STEVE ORR:** Sorry, there's a range of different roles within the RAA when they assess applications. There are people in call centres; there are people who do the financial processing. The main area of tension or where there are issues about the numbers of people is in the area of assessments. We doubled the number of people who are doing assessments from 12 to 24. The total number of people working on the program at the moment is 51.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Those additional 12—are they external people or have they moved across?

**STEVE ORR:** I'll come back to you, Mr Barrett, on that question.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** How long have you been working on this increase?

**STEVE ORR:** Sorry?

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** When did you first discuss this with the Minister?

**STEVE ORR:** It was the week previous to last week.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** When she says things like she instructed the department to act and told the department to put in more resources and that's what they're doing, my experience with the RAA would be that they were doing everything they possibly could with the resources that they had at hand. Do you think it's true to imply that this sort of stuff only happened because the Minister intervened, as she mentioned earlier?

**STEVE ORR:** The Minister was pretty clear, particularly with me and some of the other staff who were involved in assessing it, about needing to increase the efficiency by which we're actually processing applications. As you can imagine, Mr Barrett, there were a number of factors going into the management and oversight of this particular program. The Minister touched on some of those previously. We had a cat C and then we went to a cat D. It was a significant administrative load just to move people from one to the other. We didn't want people having to go through an additional application process simply because it became a cat D. There were additional information requirements and then we had to get staff trained and developed so they could actually run the program. That took some time. The efficiency is what we're now looking at to ensure that the program and the assessment process is as efficient as possible. Certainly the Minister has been clear with me and others within the department about the need to put on additional resources to get information back to people in terms of where their application actually sits.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** If we're able to double the resources in essentially a week—coincidentally, since this was put on the Premier's radar in budget estimates—how come it has taken three months to get to that point that we need to increase the resources into dealing with these applications?

**STEVE ORR:** The cat D become available in early July. The cat C was obviously in place about a month beforehand. I think it's a reasonable question in terms of how quickly we responded to the event. As I said, there was a number of factors that we had to deal with early on, which slowed the process down. As with all of these things, Mr Barrett, we have a look back through to ensure that we learn from the experience. Certainly those learnings will be applied when we deal with this next time around.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** I presume you'll have to take this on notice given your answer to an earlier question, but how many of those staff who are on there are higher grade staff working on this?

**STEVE ORR:** Again, I'd need to take that on notice.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** I appreciate the efforts that were put in over the weekend to catch up on this. Do we have any understanding of what this would have cost in overtime?

**STEVE ORR:** Again, I'll take that on notice. There are funding arrangements between the State and the Commonwealth in terms of the way in which these events are funded. That factors into it. The sort of staff which we can actually use in relation to those funding arrangements is also another factor. But, in terms of the amount of money that was spent over the weekend with respect to overtime, I'd need to take that on notice.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Some of the language that we're hearing about applications being "picked up"—are you familiar with that term? I just wonder if you could explain more what that actually meant. When do we classify an application as being picked up?

**STEVE ORR:** I think it's just simply the assessor grabbing the application and starting the assessment process—I think.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** What would be the time frame, then, from that to it actually being assessed?

**STEVE ORR:** The time at the moment is 24.3 days. That's the time, as of last night.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Earlier on, I touched on that generic email that went out on Friday. I saw you assist the Minister with that. So every applicant has received a person-specific response to their application?

**STEVE ORR:** This deals with the applications as of last Tuesday. Anyone who hadn't had an answer back in terms of where their application was, we reached out. The vast majority of that was through phone. Where we couldn't reach out through phone, it was either text or email. Then, at the end of the week—particularly to cover those people who had applied in that four-day period—we also sent out an email to everyone again who was still waiting for a decision.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** And they would now have a better understanding of when they can expect to hear back on their application?

**STEVE ORR:** They should have.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Mr Orr, I want to go now to some questions about the Dubbo sports hub project. I have some questions for Mr Begg as well, but I'll start with the secretary. For that particular project, there was obviously a number of documents that came back through the call for papers, as you'd be aware. I wondered if you could talk me through the process from your perspective, because we have briefs that were created back in October last year recommending that you approve and sign a new funding agreement which altered the name, location, scope et cetera for the sports hub. Is that your recollection as well?

**STEVE ORR:** There has been a number of documents in relation to this, but Mr Bolton's probably been closest to it. If you don't mind, I might refer to Mr Bolton.

**JAMES BOLTON:** Thanks, Steve. The key briefing note that I was involved in was around November 2024, which was around consideration of the grant at the time. It provided advice on a variety of things, including the funding deed, which the Office of Sport was essentially responsible for. We were a funding contributor to that. The brief, as I'm sure you're aware, included the timeline and expected project costs and some of the issues that were experienced in the project.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Mr Orr, back to October briefs, there was a brief where the Office of Sport had confirmed through reassessment and probity actions that the project remained aligned with the

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**CORRECTED**

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guidelines. It said that the grants management office has reviewed the changes and recommended the changes be approved and the agreement signed by the secretary as the financial delegate. Do you recall that brief, Mr Orr? That was October last year.

**STEVE ORR:** I know there was a brief. I don't think that brief ever came to me.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** So you don't recall ever signing off on it? I'm happy if you need to take that on notice.

**STEVE ORR:** No, I don't believe I did.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** In terms of the discussions with the Minister's office around that particular project, there were some documents that indicated that sign-off should happen towards the end of October, but then the Minister's office requested another brief to get more history of the project. Is that your understanding? Do they come to you wanting more information—or through you, Mr Bolton?

**STEVE ORR:** It might be better if Mr Bolton answers that, if that's okay.

**JAMES BOLTON:** Sorry, Ms Mitchell. Could you just repeat the question?

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** In relation to requests from the Minister's office wanting to understand the background and history of the project, my understanding is that there was a request from them that came at the end of October wanting more information about the project. Do you recall that?

**JAMES BOLTON:** Not specifically, but I can provide some clarity on the prompt for the brief that went up that I referenced before. The prompting for that brief was a request from the Office of Sport around October 2024. Is that what you're referring to? It was for us as the department, DPIRD, to consider entering into a new proposal with PCYC.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** What I have is that there was a request from the Minister's office towards the end of October wanting a briefing by the following morning of a complete timeline of the project—so, separate to the Office of Sport, the Minister's office coming to you wanting more information on the history of the project. Do you recall that?

**JAMES BOLTON:** I can recall some of that. But, once the project and consideration of it—essentially a few things happened at the time, which was the programs and this responsibility moving into my portfolio. Like I said before, the key consideration that I was a part of was the brief that went up around the end of November. So I can take on notice some of the questions around that previous brief that you referenced.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** That would be good. What's your recollection in terms of the brief that went up in November?

**JAMES BOLTON:** The brief, as just described, considered a lot of things like the issues around the project and the lack of delivery and the timing that had occurred previously. It also had some recommendations around how to proceed, moving forward.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Who came up with those recommendations? Was that through you?

**JAMES BOLTON:** Yes, that's through me.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Prior to that brief, was there ever a discussion with the Minister's office about not funding that project?

**JAMES BOLTON:** I'll have to take that on notice. The key decision point is obviously the brief that goes up. There may have been discussions between the Minister and myself at the time, but it's my responsibility to provide a brief.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Yes, I appreciate that. I guess what I'm trying to figure out is there are documents that we have and have obtained through the call for papers that seem to indicate that it was possible for the project to continue, and then the decision was made not to. I respect that that's the decision of the government of the day, but I'm just trying to understand was there a direction given to you by the Minister or her staff not to go ahead with that project at some point?

**JAMES BOLTON:** Not that I can recall, but one item that's really critical in this is that it's a different project. The first project was for the site on the CSU. The consideration and the request from the Office of Sport was to consider a completely new project and a new funding deed, essentially, which was for the Sports World site. That was a fundamental piece of the briefing position that we put to the Minister.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** So, because it was on a different site, your advice to the Minister was not to continue with the project?

**JAMES BOLTON:** That was part of the consideration, from memory.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Then, in terms of the funding that had been allocated to that—because there was, to my understanding, more than \$30 million there for that original project—where has that money gone to?

**JAMES BOLTON:** The money has been returned to the department.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** What will it be allocated to, then?

**JAMES BOLTON:** To a certain degree, there has been a commitment to the Regional Development Trust: an additional \$33 million put towards the trust.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** The Minister said this morning that she's looking at options—again, I appreciate you have a role to play as a public servant—but the \$30-odd million that was allocated for that Dubbo project is now effectively back in the generic trust and could be dispersed anywhere across the State, theoretically.

**JAMES BOLTON:** In theory, yes.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I wanted to ask you, Mr Begg, through the documents there was some urgency around returning that funding to the general funds—for the Office of Sport to return their funding. Documents indicate that you had a conversation with the Minister about that. Do you recall that?

**ANGUS BEGG:** I've never had a conversation with the Minister about this.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Someone put in an email that you did have a phone call with her. Are you saying that that's incorrect?

**ANGUS BEGG:** I'm not here to comment on the commentary of others. I'm happy to answer questions of fact.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** As I said, I appreciate it's sensitive. I'm not trying to make you feel uncomfortable. The email that was received said that the Minister yelled at you and was on the phone about that. Do you want to clarify that?

**ANGUS BEGG:** I refer to my previous comment.

**STEVE ORR:** I have spoken to Mr Begg about that, and what he said is correct.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** As I said, I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable. I'm just trying to get to the bottom of what actually has gone on in relation to that particular project. I might throw back over to my colleague for a bit. We might come back to this.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Submissions on the land codes—is that you, Mr Kelly?

**ROB KELLY:** Yes, it is.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Can you tell me how many submissions were received?

**ROB KELLY:** I can. We have received 1,471 submissions.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Have you got them dated? Any chance you can tell me what was submitted after 4 July?

**ROB KELLY:** I will have to take that on notice. I don't have the information to hand.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Thank you very much. Is there any reason in your mind that these submissions should not be released?

**ROB KELLY:** Again, I refer to the Minister's testimony this morning. We'd have to go through and see the sensitive nature or, if there is any sensitive nature, whether there has been permission granted for the person submitting it, that they want their details—having said all that, if there are no reasons as to why they couldn't be then we could consider that.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Through you, Mr Orr, and possibly to Ms Connell—I'm not sure—has anyone got assurances about the impacts of the proposed waste incinerator at Parkes and what impact that might have on agricultural production, in particular when it comes to LPA accreditations.

**STEVE ORR:** Maybe Mr Bolton might answer the question.

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**CORRECTED**

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**JAMES BOLTON:** The energy from waste facility proposed in Parkes is the point of the question. To a certain degree, our role is essentially providing a lease to the proponent. The development is not approved yet, so the proponent has to go through a series of approvals with DPHI and the EPA. Through that process, they will assess all the things that are a concern to the community. Human health is the key one. All that work and information is to come through the application process.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** I understand that. I just wondered, from an ag perspective, has anyone sought advice on what impact it might have there, particularly when it comes to the LPA?

**STEVE ORR:** Has the proponent sought advice from us? Is that your question?

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** No. Has the department sought advice at all on what impact it might have on agriculture, being the department of agriculture?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** I'll take that on notice in terms of any advice we have provided into the process.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** The biosecurity commissioner—let's use the reports that have been lodged from the previous commissioner. Do either of these reviews include assessments of arrangements in relation to varroa mite, FMD or fire ants?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** The previous Independent Biosecurity Commissioner, Dr Marion Healy, undertook a number of reviews. The information on those reviews is available on the commissioner's website. I will take on notice whether they dealt specifically with the matters you raised. I will specify that they were focused on invasive species. One of the reviews focused on governance in relation to invasive species, and the other one looked at compliance in relation to invasive species management.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** I am trying to get to the bottom of the remit of the biosecurity commissioner more broadly when it comes to emergency incursions and whether they have a role in that space.

**RACHEL CONNELL:** The biosecurity commissioner, under the Biosecurity Act, has a statutory role to provide advice on a broad range of matters in relation to biosecurity. In terms of the work plan that the previous commissioner focused on, the elements of that work plan you can find on the Independent Biosecurity Commissioner's website. The key focus areas were compliance and governance in relation to invasive species management. There was some work in relation to communications and working with Aboriginal people as well. That was the focus of the first period of time.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Mr Kelly, possibly—Good Neighbours Program. When do we see the next round of that announced?

**ROB KELLY:** The next round for those—there's the current round that has closed and has been assessed. That is going through the final stages of approval and is expected to be announced in the next few weeks.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** And that will take us up to how much of that program?

**ROB KELLY:** In total? I haven't got the exact number, but it's roughly around \$6 million out of—

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** That being six of 10 that's now gone out the door.

**ROB KELLY:** Yes, six of 10.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** How are these projects—how do they come to LLS? There is not an application process for this, is there?

**ROB KELLY:** There is an application process. It's not open to the general public, obviously, because it's a project that's aimed at public land managers and their neighbours. There are open rounds for public land managers to provide applications for the funding.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** The Government applies for this government money to spend on their land.

**ROB KELLY:** Plus other—their public land managers, yes.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** It feels very much like a press release to announce business as usual, doesn't it?

**ROB KELLY:** It's not business as usual, because the public land managers who have applied also work with the neighbouring landholders and other community groups as well because it is a Good Neighbours Program. Primarily, the program was set up around building that relationship between the public land manager and their neighbours. Obviously a lot of the issues that were raised were around that interaction where there was perceptions

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or otherwise that there was a lack of coordinated pest control or more was needed to be done in that space. It's work that involves both public land managers and neighbours.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Mr Chaudhary, can I please ask you if we're likely to see a similar result in terms of the financial position of the hardwood sector for this financial year? I know the annual report is due soon, but if you could give just an indication. I'm sure the work is mostly completed.

**ANSHUL CHAUDHARY:** I think you mentioned before that the half-year result for hardwood was about 14.9 million. It is important for the Committee to understand that Forestry Corporation is more than just hardwood; we've got other divisions as well. Those other divisions are positively contributing to the result.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Going very well, yes.

**ANSHUL CHAUDHARY:** Hardwood has got a number of issues. It will be in a negative position by the end of the financial year. We have to wait for those results to be released. There is a couple of reasons why it is the case. One of the key things you might recall—last year, we had a couple of changes to the environmental rules. When that happened, we had to stop work on the North Coast. That had a widespread impact on wood supply and on the financials of hardwood.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Can I ask, just in the short remaining period—we're looking at continued losses. Is it likely to be of a similar quantum to the first part of the financial year?

**ANSHUL CHAUDHARY:** The results are not out yet. I won't speculate on that, because it has to pass the audit clearance.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** In terms of the imminent announcement of the Great Koala National Park, are your operations that are taking place at the moment in the GKNP assessment area—are they all coming to an end now?

**ANSHUL CHAUDHARY:** We are continuing to operate in all areas of North Coast forest.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** In those koala assessment areas where that park is going to be determined, will you just stop on the day the announcement is made? Is that your plan?

**ANSHUL CHAUDHARY:** I think that's yet to be seen when the decision actually comes out, Ms Higginson.

**STEVE ORR:** I think it's really a matter for Government, Ms Higginson, in terms of how all that's going to work.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Someone has to say "stop" to the machines. I'm just curious about whether that's the CEO or who—

**The CHAIR:** I will now say "stop". We will now break for 15 minutes for afternoon tea. We'll be back at 3.45 p.m.

**(Short adjournment)**

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back. We'll start with questions from the crossbench.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I've got some questions in regard to mulesing. I asked some questions on notice about what assessments have been made on potential export market losses if mulesing is not phased out. The response I got was that the New South Wales Government continues to monitor the changes to traditional and technical barriers to trade in the primary industry sector over time. Can I ask you to elaborate on what technical barriers have been identified specifically relating to mulesing?

**PETER DAY:** The question was, Ms Hurst, around technical barriers to stopping mulesing. Is that correct?

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Yes.

**PETER DAY:** I'd have to take that on notice in terms of that response that was given to you previously so I can find out the background to that one. In terms of mulesing itself, currently our advice from industry is that we're up to about 97 per cent rate of mulesing in the land market at the moment.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Sorry, 97 per cent rate. What do you mean by that?

**PETER DAY:** In terms of 97 per cent are using pain relief at mulesing.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Pain relief—great. Could you take it on notice in regard to elaborating on what technical barriers have been identified? In my question on notice, I also got the response back that ongoing research and work into breeding naturally resistant sheep by industry has resulted in a 190 per cent increase in the last eight years in the number of flocks that no longer require mulesing. I'm wondering if you could tell me what the source of that information is and if this is a New South Wales statistic or Australia-wide.

**PETER DAY:** What I've got here is that Australian Wool Innovation have invested more than \$48 million between 2001 and June 2024 on flystrike RD&E, including on breeding more flystrike-resistant sheep; blowfly control; mapping the *Lucilia cuprina* genome, which is the blowfly itself; use of pain relief; parasite control; and husbandry.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** My question was quite specific. It was about the question that I put on notice. The answer said there had been a 190 per cent increase over the past eight years in the number of flocks that no longer require mulesing. I'm happy for you to take it on notice if you don't have it in front of you, but my question is what was the source of that information, specifically, and whether that statistic is New South Wales specific or Australia-wide.

**PETER DAY:** I'll take that on notice, Ms Hurst.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Has DPIRD assessed the cost-effectiveness and welfare benefits of transitioning from non-mulesed sheep at all?

**PETER DAY:** I'll have to take that on notice in terms of the cost-benefit analysis. I'm not aware of that.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** If there has been a cost-benefit analysis, could you also provide details of that cost-benefit analysis?

**PETER DAY:** I will.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** How is DPIRD ensuring all wool growers are taking steps to breed flystrike-resistant sheep to ensure the industry is moving towards that phase-out?

**PETER DAY:** There's no actual mandate to breed those sheep. However, what we are working on is that there's a growing uptake from industry in terms of using actual pain relief itself in terms of where mulesing has to occur. But there's no requirement to use—

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** So the emphasis for DPIRD is helping farmers move towards pain relief rather than moving away from the practice of mulesing?

**PETER DAY:** They're questions for industry themselves. What we can provide is the advice—

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** My question was what is DPIRD doing to support farmers? I'm asking you is DPIRD's emphasis on supporting farmers moving towards pain relief or is DPIRD working to help farmers phase out and to actually breed flystrike-resistant sheep instead?

**PETER DAY:** In terms of the research, I would have to refer to Ms Connell for the research programs themselves.

**RACHEL CONNELL:** I'm not aware that we've got any specific program supporting primary producers in that regard but, as Mr Day said, the national RDC is focused on that as a program of work.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Is there a reason why DPIRD is not supporting farmers in this space?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** The national body is funded through growers but also funded through the Commonwealth. It's a national issue. In terms of our limited resources, the national body is driving the work at the moment.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Animal welfare laws are State based. My question then would be whether DPIRD has any kind of responsibility or oversight into the welfare of sheep in these industries?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** Obviously the prevention of cruelty to animal legislative framework applies, and there's a significant work stream that takes place nationally in relation to animal welfare matters. But, in this case, I think it's a positive thing that the industry is investing quite significantly in changes and supporting those changes across the sector, not just in New South Wales but nationally.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** In regard to Coffs Coast Wildlife Sanctuary, I've sent some documentation to the Minister and the department regarding some concerns that we continue to have, including evidence that there appears to be closing of the gate between the two dolphin pools and containing the dolphins to the smaller,

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noncompliant pool for the purposes of performance or interactions with the public. Has the department looked into those concerns from the further evidence that was sent through in June this year?

**PETER DAY:** Our last inspection at Coffs Coast was on 26 March this year.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Has anything been done since my letter in June indicating that there was evidence that the noncompliant pool was still being used as the primary pool at certain instances for the dolphins?

**PETER DAY:** I'd have to take that on notice in terms of a follow-up to that correspondence, Ms Hurst.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I've got some follow-up questions as well. Again, you may need to take this on notice. I want to get the number of times the dolphins have been confined to the noncompliant pool in the last 12 months, including how long the dolphins were confined to the noncompliant pool on each occasion, the justification for the confinement on each occasion and whether any veterinary advice was sought to support the confinement on each occasion. Could you take that one on notice, Mr Day?

**PETER DAY:** I'll take those on notice.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I also want to find out if there was any animal welfare assessment that has been undertaken or advice that has been obtained in respect to the 2024 decision to grant them a special condition to allow them to even use a noncompliant pool.

**PETER DAY:** That approval for the pools—my understanding was that has been given since prior to 2014. I'm not privy to the information that informed that decision, but it would have been based on the technical information at the time. But I can take that on notice in terms of what was actually considered as part of that decision.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** If there has been any advice since then as well, particularly given that the experts in the space are raising major concerns—are you able to take that one on notice?

**PETER DAY:** Yes, I will.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** I also have some questions I want to ask Ms Black. In regard to the \$7.9 million that has been allocated to the hunting bill, it has been allocated to be spent over two years. Do you anticipate there will be further budget allocations needed to support the operation of the bill into the future?

**TARA BLACK:** If the Parliament passes the bill, then the funding is to support its operation for two years. After that time, we'd evaluate how that's going and what funding is required, and the Government would need to make a further decision about funding.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** What's the current annual cost that the department spends on supporting recreational hunting in New South Wales, including licences? Do you have a breakdown of how much that's costing?

**TARA BLACK:** We receive roughly \$1.9 million a year in licensing fees, which goes into the trust fund.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** But how much does the Government spend?

**TARA BLACK:** I'd have to take that on notice.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** Is it anticipated that any of the \$7.9 million will be spent on public safety measures in light of the increased risks associated with the bill increasing hunting activities?

**TARA BLACK:** The funding is partly to support additional compliance and enforcement efforts. The bill itself lists additional Crown land that will be available for hunting and then a process for other parcels of public land to be considered. Part of the funding is to support safety and compliance with existing Game and Feral Animal Control Act requirements.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Kelly, I might just go back to those questions I was asking earlier on the aerial shooting operations. I take you to the answer provided to question number two on program four, north-west Willow Tree, the question being, "For each locality operation, what were the specific dates and times for each day the helicopter shooting operations were conducted?"

**ROB KELLY:** Which one was it, sorry?

**The CHAIR:** The answer to number two, program number four, north-west Willow Tree. Can you confirm why there's no flight data for 9 October listed?

**ROB KELLY:** For 9 October?

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**CORRECTED**

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**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**ROB KELLY:** I'll have to take that on notice as to why. There are a number of reasons why we don't fly on certain days. It could be weather. It could be a whole range of things.

**The CHAIR:** Can you also take on notice then, if there was no flight data, no flight operation happening, how did they shoot 196 animals on a day when they didn't fly?

**ROB KELLY:** Yes, I'll take that on notice.

**The CHAIR:** If you turn to the corresponding data regarding animals shot, it lists that on 9 October they shot 196. Who was conducting the operations at Willow Tree during that time period? Was it contractors or was it LLS staff?

**ROB KELLY:** Just hold on two seconds, I will be able to find that. I actually don't have that level, down to that detail. We can provide that.

**The CHAIR:** If you could provide that on notice, whether it was contractors and, if so, who those contractors were.

**ROB KELLY:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Full disclosure: I was in the Willow Tree area, on private property, on 10 October when operations were being conducted, along with the land manager and some of my staff. We traversed an area that was then shot probably no less than 30 minutes after we were out of it. The wind was going up into the tree line, so we walked in that direction and did a big loop. If you know anything about animals, we'd just scented up that whole area, so there would have been no animals. We saw no sign of deer, pigs, foxes of any kind. And then, no less than 30 minutes after I left, but my staff remained, the helicopter was witnessed shooting blindly into that tree line. Does that comply with FFAST protocols?

**ROB KELLY:** I'll have to take that on notice to get the details of that. I don't doubt your recollection, but obviously I don't have that detail at hand of the logs for the day.

**The CHAIR:** I have people who are prepared to sign affidavits to that effect, if need be. We were also told by the land manager that in the week prior to our visit there were over 300 shots fired on this one property. Have you ever smelt a dead animal, Mr Kelly?

**ROB KELLY:** Yes, quite a few.

**The CHAIR:** You know what they smell like?

**ROB KELLY:** I do.

**The CHAIR:** Do you know how far the smell will travel?

**ROB KELLY:** Yes, I do.

**The CHAIR:** You'd be surprised, then, that when that property manager walked the area that the 300 shots were fired into, not only could he not smell anything but there was only one carcass of one red deer hind, that was known as a satellite deer, in that whole area. If 300 shots had been fired, you would expect there would have been a lot of dead animals on the ground, wouldn't you, Mr Kelly, and the smell would be pretty high?

**ROB KELLY:** Again, I'll take that on notice. But if there were a lot of dead animals on the ground, the smell would be quite high, yes.

**The CHAIR:** But you would expect there would have been a fair number of carcasses on the ground if they had fired 300 shots across the property?

**ROB KELLY:** Yes, you would expect so.

**The CHAIR:** Can you come up with any explanation as to why there wouldn't be a huge number of dead animals rotting on the ground?

**ROB KELLY:** As I've said, I'll take that on notice. We've got the data around the tracking details of that, so I can take that on notice and can provide that data.

**The CHAIR:** Can you also take on notice, when you're looking at the tracking data, on the day that we were there, that same chopper was seen in full view firing shots into an empty gully?

**ROB KELLY:** I'll take all of those on notice, yes.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The CHAIR:** As the helicopter was banking, they were firing the shots. Can you take on notice as to whether that fits in with the FAAST protocols?

**ROB KELLY:** We'll take that on notice.

**The CHAIR:** I'll leave that there for the moment. Mr Saunders, just going back to the mulloway issue, in December 2024 the harvest strategy working group supported mandatory event level reporting for commercial mulloway to improve assessments. When is that going to be implemented?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** That's something that needs to be worked through because mandatory reporting is, obviously, something that needs a fair bit of consultation and discussion.

**The CHAIR:** Would you not consider this a foundational step in terms of data verification?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** Absolutely, and that's why the harvest strategy working group suggested it.

**The CHAIR:** So why are we pushing ahead on the harvest strategy when we haven't done that foundational step?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** Like I said, it's just something that will take a—anytime you mandate something, it takes a while and, you can imagine, it's not going to be an immediate 100 per cent uptake either.

**The CHAIR:** Sure. Ms Black, under part 5B of the Forestry Act, only the forestry Minister and the environment Minister can amend an IFOA. Why did DPIRD give the lead to EPA on the work on the western IFOA rather than do it themselves?

**TARA BLACK:** My understanding is that the Ministers are able to amend the IFOA itself but the protocols can be amended by the EPA.

**The CHAIR:** Can those protocols be amended without a ministerial direction to do so?

**TARA BLACK:** I'll have to take that on notice. My understanding is that, in at least the protocol amendments that I've looked into recently, they were at the direction of the Minister for the Environment. She gave a direction to the EPA to do that.

**STEVE ORR:** We'll just confirm that.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, if you could, because a GIPA that's come into my possession and a letter attached to it from your department—I can give you the reference: RSN000246—says no searches were needed because the authorising document does not exist. If there was no document that authorised EPA to take the lead on the IFOA, I'm wondering—

**TARA BLACK:** Was that a GIPA of our department?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**TARA BLACK:** If there was authorising documentation provided to the EPA, we wouldn't hold that. But we can certainly check that and that specific correspondence you've mentioned.

**STEVE ORR:** And, Mr Banasiak, the responsibility for amending the protocols sits with the EPA.

**The CHAIR:** Even though they're the compliance, not the policy, agency?

**STEVE ORR:** Correct.

**The CHAIR:** What's your understanding of their ability to amend the IFOA? I note that the greater glider amendments were characterised as "minor". Therefore, the EPA skipped any process of consultation with the industry. How is "minor" defined? I can't find a definition within any of the Acts regarding what is considered a minor amendment to an IFOA versus what's considered a more significant one.

**STEVE ORR:** I think it's probably a question for the EPA.

**The CHAIR:** Is DPIRD comfortable with abdicating control of the IFOAs to the EPA, given their statements on Friday in estimates, where they were actually quite denigrating toward Forestry and showed probably a bias against Forestry?

**STEVE ORR:** I understand the issues surrounding Forestry at the moment. There are significant issues. However, the legal framework—

**The CHAIR:** But the regulator shouldn't show a bias one way or the other.

**STEVE ORR:** Again, they're matters for the EPA, Mr Banasiak.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I want to come briefly back to the Dubbo sports hub, just in relation to the timing of who had oversight from what point. Mr Bolton, you said from November last year was when you were more involved in that project. Is that correct?

**JAMES BOLTON:** I'll take that on notice for specific dates when I was made aware of it, but roughly around that time frame.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Because there are some briefs from October that went to you as well, Mr Orr, so I'm just trying to work out exactly who would have been responsible for it. If you could take that on notice, that would be great.

**JAMES BOLTON:** Yes.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Obviously, the decision was made part way through this term of government for that project not to proceed. Are you able to tell me how much had been spent on design, tendering and other costs since the 2023 election? Again, if you need to take it on notice, that's okay.

**JAMES BOLTON:** On notice, we can.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I'm told the PCYC received an email in August 2024, I think from your agency, telling them to look for an alternative site for the sports hub. Does anybody recall that email or that request that they look for a different site?

**JAMES BOLTON:** Do you have any more detail on the email?

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** That's what I have—that it was in August 2024 and that they should look for an alternative site. Could you take on notice, perhaps, what contact was made with the PCYC in August 2024?

**JAMES BOLTON:** Yes.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** That would be great. In relation to the project overall, is there any reason why the PCYC couldn't now apply for that \$30-odd million from the regional trust fund? Will there be an opportunity for them to do that?

**JAMES BOLTON:** There's a couple of avenues that PCYC can take. We have been engaging with PCYC on a few different programs, but there are options for them to be considered.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Is one under the regional trust fund?

**JAMES BOLTON:** Yes.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I have some questions now for Ms Whyte and for Dr Tyndall. Ms Whyte, you're executive director, regional programs and partnerships?

**HARRIET WHYTE:** Yes, that's right.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Which programs fall under your direction as an ED? What are you responsible for?

**HARRIET WHYTE:** At the moment, I've got responsibility for the Regional Development Trust, the Sustainable Communities Program, the ports funds and the Minister's Community Benefit Fund, as well as our contracting and grants management function.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Feel free to take it on notice, but are you able to tell me the total dollar value of grants that have been rolled out through these programs since you began in this role?

**HARRIET WHYTE:** I can take that on notice. Obviously, as you'd be aware, with the grant programs, the dates that you're wanting to know would be helpful as well. I've got responsibility for the contracting and payments, but some of those grants were awarded some time ago that we're now seeing through to delivery.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Maybe just any that have been awarded since you took on the ED role. Could you do that on notice?

**HARRIET WHYTE:** Yes. I've been in the ED role for a year, so since July last year.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** If we do the last 12 months, that'll be a good starting off point. In relation to the staff within your team—and I appreciate the secretary has spoken about some of the changes and the draft changes that are being worked on—how many roles do you currently have, and how many do you believe you'll have after the restructure?

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**CORRECTED**

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**HARRIET WHYTE:** I can take that on notice to get the specifics at a specific date for the number of roles. As I think the secretary has outlined, the draft change management plan is just a draft. We're seeking consultation to land on the final numbers. We have proposed a number of role reductions of 30 roles being reduced in my space—that's 30 ongoing roles.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** How many ongoing roles do you have at the moment?

**HARRIET WHYTE:** There'd be about 130. I've just recently taken responsibility for the contracting and payments function, three weeks ago.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** One area I wanted to ask about is the recovery and resilience officers. That's within your purview as well?

**HARRIET WHYTE:** Yes, I've got a team called the recovery and resilience programs team.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Will that continue after the changes? There seem to be some documents that indicate there's a number of roles there that are slated or being consulted on them no longer existing. What's the plan with that?

**HARRIET WHYTE:** That's correct. As the secretary outlined this morning, there's been a number of reviews into a number of different functional areas. One of those reviews that you'd be familiar with was the review into the disaster recovery funding arrangements, which advocated for a centralisation of those recovery functions within the NSW Reconstruction Authority. We are proposing to shift the responsibility for the grant programs that fall under disaster recovery into the Reconstruction Authority.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Will some of those personnel go with those roles, or is that a matter for the authority? I'm just trying to work out if people currently working for you are going to then move to the Reconstruction Authority—or is that up to the changes within government, I suppose?

**HARRIET WHYTE:** We're just focused on consultation on the draft and then considering the feedback before making final decisions.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** The Sustainable Communities Program—that's the water buybacks money?

**HARRIET WHYTE:** It is, yes.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** You picked up \$16 million that went to the department for the administration of that?

**HARRIET WHYTE:** Yes, that's correct.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Did any positions get created out of that funding?

**HARRIET WHYTE:** We have funded positions from that money.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Directly attached to that program, or are they used in other areas as well?

**HARRIET WHYTE:** We've got positions that are directly funded, exclusively on that program.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** When does money start rolling out for that program?

**HARRIET WHYTE:** The Minister made some announcements about that last week, about the first tranche of successful projects.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Dr Tyndall, I have a couple of questions for you. In a similar vein, how many FTE roles are currently in your area of the agency—Strategy, Media and Ministerial Services?

**ADAM TYNDALL:** I can take the exact figure on notice, Ms Mitchell, but the headcount is about 70-odd—about 73.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Do you have a rough breakdown of how many within those 70 roles are media or comms, and what the breakdown is? Again, if it's on notice, that's fine

**ADAM TYNDALL:** I can take that on notice, Ms Mitchell. Happy to do that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Is there a plan with the draft change management plan to reduce any of the departmental media adviser roles at this point?

**ADAM TYNDALL:** Not at this point, Ms Mitchell, no.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** How many media advisers do you have currently, do you know?

**ADAM TYNDALL:** I can take that on notice, Ms Mitchell.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** In terms of the positions that are up for discussion in terms of being reduced, they're communications roles versus media roles. Is that what the current situation is?

**ADAM TYNDALL:** There's a range of roles impacted by that. I'd probably just emphasise, at this point, understanding the impact this is having on our staff as well, but a range of roles within my group. We have a ministerial services function, so it impacts on that component of my group, but also our comms function, and we have digital and design roles within that as well.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** So it's a combination of those positions.

**ADAM TYNDALL:** That's right.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** As I said, I appreciate that it's a tough time for people and that it's all still being looked at. I'm not trying to make that more difficult. Dr Tyndall, in terms of where most of your staff are located, are they statewide?

**ADAM TYNDALL:** They're statewide, but in my instance the majority of the positions that are impacted, and probably make the distinction between impacted and net loss, would be in the Sydney area.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** That's all I have for you, Dr Tyndall. I'll move on to something else. My next questions are directed towards Mr Chaudhary. I'm looking into Forestry Corp. These questions are quite specific, again, but it's fine if you need to take any on notice. How much of the existing softwood plantation estate is currently producing timber that will meet Australia's MGP10-plus standard? How does that compare to projected demand for housing over the next decade or so?

**ANSHUL CHAUDHARY:** It's probably best to take that on notice. We do produce roughly about three million tonnes of timber, and most of our softwood timber goes into housing frames. Generally, I think we produce timber that would build about 40,000 homes a year, but I can take the specifics of that on notice, Ms Mitchell.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** That would be great. Do you know what proportion of the estate is at or near maturity?

**ANSHUL CHAUDHARY:** In the Black Summer fires, we lost about a quarter of our softwood estate. That was significant. That's about \$100 million of revenue per annum that has been impacted. A lot of our forest is in the early stages. We have replanted about 50 million trees over the past five years. Particularly in the Snowy Valley area, we've got young-age plantations. But, specifically, if you want me to give you a profile of age classes, we can do that separately.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Yes, on notice is fine. If you're able to do that, that would be great.

**ANSHUL CHAUDHARY:** Yes, absolutely.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** In terms of research and development, can you outline for the Committee what sort of investment you're making in seedling quality and some of the seed stock research and any work in that space?

**ANSHUL CHAUDHARY:** Sure. We've got a tree breeding or tree improvement program within the organisation as well. We are also part of the radiata pine breeding organisation in New Zealand. We do some research with them. We've got research and development that we do with the department as well. Again, if you want some specifics on that, I can probably get you that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** That would be good. Did you say there's a specific program to do with the genetics for pine? Is it with New Zealand?

**ANSHUL CHAUDHARY:** For genetics, yes. We procure most of our seeds from New Zealand, given the biosecurity and all that sort of reason. A lot of genetics goes into it. I'm not the expert in that area, but I can get some information for you on that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Yes, just some information on notice would be great. How many qualified foresters does Forestry Corporation currently employ to manage the softwood estate?

**ANSHUL CHAUDHARY:** Again, I can take that on notice, but we have a lot of qualified foresters now in our business in various levels—on the frontline staff as well as supervisors and forest technicians in the organisation. Again, I can take that on notice to get you an exact number if you want.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** That would be great. Even if you've got those numbers maybe over the last three years to see whether they're increasing or declining, that would be good. Again, I'm happy for you to take it on notice. What work is being done to support contractors having access to a skilled workforce that they need as well. Do you have any role to play in that or not really?

**ANSHUL CHAUDHARY:** We do partner with the peak body, the Australian Forest Products Association, a bit on that sort of thing. Forestry particularly used to be a degree offered as an undergraduate study. We haven't had that for some years, but we've partnered with AFPA and some other organisations like Forestry Australia. There are some grad certificates we are offering our staff. We've actually put a whole range of that through our Forestry staff and contractors—not quite contractors, but the AFPA is looking at all of that and they have access to that sort of qualification as well.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** How much profit from Forestry Corporation's softwood operations is reinvested back into expanding or improving the estate?

**ANSHUL CHAUDHARY:** It's a sustainable business, which means that we harvest and replant roughly the same number every year. As I mentioned earlier, we are playing a bit of catch-up because of the Black Summer fires. We haven't got to our what we call "fully stocked" estate. We've been replanting at an accelerated rate and hopefully, by the end of this decade, we'd have done that. We do invest. We put a lot of money back into the business on replanting, on roading work. It's been a bit difficult with floods and fires so we're playing a bit of catch-up there. Plus, obviously, we've got a dividend policy where, as a State owned corporation, we pay dividends to the State as well.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Lastly, an issue that's been raised with me quite a bit—mainly by neighbouring landholders, to be honest—is the issue related to wind turbines within existing plantation estates. Some of the concern goes around the fact that this requires clearing mature trees that would otherwise be able to contribute to timber supply. What kind of cost analysis has been done on the opportunity cost of removing plantation land for these wind turbines?

**ANSHUL CHAUDHARY:** Ms Mitchell, when the opportunity was first considered, the Government at that time had a requirement to change—we had to change our Forestry Act. One of the requirements was to replace any land that we would lose on a two-for-one basis, which means every hectare of land that would be occupied by a wind farm or roads would be replaced on a two-for-one basis. That ensures that our softwood plantation would expand over time and that any wood supply impact would be mitigated as such.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** In terms of some of these projects that are being discussed to be wind turbines, effectively, erected in these estates, there is a lot of concern from local neighbours around fire risk and what happens in the event of something like that occurring. What work is being done by Forestry Corporation in relation to those risks? How can you allay the concerns of landholders about that?

**ANSHUL CHAUDHARY:** It's a good question. First of all, I'd say that we haven't made any approvals about the wind farm, because it has to go through a proper planning approvals process. There are some proponents that are interested in it and they're undertaking all the work to do that feasibility work. Then they'll go through a planning process and planning approvals. With respect to fire, again, the proponents will take on that—do their own studies and understand how to mitigate the risk. But we are also working with the RFS. We've had a number of conversations with them to understand how that will play out in the landscape and we're doing some additional studies on that as well at the moment, Ms Mitchell.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Mr Kelly, could you just give me an update of what programs are underway to address the spread of cane toads and what dollars might be attached to them?

**ROB KELLY:** Yes, just bear with me for a second. In terms of LLS's responsibility in relation to cane toads, we obviously work with our colleagues at Ag and Bio. There's a cane toad biosecurity zone in place. The boundaries of those are moving. We've been working with some Landcare groups, National Parks as well as Ag and Bio to do—our role is more supporting landholders to do monitoring, to try and establish the spread of where cane toads are moving to so we can get a better handle on where the actual control zone should be. That's a new piece of work, because we know they're spreading further north and south in the space. We're in a process of looking at monitoring to identify the new zone. We have provided funding this year to some Landcare groups to help do the monitoring and, where we can, do some control activities.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Is that funded out of the LLS budget, or is that coming out of the special pest management rate?

**ROB KELLY:** It comes out of the special purpose pest rate, which is part of LLS's budget, that is correct.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Ms Szabo, would we say that the numbers of prevalence of cattle tick in New South Wales at the moment is increasing or decreasing on general trends?

**LISA SZABO:** On general trends, if you look over the past financial years in terms of where we're getting some new infested properties coming across, there's a slight increase. With that, you can also get the cattle fever becoming prevalent as well. Again, there's been a slight increase in that. Now part of that, of course, is due to the climatic conditions that we have at present, particularly over the last two financial years, which really favour cattle tick reproduction.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Is that an increase of prevalence as well as the footprint?

**LISA SZABO:** The footprint, not necessarily so much, but more the prevalence.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** What has the producer feedback been on the shift towards the owner treatment scheme?

**LISA SZABO:** Mixed. We deal with some of the producers quite directly. We have got in place a cattle tick consultative committee. That committee has been broadly supportive of that, although we do need to improve our communications of that particular program out to landholders. At present we have about 312 infested properties in New South Wales, and 217 of those are under the department-led treatment program and 95 are owner led.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Is there any advocacy at the moment, either within or external of the department, towards moving towards zones like we see in Queensland?

**LISA SZABO:** As you heard the Minister give testimony this morning, the Cattle Tick Program has been referred to the Independent Biosecurity Commissioner for advice. We would await and see what advice comes from the Independent Biosecurity Commissioner. But from the department itself? No.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Are there KPIs around how quickly a department needs to respond to cattle tick declarations?

**LISA SZABO:** We don't have those KPIs, but I am aware that, at the NSW Farmers conference, that was something that was raised with us.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** If you look at places like Bonalbo—and this is probably open for the table as well—as a result of cattle tick, in the last little while Bonalbo has had to cancel their show, the campdraft and, more recently, their dog trials and cutting event. Is there any compensation for communities or organisations that are negatively affected by biosecurity issues such as cattle tick?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** There's no compensation available in relation to cattle tick. But I will say the Bonalbo Show made that decision as a precaution. I understand that our staff were prepared to work with them in terms of the event going ahead. It's obviously an issue we take seriously, and there's been an increased effort in the compliance space. Over the weekend we worked with police and the transport department in relation to another operation, Victor, and stopped 30 vehicles for review, and a number of those vehicles were found to be in breach of the Biosecurity Act. One of the key things that we're working with Local Land Services as well is making sure people are aware of their biosecurity duty, especially people that are coming in from Queensland, and the requirements that they have for treatment as well. It's certainly a focus for us and something we're taking quite seriously.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Who can I direct questions to in relation to the draft network marine management plan?

**TARA BLACK:** That's me.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Ms Black, where is it?

**TARA BLACK:** My understanding is that it will be released soon.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** I was told by one of the Minister's officers—I think it was late last year—that it would be released very soon then. In fact, I received correspondence from Minister Moriarty in December last year stating that the network plan had been released, and that was actually sent in error. Is there any reason why it's been so delayed, considering that plans 2021 to 2031? And it's 2025.

**TARA BLACK:** Yes, I think that's a question you'd have to put to the Ministers.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** The last time you saw it, in terms of the department, it's been sitting with the Ministers for a long time, or has the department started to make changes since December last year again?

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**CORRECTED**

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**TARA BLACK:** As I said, my expectation is that it will be released soon.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Is there an intention to get rid of marine parks officers to become fisheries officers—basically to merge those roles so that marine park officer roles are general duty fisheries roles? Dr Saunders, do you know anything about that?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** Effectively, that's happening at the moment anyway. Those officers still are in places that reflect locations where specific marine parks are, so positions haven't been changed around to do that. But you can appreciate that we're managing the full marine estate, so just because they're located in one area would necessitate that they'd be able to do multiple functions.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Essentially what's happening is marine parks officers' roles are becoming vacant and not filled. Would that be a correct summary?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** No, I didn't say that. Actually, the opposite. I believe none of those positions have been changed when they've become vacant.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Let's use an example of Port Stephens-Great Lakes Marine Park. Do you know how many marine parks officers are employed within that park?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** I believe the regional fisheries officer position, which we're just looking to fill at the moment, is one of those. I'd have to take on notice about the other officers that are specifically orientated around marine parks, but we do have other officers that are there that would assist in doing marine park compliance work.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** So you're filling the position of senior marine park officer or not?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** Yes, we are.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** With that title?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** I think the title is the regional fisheries officer. I'd have to take that on notice.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Is there a difference? Is there a reason why the department is changing the title, which I assume is more than just changing the title from marine parks to fisheries, in terms of what those officers need to do? For a start, that means they're looking at the entire marine estate, doesn't it, and there's not people specific to policing and ensuring that fishers and water users are being compliant with those marine park boundaries, particularly sanctuary zones and other things? Isn't that what that means?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** Not necessarily, because we'd have officers that aren't titled marine parks officers that would be assisting with those operations as well. It's more about looking at the operation in its totality and where we can get the best operational benefit.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Are you cutting fisheries roles—fisheries compliance roles?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** No we're not.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** You're just changing the title and where those fisheries officers are required to enforce?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** Where that aligns with operational needs, absolutely.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** What do you mean by "operational needs"?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** If it's identified by discussions with compliance officers about whether a position needs to remain in one area or not and would be better off in a higher priority area, that's always looked at whenever vacancies come up.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** How is that undertaken? For example, I've been told that Port Stephens traditionally has high levels of illegal fishing activity, especially in the commercial fishing sector, with some commercial operators working within the marine park. The major offending sectors are the Estuary General mesh net and mud crab trapping fishery as well as the ocean trap and line sector and, because of the continued failure to fill that Port Stephens-Great Lakes Marine Park senior marine park officer role that is dedicated to look at that, some of that activity is increasingly being ignored.

**THOR SAUNDERS:** I would have to take on notice what the illegal fishing estimates are amongst different regions and whether the Port Stephens marine park is higher than any other region.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Can I check: Is the Fisheries NSW office empowered to deal with, for example, illegal activity associated with protected fauna, such as certain sea turtles, or not?

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**CORRECTED**

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**THOR SAUNDERS:** Sea turtles aren't under the fisheries Act; they're under the biodiversity Act, which is administered by the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water. There would definitely be detailed information taken and they would report it to their colleagues in Parks and Wildlife. But we don't have the powers to.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Officers from the DCCEEW are boarding the commercial fishing boats to see whether turtles, for example, might be caught in fishing operations. Is that what you're saying?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** No. Turtles are under the biodiversity Act, so those officers are the ones that have the powers for being able to prosecute. Obviously, our compliance officers work in partnership with them, so if they were to board a vessel and someone had turtles, for instance, they would be reporting that on, with taking detailed information.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Has that ever happened?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** To my understanding, it hasn't.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** It doesn't sound like it's possible really because of the legislation.

**THOR SAUNDERS:** Actually what I don't know has happened is whether there's actually been turtles on board and kept by a commercial fisher. I don't believe that's happened.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Fisheries NSW is usually the only agency out on the water monitoring the activities of commercial and recreational fishers and marine park users. But you're not empowered to do anything in relation to those protected species because it's not within the remit of Fisheries NSW?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** I would say that the officers would take very detailed information and report it to the DCCEEW officers but, as far as I understand, it hasn't happened before.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** If that's the case—in fact, I don't think there have been any reports of bycatch of protected fauna such as sea turtles. I've got here the Estuary General meshing fishery, the Estuary General mud crab or fish trap fisheries, the estuary prawn trawl, or the offshore trawl fisheries in the last five years. Does that seem feasible?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** It's something that we've got observer programs looking at to see what that under-reporting level is, because you're right; there would be some interaction. My understanding is, from previous observer surveys, it's pretty low—like, very low. We've got programs in all of those fisheries to have a look to see what that looks like. Obviously, off the back of that is a program of education about ensuring that fishers start reporting and continue to report interactions with threatened species.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** That's interesting. Has Fisheries NSW released any media stories—done any social media posts, for example—in the last few years that you can think of regarding detections of illegal activity in the commercial fishing sector?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** In terms of interactions, we've posted reports in the offshore trawl fishery. We were unable to in some fisheries because of confidentiality to a few operators. We've got programs going on in place. My expectation is the results of that will be put on our website.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Do you have a policy about not publicly advertising offending in the commercial fishing sector?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** No, we don't.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Chaudhary, going to the questions from the Opposition regarding the wind farms in State forests, if there's need for road upgrades to get this infrastructure into forests—and undoubtedly there will be, as I've been in a lot of those forests and I know the road condition—who is responsible for paying for those road upgrades? Has that been worked out?

**ANSHUL CHAUDHARY:** Any particular area you're talking about, Mr Banasiak?

**The CHAIR:** Just in general, is there an agreement that the proponent will pay for the road upgrades, or is it left to Forestry?

**ANSHUL CHAUDHARY:** For the wind farm, you're talking about?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**ANSHUL CHAUDHARY:** Obviously that all needs to be worked out once planning approval is granted. But generally, if there's any road upgrade, any road upgrade or road repair would be a cost for the proponents.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The CHAIR:** Ms Black, coming back to the IFOA question, I wanted to clarify that, when I initially asked you the question, I wasn't talking about protocols in the coastal IFOA; I was talking about EPA taking the lead in the review of the western IFOA. I believe Jackie Miles from EPA has taken the process lead in reviewing that for the last five years. All that has seemingly been achieved is to rewrite the terms. Nothing seems to be processing. I'm wondering who gave the process lead to essentially review the whole western IFOA—so, not a protocol change, but the whole review?

**TARA BLACK:** I'm not sure that that's the case. I'd have to double-check that and come back to you, but my understanding would be that our department would work with the EPA on that review, given it's the two Ministers that would sign off on the IFOA.

**The CHAIR:** Can you come back and explain to us why it has taken five years to review the western IFOA, then, if you are working with EPA—and who actually is the lead agency in this?

**STEVE ORR:** I don't think, Mr Banasiak, we're actually aware of a review process happening at the moment.

**The CHAIR:** There isn't a review process?

**STEVE ORR:** Not a formal one that we're aware of.

**The CHAIR:** Can you come back on notice as to what is actually happening with the western IFOA? It's my understanding that Ms Miles from EPA has been doing some sort of review of it.

**STEVE ORR:** Sure.

**The CHAIR:** Why was EPA the instructing agency on the 2018 Forestry Legislation Amendment Act, rather than DPIRD? As part of a GIPA, I asked, and there were no records found within your department around that. That piece of legislation had to do with private native forestry, so I'm just wondering why EPA would take the lead in drafting legislation for a forestry bill.

**TARA BLACK:** We might have to take that on notice.

**The CHAIR:** I'm happy for you to take that on notice.

**STEVE ORR:** I suspect—not too many of us were around back then, Mr Banasiak, but there was a shift of PNF away from being administered through the EPA into Local Land Services. So it came into—I think it's part 5B.

**ROB KELLY:** Part 5B, yes.

**STEVE ORR:** Yes, of the Local Land Services Act.

**The CHAIR:** Can you take on notice whether that was part of that transition? It might have been before the transition.

**STEVE ORR:** Yes, I imagine it would be, because the legislation changed around about that time, but we can take it on notice.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Saunders, can I speak to you around grey nurse sharks? Are you aware of any updated data on grey nurse shark numbers, in terms of their population and their status?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** Yes, I've been privy to draft reports. The National Environmental Science Program, to which we contribute a lot of the genetic samples for grey nurse sharks, black cod and a few other species, is about to release a report on Threatened Species Day. I believe Mr Sloane and others have reported that the data is showing that the rate of recovery is approximately 5 per cent per year, which is around—

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, 5 per cent—

**THOR SAUNDERS:** Per year, which is about the maximum percentage increase of a species with that biology.

**The CHAIR:** That's positive news?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** I would say so, yes.

**The CHAIR:** Will that data be factored into any decisions around the draft marine State management plan? Given that the decline of grey nurse sharks was put up as a reason for marine parks, now that they're recovering, will that be factored into rules around sanctuary zones and available activities going forward?

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**CORRECTED**

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**THOR SAUNDERS:** There's a fair bit of water that needs to go under the bridge, but I would have thought that, with a lot of other data, it would be put under consideration when those discussions are had.

**The CHAIR:** Are you saying that it would be or it wouldn't be?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** Absolutely, it would be, with a lot of other information.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Black, can you give us an update on what's happening with the abalone industry and their call for a buyout? Last time I spoke to the Minister it was still unresolved.

**TARA BLACK:** The Minister wrote to the Abalone Association last week to advise that we will be starting a review of abalone fishery, including consideration of a rezoning and share reallocation process. Thor and I met with the chair last week. I think that news has been pretty well received by the board of the Abalone Association. The Minister has also written to NTS Corp, who are the legal representative of the South Coast people, to also advise NTS Corp of the review, given that they're stakeholder in this space. The intention is to kick off the review through an industry advisory committee in October. The department has started doing quite a bit of work and thinking about how the review should proceed.

**The CHAIR:** Do you have a terms of reference for that review at all?

**TARA BLACK:** Not yet. That's something that will go to the first meeting of the industry advisory group.

**The CHAIR:** What's the current status of the *Solitary Ranger*? I think last time I asked Mr Sloane, it was up on blocks.

**TARA BLACK:** It's off the blocks.

**The CHAIR:** It's off the blocks?

**TARA BLACK:** Yes. It's berthed at Coffs marina, and in the next couple of weeks the boat will be heading north to do some joint compliance and research activities. We've got some other activities booked in for the remainder of this year, and we're working through plans around those as well.

**The CHAIR:** Will that be its first operation back? How long has it been operational?

**TARA BLACK:** It just passed its five-year survey in July.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, but I think there was a significant period last year where it was not being utilised and work needed to be done on it. How long has it been?

**TARA BLACK:** I think Thor can give you some details.

**THOR SAUNDERS:** The *Solitary Ranger* conducted two separate voyages. One was to look at some benthic habitat sampling in conjunction with some compliance operations off the North Coast of New South Wales, plus they've got a multi-agency function with Parks Australia, where they look at Pimpernel Rock and cod grounds, which are grey nurse shark aggregations. They did all that work around June/July this year.

**The CHAIR:** Where are we at with the dispute about the fisheries officers? Has that been resolved?

**TARA BLACK:** Not resolved yet. We're back with the Industrial Relations Commission later this week. Both parties are still working to try and resolve those negotiations.

**The CHAIR:** Has any further consideration being given by the department in terms of compliance officers' calls for greater high visibility in terms of PPE et cetera?

**TARA BLACK:** You might be aware that an independent review has been undertaken into the fisheries officers' powers. That work has been completed and will shortly be shared with our staff.

**The CHAIR:** Has it been shared with the Minister yet at all?

**TARA BLACK:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Will that review be public after it is shared with staff? How will everyone else who has been following this story along find out about it?

**TARA BLACK:** I'll have to double-check, but I don't see any reason why it wouldn't be made public.

**The CHAIR:** Perhaps on notice regarding the recreational fishing trusts, are you able to come back with the breakdown between saltwater and freshwater expenditure in the last financial year—what has been spent—and also how much has been spent on staffing within DPI versus actual physical improvements in terms of fishing resources?

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**CORRECTED**

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**TARA BLACK:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Opposition?

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Can I just ask a follow-up on that?

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Sure.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Can we also have how much has come into the fishing trust over those same periods, please?

**TARA BLACK:** Yes.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I only have one question. It's about the opal museum project out at Lightning Ridge—maybe through you, Mr Bolton. Is that right?

**JAMES BOLTON:** Yes.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** We've just had some concerns. I know the member for Dubbo has written to the Minister about some subcontractors not being paid, particularly concrete suppliers. I understand it's not a government project, but there is a significant amount of State government funding that has gone to it. What sort of checks and balances do you put in place with that funding to ensure that suppliers and subcontractors are paid?

**JAMES BOLTON:** With that specific project, and any other contract, we have contract managers regularly engaging with the proponent around their delivery. Milestone payments and so on are granted once the milestone is met. Through that audit process, we would check for things like that. For that specific project, I'll take on notice what checks were put in place for that matter.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** If you could advise, it was Concrete Industry Supplies in Tamworth. My understanding is they were left about \$200,000 out of pocket for materials that they had supplied last year. As I said, I appreciate when there are various subcontractors involved it can get a little bit challenging, but it would be good to know where that is up to. In terms of the project overall, work has paused on it. It is about 80 per cent complete. Has there been more government money that was invested in that project in this year's budget, do you know?

**JAMES BOLTON:** There was a commitment for an additional \$1 million in this year's budget.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** What was the process for those proponents to apply for that additional funding?

**JAMES BOLTON:** I'll have to take that one on notice. Our role was more around the administration of the funding agreement once the government decision was made to increase it by \$1 million. We've implemented that decision.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** It was effectively a decision of the Minister to provide that top-up funding?

**JAMES BOLTON:** Correct.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Do you know whether there were—again, I'm happy if you need to take it on notice—any sort of requirements that that additional funding would then lead to the completion of that construction so that the project would be finished?

**JAMES BOLTON:** I'll have to take on notice the consideration of that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** If you could provide whatever you can on notice, that would be great.

**JAMES BOLTON:** Sure.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** I'm just going to try and rattle through a few things in the time remaining. The Welcome Experience—is that you, Mr Bolton?

**JAMES BOLTON:** Yes, it is.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** I understand there is an evaluation that is due out. Has that been released as yet?

**JAMES BOLTON:** I might throw to—is it not you, Harriet?

**HARRIET WHYTE:** No.

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**CORRECTED**

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**JAMES BOLTON:** Actually, it's in Ian Smith's patch.

**STEVE ORR:** Ms Black, who used to look after the program, might be able to help you.

**TARA BLACK:** My understanding is the evaluation isn't finalised yet.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Is there a particular hold up?

**TARA BLACK:** I'm not sure of those details.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** My latest stats said it's in 55 LGAs. Is that still the case?

**JAMES BOLTON:** Correct.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Are we looking to expand that? As far as I understand, it's been expanded to some of the people that can access it. But what about the number of LGAs?

**JAMES BOLTON:** Through the review process that's still underway, we're considering options for its future, so how it can potentially be expanded into other LGAs. We'll work with the Minister through that decision process, but we're in the thick of that at the moment.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Is the evaluation report something the department will release, or does that have to go through the Minister's office before it gets released?

**JAMES BOLTON:** That's a good question. I'll take that on notice.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Thank you. Mr Kelly, what percentage of TSRs are currently leased?

**ROB KELLY:** I will see if we've got that. I might be able to give you a number but not necessarily a percentage.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Ballpark would be fine.

**ROB KELLY:** Righto. Hold on a sec. I'll get to that for you.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** It's probably not critical I have that number just yet, to be honest.

**ROB KELLY:** I can get it for you.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** The process of leasing a TSR for stock grazing purposes, from what I'm told and from what I've experienced, can be a little clunky at best. And in some reports it's actually prohibitively expensive. Wouldn't we be better off making this more accessible, meaning that more TSRs are leased and therefore managed rather than left unmanaged because of the difficulties to book that land?

**ROB KELLY:** The process change this year for long-term leases—we are talking about the long-term leases here, Mr Barrett, the five-year long-term permits. I'll make the distinction between lease and permit. They are a long-term permit. A lease would be exclusive access, whereas a permit still allows general travelling stock to go through. Our legislation only allows long-term permits, which has all the caveats around it. We've changed the process this year to be fairer, more transparent and more equitable. As opposed to 11 regions running their own tender process to apply for a long-term permit, we went to a standardised process that was assessed by an independent panel. There was a range of criteria that were established around eligibility for those TSRs, which also included the requirements of the successful tenderer, or permit holder, of their obligations as well. Yes, it meant that there were some people that had had them in the past that didn't anymore, but that's the nature of a transparent process where people are able to put in tenders on a competitive basis.

Your question was also around whether we would be better off doing it differently so more of them were let out. I don't know whether that would have changed the process or not. The majority of TSRs, but not all, that were up for it—I think, from memory, there were a bit over 1,500 TSRs—were eligible for that long-term permit process. I'll find the number of how many were leased out. It wasn't all of them, but a significant portion were leased out. Those that weren't leased out—some simply just didn't get an application, for whatever reason—will go to a different process to either run the five-year again or we'll go to rolling 12-month permits to lease or permit them out.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** While I've got you, Mr Kelly, regarding the Illawarra Feral Deer Management Program, my understanding is that there was a panel of contractors in place up until 2023. That contract then expired. Recently, I believe, a new panel has been established. Would it be true that the qualifications expected of that panel have decreased since 2023?

**ROB KELLY:** I'll have to take that on notice. I don't have the comparison between 2023 and now.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Has there been anything in place since 2023 and this new contract?

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**CORRECTED**

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**ROB KELLY:** Again, I'll have to take that on notice for that program. I know they've had panel providers, but I'll have to take it on notice specifically for that program.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Would you also be able to take on notice how many deer have been removed out of the system since the end of that contract in 2023?

**ROB KELLY:** Specifically for the Illawarra deer program?

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Yes.

**ROB KELLY:** Yes.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** In relation to the \$10 million weeds action plan money, is that you again, Mr Kelly?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** No, that's me.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** What is expected to be delivered with that money to councils? Is this for the on-the-ground removal of weeds or more for facilitation?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** The program adds a number of elements in relation to identifying weeds and providing directions for weed removal. I'll pass to Dr Szabo in a moment to provide more detail. At the moment we are focused on that program moving to a four-year arrangement. One of the things we're looking at is the best way to structure the program to ensure that we're dealing with the key critical risks, which will obviously evolve over the period of the four-year time. But it's got a detection, eradication and surveillance component to it.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** And it's targeted specifically at those high-risk—is "high-risk" the right word?—weeds?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** It has a variety of focus areas.

**LISA SZABO:** The New South Wales Weeds Action Program is designed to prepare for the early detection of and response to those high-priority weed areas. It isn't directed towards weeds that have been established in New South Wales for many, many years. All of those grants that are provided to the local control authorities are made available and transparent on our website.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** They are for councils to make an application to deal with a specific incursion?

**LISA SZABO:** No, it's for councils to look at what are the priority weeds in the general area and to put in place an application around how they're going to look at the surveillance of those weeds. I think one of the important things to note with the Weeds Action Program is that for every dollar that goes to a local control authority, that local control authority contributes another two towards weeds management.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Can we get a breakdown of which councils that went to?

**LISA SZABO:** It's all available on the website.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** How are the applications assessed?

**LISA SZABO:** The applications are assessed internally. They're assessed against the local weed management plans and then awarded going through the Minister.

**RACHEL CONNELL:** They're obviously done under the New South Wales grant administration guideline framework.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Sorry?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** The grants are issued under the New South Wales grants administration guideline.

**STEVE ORR:** Mr Barrett, probably the other thing is we've been in an annual cycle, so it's every year. We want to shift away from that and go to, as Ms Connell referred to, a four-year cycle.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** The latest round of that was for 12 months?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** The 2024-25 grant round was for 12 months. The intention is to move towards a four-year cycle, consistent with the recommendation of the NRC's review of invasive species management.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Will that make it a \$40 million fund? Is it still going to be \$10 million each year?

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**CORRECTED**

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**RACHEL CONNELL:** That's correct.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** When do we expect to see the announcement made for the four years?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** We're currently working through the design of the new grant arrangements. As you can appreciate, there are some additional checks and balances you need to work through when you're moving from 12 months to four years. One of the things we want to make sure of is—as you'd appreciate, what's classified as a high-risk weed in one year might change the next year. We just want to make sure there's the flexibility and agility in the framework to ensure we're delivering on the program outcomes.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Will it still be specific to councils, or can it go to the Macquarie weeds action group?

**RACHEL CONNELL:** It will continue in the way that the previous Weeds Action Program has in terms of going to LCAs.

**LISA SZABO:** County councils can be an LCA.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Mr Kelly, can you tell me how much is in the LLS Future Fund at the moment?

**ROB KELLY:** I'll check on that. If I don't have it at hand, I will take it on notice.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** That's not critical. My recollection was it started at \$35 million and that interest was then to be given—\$1.5 million per board each year. Is that correct?

**ROB KELLY:** I'm not sure it's per board. I'll get the exact numbers for you.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Do you know where I can find out what that money is for? Because that was initially, of course, ratepayers' money that was put into the government agency and ring fenced for ratepayers' use. I wonder if I can see somewhere what the rules are around that money.

**ROB KELLY:** Around how it's spent?

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Yes.

**ROB KELLY:** And how it's allocated?

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Yes.

**ROB KELLY:** I'll take it on notice, but I'll give you a general overview. The Future Fund primarily goes to refurbishing LLS offices. It's capital. It goes to capital projects, primarily to refurbish either the LLS offices or build bait sheds, those sorts of activities.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** And that was the intent that was put to it at the start?

**ROB KELLY:** That was the intent, yes. You would understand the original—when LLS was first formed, there was still money left over from the previous organisations that came into it. Then from the sale of the former LHPA offices, once they were sold, that money went into the Future Fund, with the primary aim of refurbishing either existing offices to get them up to standard or build new bait sheds and things like that.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Was that to be spent at the direction of the local boards as the representatives of the landholders?

**ROB KELLY:** There is input into that, into the capital programs, but primarily we have a list that goes through an assessment process to identify those, particularly in relation to offices or bait sheds—those are where the highest need is—to refurbish or rebuild those.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** So that money is porous, in that money from one area can end up in another area?

**ROB KELLY:** It wasn't allocated as particular areas. There was just a set amount and then it's based on priority. There's not, like, an allocation per LLS region. It's a prioritisation on what is the highest need, to give the best service level to customers.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** This might be for you or to Mr Chaudhary; I'm not sure. How many aerial shoots have taken place over State forests in the past two years?

**ROB KELLY:** I can't get the past two years; I can give the last 12 months. I have that data at hand. I can give it to you. For LLS-organised and controlled aerial shoots—noting that there can be private contractors that do it or outside of LLS—there were eight undertaken.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** How many were applied for?

**ROB KELLY:** That I would have to take on notice. If we're looking at a combined—whether it was an aerial shoot or other biosecurity activities like, say, aerial baiting and things like that, there were over 50 State forests.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Were any of those not participated by Forestry Corp?

**ROB KELLY:** There were. I don't have the exact number. I know there were a few. There were very sound reasons for those. Some were already open for recreational hunting. There were others closed for harvesting—a whole range of things.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** With that information you'll provide me, are you able to provide why those programs were not taken—

**ROB KELLY:** I'll take that on notice. I'm not sure we'll have all of the details for those, but I'll take it on notice for those that we have.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Again, Mr Kelly, how are we situated for locusts this year? Is there extra concern, extra threat for locust plagues or local locust numbers this year?

**ROB KELLY:** It's an interesting question. There's no increased information that there's going to be a significant locust outbreak. There's obviously monitoring that is undertaken all the time. There have been, in the last month or so, some sightings and hatchings. There have been reports of hatchings in Queensland. But in terms of the advice that we've received from the Australian Plague Locust Commission—the monitoring—there's not a warning that there's going to be a significant locust outbreak. It's continue to monitor.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** And the special pest purpose management fund—sorry, I forget the order of the words.

**ROB KELLY:** Yes, the levy.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** It was originally the locust fund. Is there money within that ring fence for locust?

**ROB KELLY:** Absolutely.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Great, thank you.

**ROB KELLY:** Absolutely there is. So if there was a locust outbreak, we would be able to respond. Even if there's low-level locust sightings, we have in the past issued chemical for the control of those as well. So there is money available for that.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Does the LLS have chemical on hand?

**ROB KELLY:** We do have chemical on hand.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** How close is it getting to use-by dates?

**ROB KELLY:** It's assessed each year for its use-by date. If it's past its use-by date, we dispose of it correctly and legally, and then we replenish the stock.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Can someone give me an update of where we're up to with carp? Last we heard there was an enclosed water in Victoria where they were seeking an application for a trial, possibly.

**RACHEL CONNELL:** We're happy to, from a biosecurity perspective, provide an update. Obviously it's an issue that's managed by the Commonwealth in terms of the regulatory controls and approvals. We are expecting to have a role in terms of the next iteration of testing of the virus.

**LISA SZABO:** There is a known biocontrol agent for carp. There's been a couple of attempts at getting the necessary research behind it, to have confidence that it's not going to have crossover effects into species that it shouldn't. We're currently in the process of negotiating with one of our partners around a research project to deliver certainty around that aspect.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** This is the carp herpes virus?

**LISA SZABO:** Yes.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** What is the risk that it gets imported? Does it exist naturally in other countries?

**LISA SZABO:** I'd have to take that one on notice, actually.

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**CORRECTED**

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**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** I wonder what the risk is of that coming into the country illegally, as we're not prepared for it, and it being released that way.

**STEVE ORR:** Dr Saunders might be able to help.

**THOR SAUNDERS:** It does occur naturally in other countries, particularly in Europe. Obviously, it evolves as well, so the version of the virus that we've got is probably about four or five years old now. There's a fair bit of work that needs to be done both on its potential crossover to other species but also its effectiveness. That's the sort of stuff that's being discussed at the moment from a scientific forum.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Is the vector of that another live, infected fish or are there other ways that virus could be transported?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** There are not many vectors. It's basically carp to carp, so it's pretty specific and the vectors of transference are anything that can carry an infected carcass from one place to another.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** The new office of animal welfare—I don't think we have a time frame for that, but is that another restructure coming down the line?

**STEVE ORR:** I'd imagine the Government will make an announcement on that shortly.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Are you implying that's something that we might find out about quite soon?

**STEVE ORR:** I would expect so. But again, it's a matter for the Minister.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** I have one quick question for you, Ms Whyte, about the Sustainable Communities Program and the jobs that came with that money. They are not caught up in this delimitation, are they? They are ring fenced as part of that program?

**HARRIET WHYTE:** Yes, that's correct. Where we've got funding for a specific program, those roles will continue to deliver that program.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Kelly, just going back to the aerial shooting operations, can I take you to the number of animals shot in program number three, Central West LLS, on 30 September and 1 October. I'm looking at feral pigs.

**ROB KELLY:** That's Trundle and Tullamore?

**The CHAIR:** Yes. You see these figures more often than I would. Would it be unusual to have exactly the same number of pigs, or any animal, shot on two consecutive days?

**ROB KELLY:** I don't know whether I can comment if it's unusual or not; the numbers are the numbers.

**The CHAIR:** To be frank, I'm questioning the numbers. It seems strange that they're exactly the same across two separate days. To be fair, I'm questioning them based on what I saw on 10 October, where choppers were shooting into empty gullies. When you go back and investigate what happened on around 9 October and 10 October, what would be the process if you find fraudulent activity in terms of falsifying how many animals were shot?

**ROB KELLY:** That's a hypothetical question in terms of what the findings would be.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, but I imagine you would have some sort of process. You talked about a process of verifying and checking these numbers. One would hope you would have some sort of process in place if you found that contractors were falsifying these numbers. This is taxpayers' money. We know that pigs are a huge problem. People are screaming for more support up north, particularly in the Tamworth area, and potentially you had an aerial operation essentially wasting bullets and money, shooting into empty gullies, when they could have been redeployed up north. What would be the process if you found fraudulent activity?

**ROB KELLY:** The process—without us specifically referring to this program, because we haven't yet looked at the data in that—like any sort of issue in relation to disciplinary matters, goes through the standard process, through HR. We do an investigation and, depending on the findings of that, we will act appropriately.

**The CHAIR:** Would it differ if they were contractors versus employed LLS staff?

**ROB KELLY:** There's still an investigation. The pathways for what you do to manage that will differ, but there's still an investigation.

**The CHAIR:** Sure, but the consequences would obviously differ, would they, if you had to issue a consequence if you found wrongdoing?

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**CORRECTED**

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**ROB KELLY:** The consequence will be different because there are obviously different avenues to take, whether they are a staff member or whether they are a contractor.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Saunders, going back to mulloway in terms of stocking, are you able to provide perhaps on notice how many fingerlings were released in 2024-25 and whether there is a breakdown per river system?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** I could have done it right now, but my computer just died. I can definitely take that on notice.

**The CHAIR:** What's the process of monitoring the survival and recruitment of stocked mulloway?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** Because it's a relatively new stocking program, we've got what I would call a good research program going on. That has led to us stocking larger sized mulloway to try to increase the survival. That is obviously going to be, over the next three years, an ongoing project to work out what the sweet spot is for size versus cost and benefit. That's something that we'll have probably a better size that we would be looking at to put in the different estuaries.

**The CHAIR:** Is there a forward plan to expand into different estuaries?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** Yes, I think there is a bit of work going on in the Marine Estate Management Strategy where we can really get some great benefits from stocking, particularly in things like ICOLLS where they don't get marine larvae coming in. I would say we would be constantly looking to adapt to get the best bang for our buck. I've just got the figures in front of me. We have stocked 120,000 mulloway fingerlings, but I'd have to look at the breakdown for you.

**The CHAIR:** You just mentioned ICOLLS. I remember when I was talking to Mr Sloan and Peter Turnell in a previous estimates and we spoke about a bit of research being done into ICOLLS around how it may be best to manage them in terms of fish stocks. Has that been concluded at all?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** It has been progressed. It is something that is going through the Marine Estate Management Strategy funding. We've got some initial funding to secure work towards looking at the relative productivity of various ICOLLS in relation to the amount of time that they are open for. As you can appreciate, if you artificially open an ICOLL, you might be limiting its productivity, given you've got all the algal growth and everything like that. Once we have that information, we will have a pretty good idea of what's an appropriate opening regime and where would you actually stock marine—

**The CHAIR:** You are seeking funding to do that. Have you actually started the research yet?

**THOR SAUNDERS:** Yes, we have started it.

**The CHAIR:** And you don't have a timeline in terms of when you might—

**THOR SAUNDERS:** I'm thinking this is probably going to be around a three- to five-year project, Chair.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** In relation to the Welcome Experience, Mr Bolton, do you have any data on how many people who have used that program have asked questions about maternity and birthing services that are available in the different LGAs where you offer the program?

**JAMES BOLTON:** I'm not aware of that, Ms Mitchell, but I can clarify on notice.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** If you could, that would be great.

**The CHAIR:** That pretty much takes us to 5.15 p.m. I'll look to Government members to see whether they have any questions.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** No, we don't.

**The CHAIR:** As I always do, I invite anyone who has any homework they want to hand in early to do so.

**PETER DAY:** Chair, I just want to make a correction to a response I gave to Ms Hurst this afternoon. The number of facilities that had applied for an extension of the research rehoming is three. One came in last week, but there are three currently before ARRP. One is the premises I spoke about today. Another one came in last week, so there are three currently before ARRP. That's due to meet in September for consideration.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** What are the three?

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**CORRECTED**

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**PETER DAY:** I don't have the three, but one is Blayney. It's still there before ARRPs, but they're processing through that now, and two others have come in as well. That's three all up with ARRPs.

**The Hon. EMMA HURST:** We don't know where those are from?

**PETER DAY:** No. The other point was just around the virtual fencing national guideline. It's an outcome-based guideline. That clarifies that the technical review was done on the collars up to a 0.33 joule level.

**ROB KELLY:** Just to respond to the questions on the code submissions, Mr Barrett, in relation to the split between pre and post the extension, prior to 4 July there were 307 received. From 5 July to 1 August when it closed, there were 1,164 submissions received in that space. There were 685 TSRs advertised for the long-term grazing permit, and 1,651 tender submissions were received. The difference is because some tenderers put in multiple TSRs. Of those submissions received, 1,108 were recommended and 577 of the 1,685 we received no tenders for.

**RACHEL CONNELL:** In relation to the Southern Multi Breed research project between the department, the University of New England and Meat and Livestock Australia, I just want to clarify data collection on the herd was completed in June 2025. The final project report is due in April 2026.

**TARA BLACK:** Chair, you asked earlier about how much funding from the Recreational Fishing Trust is provided to Surf Life Saving NSW for the rock fishing safety and skills program. The first phase was \$204,030 and the second phase, which we're in now, is \$298,590. Mr Barrett, you asked how much money went into the Recreational Fishing Trust. It was \$16.1 million last financial year.

**The CHAIR:** That concludes our time with you. You have taken some other questions on notice, so the secretariat will be touch around time frames and sending the responses back to us. Thank you very much for your time this afternoon and for your time the whole day if you were here the whole day.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**

**The Committee proceeded to deliberate.**