

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE No. 5

**INQUIRY INTO THE MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC LAND IN NEW
SOUTH WALES**

At Bourke on Wednesday 26 September 2012

The Committee met at 9.00 a.m.

PRESENT

The Hon. R. L. Brown (Chair)

The Hon. R. H. Colless

The Hon. C. M. Faehrmann

The Hon. L. Foley

The Hon. S. MacDonald

The Hon. Dr P. R. Phelps

The Hon. P. T. Primrose

CHAIR: Welcome to the sixth public hearing of the inquiry by General Purpose Standing Committee No. 5 into the management of public lands in New South Wales. The inquiry is examining the operational, economic, social and environmental impacts of converting Crown lands, State forests and agricultural land into the national park estate and other matters related to Crown land. Before we commence the taking of evidence I acknowledge the Ngemba people, who are the traditional custodians of this land. I also pay respect to the elders, past and present, of the Ngemba nation and extend that respect to other Aboriginal people present.

Today we will hear from representatives of the Bourke Shire Council, from Mrs Nancy Robinson, a local landholder, and also from a representative of the Brewarrina Business Centre. In addition to today's hearing the Committee will hold another public hearing in Coonabarabran tomorrow morning. We will hold further hearings at Port Macquarie and Grafton as well as in Parliament House in Sydney. Please turn off your mobile phones.

I will briefly explain the procedures for today's hearing. There are no media present today so I will not mention the broadcasting requirements. Witnesses are advised that any messages should be delivered to Committee members through the Committee staff. If they wish to table any documents they should just say so and the Committee staff will take the documents from them. A full transcript of what is said during today's hearing will be prepared by our Hansard reporters. The transcript will be available on the Committee's website in the next few days. Witnesses here today appear under parliamentary privilege. I advise them to be careful what they say to the press before or after the hearing: they are only covered by parliamentary privilege while they are sitting at that table.

ANDREW LEWIS, Mayor, Bourke Shire Council, and

GEOFFREY ALAN WISE, General Manager, Bourke Shire Council, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: Before we proceed with questions, would either or both of you like to make an opening statement?

Mr LEWIS: I thank you very much for coming to Bourke. We welcome you here. We hope the outcome is successful.

CHAIR: Mr Wise, do you have anything you would like to add?

Mr WISE: I just reiterate the welcome. Thanks for having us here. Bourke Shire Council, through the mayor, has made a lengthy written submission to the inquiry. There are a couple of things in that I would like to drag out a little bit. I would also like to share a new submission, if I can table it now, and go through that.

CHAIR: That is fine.

Submission tabled.

Mr WISE: I think it is appropriate to declare a bit of who I am, having listened to the session yesterday afternoon. My background might have some relevance to some of the questions. In that regard, I have been the general manager of Bourke Shire Council for the last five years. Unfortunately that is running out on Friday of next week, when I will be moving on. That included the period when Toorale changed hands. Prior to that I spend over 11 years as the regional director of Land and Water Conservation, Natural Resources and half a dozen other names. Simultaneously, I was the Western Lands Commissioner for New South Wales. Prior to that I had more than a 30-year career with the Department of Agriculture and ended up as the regional director of agriculture for the Orana and far west region. What I am saying is my entire working career has been spent across triple-bottom-line issues, and production, which is economic orientated, and environment through the natural resources area. In the Bourke Shire Council there have been so many social issues, and I have been privileged to have had that triple-bottom-line experience that not many other people have had.

In my past career I was a veterinarian and I did postgraduate studies in epidemiology, which is really about the study of the diseases or disease in populations and cause and effect. I have used those principles throughout my career in trying to identify and address issues and deal with the bigger picture issues. With all that background, I might table one other thing for a bit of light reading for you as you move from place to place. It is a book called *100 years: celebrating 100 years of natural resource progress in the Western Division of NSW: learning from the past and planning for the future*. From some of the issues I heard discussed yesterday there could be some relevance to that. That is donated by Bourke Shire Council to your Committee to do what you like with it. I compiled that a few years ago. I move immediately to the short submission that I have tabled. Some of this is very new information. What I propose to do is read the submission. There are two parts to it. The second part is not new but it is reiterating what has been said to you. The submission reads:

BIODIVERSITY AND CONSERVATION BENEFITS OF GRAZING OF WESTERN DIVISION LAND COMPARED TO DESTOCKING

A selected group of 11 landholders from across the Western Division or New South Wales has been cooperating with Government Agency personnel in a project called Enterprise Based Conservation (EBC).

This project originated from the WEST 2000 and WEST 2000 PLUS Programs, \$30 million Regional Partnership Programs involving the Commonwealth and State Governments and Landholders which commenced in 1997.

The EBC project commenced in 2003, and involved landholders voluntarily managing parts of their property for conservation outcomes. Since the commencement of EBC, other properties have become involved through the support from the Western Catchment Management Authority. Different approaches were approved for different properties, with some totally destocking commercial livestock from the approved areas, whereas others were allowed controlled grazing of the approved areas.

An essential element of the EBC project has been to have independent evaluation of the conservation outcomes. These evaluations have been undertaken by expert employees from the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH)—

which has effectively incorporated National Parks. The submission continues:

Recent research findings by the OEH Researchers are that there is a statistically significant greater number of species of native vegetation in the areas where grazing has occurred compared to similar adjacent areas where grazing by domestic animals has been excluded.

There has been no significant difference in the number of species of fauna between the grazed versus un-grazed areas.

This statistically significant increase in the number of flora species achieved through allowing grazing rather than de stocking of Western Division country warrants strong consideration in reviewing the policies relating to current management of National Parks and Nature Reserves across the Western Division of New South Wales. These findings have relevance in demonstrating to the Commonwealth Government that conservation outcomes are not compromised by grazing on Western Division properties such as Toorale Station.

It is logical to conclude that if controlled grazing of Public Land in the Western Division of New South Wales is allowed to occur through formal arrangements, then conservation outcomes could be enhanced which satisfy both Commonwealth and State Government objectives. Further, economic outcomes could be achieved, operational costs to the Government for management of Public Lands reduced and the potential for mechanisms to be adopted to allow for Local Government rates to be paid for the land.

Regrettably, this valuable project has come to an end due to lack of ongoing commitments by Governments to fund either the EBC project itself, or the practical scientific applied research being incorporated.

The team leader for this research study is Terry Mazzer, Environment and Heritage, Dubbo
terry.mazzer@environment.nsw.gov.au

That finding was only made publicly available at a meeting involving those co-operators held at Brewarrina last week. The second part of this submission reads:

PRECEDENT MODEL OF MULTIPLE USE OF PROTECTED AREAS IN THE AUSTRALIAN RANGELANDS.

The South Australian Government has an established model of multiple use protected areas through one category of protected area under its National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972 called "Regional Reserves". One example of this reserve type is the Innamincka Regional Reserve.

The Parliamentary Committee undertaking the Inquiry is urged to make direct contact with authorities in South Australia to explore the possibility of this model being used in New South Wales, particularly in the Western Division.

In the document I have tabled the contact details of key people who are prepared to be approached by your inquiry if you so wish. That is all I wish to talk to that document. Maybe I can now speak briefly to the key points in the longer submission we have already given.

CHAIR: Yes, please proceed.

Mr WISE: The submission by Bourke Shire Council was written in the sequence of your heads of consideration for your inquiry. If I can just touch on a couple of the key ones, but under the process of conversion and the assessment of potential operational, economic, social and environmental impacts, I make the point that traditionally when any parcel of land, any property, changes hands, whether it is rural, business, commercial or residential, invariably the purchaser keeps using that parcel of land, that property, for something reasonably similar and, as a result, there is invariably not much of a knock-on effect to other people in the neighbourhood or in the district. However, when the Government is the purchaser and the land is converted to public land, there are invariably major secondary, operational, economic, social and environmental impacts due to the change of use of that land. To my mind this principle is the crux of what governments must understand and for which governments must commit to secondary structure adjustment offsets when commercial lands are converted to national park estate or to other types of conservation areas, and it is that fundamental principle that I believe tends to be ignored so often when the Government is the purchaser.

Under the second heads of consideration of operational, social and environmental impacts after conversion, it is salient to note that when the Toorale sale first occurred then Mayor Wayne O'Malley—who tragically died in a plane crash a few months ago—and I went to Sydney and spoke to the Deputy Premier, who was Minister for National Parks I understand at that time. She promised that as part of the loss to the council, if you like, the Government would offer council to do construction works on Toorale—road works and other things—but no such offer has ever come. So it was taken out of the equation. It was interesting at the time there were great photo shoots of the appropriate Commonwealth Minister walking side-by-side with the Deputy Premier saying that the Toorale experience was a great example of governments working together. I think it is a great pity that the mayor of the local government was not a third party in that photo because very simply it was an example of Commonwealth and State governments working together, totally excluding local government.

I have no intention of going over the table of economic work. From my understanding there are about 235 kilometres of boundary fences at Toorale and across the river there are about 175,000 kilometres of boundary of Gundabooka Park. So if you put those two boundaries in a straight line that goes further than from here to Dubbo. There is over 400 kilometres of boundary of two national parks and that has all sorts of impacts for the community. I have made reference to the Innaminka Regional Reserve. As far as council rates go at the time when the mayor and myself spoke to the Deputy Premier and we asked about the payment of council rates, the response was that the State Government could not possibly afford to pay the rates of national parks—Toorale or any other. Our conclusion from that was that if the State Government could not afford to pay the rates on Toorale it should not have purchased the property in the first place. Further, council was concerned that if the State Government could not afford to pay rates then there was equal concern from us that the Government would not be able to equally afford to effectively manage the property and, to some extent, we believe that is coming to fruition.

In the document there is also reference about Western Lands leases. I think is pertinent that every holder of a Western Lands lease must pay local government rates. The State Government took over Toorale Station in 2008 and they continued as Western Lands lease under the Western Lands Act until they were converted to conservation in December 2011, yet they ceased paying any rates in 2009. I believe it is still questionable whether the Government owes Bourke council rates for the period that the land was still classified as Western Lands grazing leases—we have not challenged that legally but I think there is every right that we could have done so. I think that is enough from the submission. It is probably better if we take questions.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Mr Wise, the submission you have just handed in regarding grazing impacts is very interesting. I want to clarify where the research is up to. You said you were handed it this week, is that right? My question is whether that research is publicly available or will it be made publicly available?

Mr WISE: At this stage, as I understand it from the researchers, they are still compiling it. They got it together for the final meeting they had of the co-operators; it has not yet been published. That is the reason why I gave the name of the person doing the work because I know how the public service works. He would not have been able to come to your inquiry but if you go to him there could be an expectation that you could find out those results. I do know that he is currently at the Australian Rangeland Conference in Kununurra. I do not know whether he is getting an opportunity to talk to it at that conference.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: I am interested in the consultation that takes place between the National Parks and Wildlife Service and council regarding Toorale—that is, ongoing consultation in relation to its management and to visitors. Do you have regular meetings?

Mr WISE: No, we do not have regular meetings. We know each other personally. It is not that we do not talk to each other but not in any formal sense. I would not see it as any different from how we interact with any other property in the district. Having said that, when they had a Saturday, virtually an open day, when they had a signing of a management agreement with the Aboriginal community, the mayor and I both attended that day—we were not involved in any way shape or form. I must admit something that was very interesting that came out of that was the Aboriginal people commenting on how well the Aboriginal culture has been preserved on the property and how excited they were about the graves and the Aboriginal artefacts and whatever preserved on the property. The message I got out of that is, if it has been well preserved after a century of commercial operations why could it not continue to be will preserved with ongoing commercial operations?

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: You say your relationship with Parks should be just like it is with any other landholder.

Mr WISE: No, I said it is just like it is not whether it should be or not. I said it is.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Has council approached Toorale to have any type of update about, for example, a tourism plan? I notice that your submission suggests that the access gates on the property are locked. Have you spoken with Parks about what their plans are for increasing visitation numbers?

Mr WISE: Not directly, no. Part of the logic of that is that whilst they are still developing that and whilst they still have locked gates and whatever and the fact that I am leaving next week to my mind it is premature for me to be pushing that agenda.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: You do acknowledge that Toorale is not yet ready to announce itself open for business in terms of tourism?

Mr WISE: Certainly that is my understanding of their current position and despite the fact that from day one when the mayor and I met with the Deputy Premier we were being sold on how marvellous tourism was going to be at Toorale, and that was going to compensate for the loss of rates and whatever else, four years down the track really there has been no opportunity for tourism of any significance on Toorale.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Do you see that council has any responsibility to work with Parks as well to devise a tourism plan to incorporate Toorale within the overall Bourke Shire Council tourism plan?

Mr WISE: We have encouraged them to participate certainly in our whole integrated planning and reporting, community strategic planning process. I cannot recall whether they came to that—we tried to engage the entire community. I would have to take on notice whether National Parks came to that. We went to every government agency and sought their participation in the process. I did not handle that personally so I cannot comment.

CHAIR: Can you take that question on notice?

Mr WISE: Yes.

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: I want to ask about council rates. It has been put to me a number of times that—both the previous government and this government—when asked the question about rates back in 2009-10 with Hunthawang and now with Toorale and others, the response from the department is always that the rest of the ratepayers can pick up the loss. You say that Toorale used to be 4 per cent or \$46,000. Is that what happened? Did you put the rest of that load over the rest of the other council ratepayers?

Mr WISE: Virtually rural ratepayers picked up by far the biggest percentage. Having said that, we are in a process because of other legal requirements with the separation of water from land, our council, like every other council with any irrigation, has had to restructure our entire rating base but still generate the number of dollars we need. So in the process of that some of the rates have also been spread across business and residential. But the initial move was solely across the rest of the rural rate base—it had to pick up that four per cent.

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: So straight away in the next rate calculation for the next rate year you threw \$46,000 across the rest of the ratepayers.

Mr WISE: That was a four per cent increase and at the same time—

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: On top of what else you were doing.

Mr WISE: —local government was capped at not being able to increase more than I think that year it was 3.2 per cent.

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: Was it 7 per cent or 7.2 per cent? Was that the capping?

Mr WISE: The capping was either 3.2 per cent or 3.6 per cent back in that year—that was the maximum amount we were allowed to increase our rates—but the remaining ratepayers had another four per cent spread across them.

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: You were allowed to put another four per cent on top of that three per cent. So they copped seven per cent that year?

Mr WISE: Effectively.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: On page two of your submission you say that no families with children now live on the property. Yet the Committee was told yesterday on its visit that some of the National Parks field officers and their families do live out there. Where did you get the information in your submission that there are not any families living on Toorale these days?

Mr WISE: Page two of which submission?

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: The one you put in a month ago.

Mr WISE: That was the information that one of my staff provided to me when this was being compiled. I know that staff come and go, they have had changes of staff out there, but that certainly is what I was advised at that time. The more important thing is the relative number of people.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: There are fewer than there were.

Mr WISE: There are far fewer than there were and there is a different profile of people. As a general statement, the people who choose to live in a place like that and work for the National Parks and Wildlife Service are younger. Whereas when it was under commercial ownership there were older employees and they are more likely to have more children.

Mr LEWIS: Did they say how long the families have been there? I was not aware that there were any families out there.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: No. We were told yesterday that some of them live there. We can seek more detail.

Mr WISE: I could respond further. I have been told that a lady has recently moved out there. Her marriage has broken up and she has moved out there, and I expect some of her children have gone with her.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Do you have any idea how many people the National Parks and Wildlife Service employs in the Bourke shire at the moment?

Mr WISE: I have been told, but I do not know precisely. The ones based in the shire service all the national parks. Getting back to rates, those national parks used to pay 7 per cent of the total rate revenue. Prior to them being national parks, they paid 7 per cent of the total rates. So we have lost 7 per cent of our revenue and we have had to spread the shortfall across the other 93 per cent of the ratepayers.

CHAIR: What is that in dollar terms?

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: It is about \$700,000.

Mr WISE: No, I imagine it would be about \$100,000.

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: You lost \$46,000 with 4 per cent.

Mr WISE: The total shire rates are about \$1.3 million.

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: So you lost 10 per cent.

Mr WISE: Yes.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: I refer to the proposal that the Committee look at the South Australian regional reserve model. Are you aware that the National Parks and Wildlife Act contains various categories of conservation reserves at the moment?

Mr WISE: Yes, I am. As I understand it, South Australia has created another category. My suggestion is that if the outcomes are being achieved through having another category, there could be merit in the New South Wales legislation being amended to develop a similar category.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: I put it to you that perhaps the outcomes you are looking for can be achieved under the current legislation. That would involve land such as Toorale being a regional park or a State conservation area rather than a national park. That would be possible, would it not?

Mr WISE: Certainly. I do not believe that Toorale had to be categorised as a national park.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Indeed, some of Toorale is currently not a national park; it is a State conservation area because of the potential for mineral exploration.

Mr WISE: I understand that to be true. But I also understand that that conservation area prevents commercial grazing at any level. I could be wrong, but I am not aware of any conservation areas in New South Wales that allow grazing. I assume from that that the rules prevent it and, equally, that that or anything else prevents the opportunity for council rates to be collected in the area.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: I think there is some very limited grazing in some of the western reserves, but we will ask the Government about that.

CHAIR: I recall that when Warwick Watkins was the director general of the Department of Lands he told me that there were three properties down in the south-western corner of New South Wales that were managed by the department for conservation. Are you aware of them or do you know what he was talking about?

Mr WISE: The submission that we sent in a month ago may refer to them. There is Kulcurna on the Murray—it is on page two of one of the submissions. That would be one. I do not know whether he was referring to the Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Area, but I do not think so.

CHAIR: He said that these properties were managed by the Department of Lands or, as it was, the Department of Water and Soil Conservation.

Mr WISE: Kulcurna would be one of those.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Wearing your hat as the former head of the Western Division Lands Commission, what do you think about simply granting freehold—getting rid of the lease system and granting freehold?

Mr WISE: I do not know that my personal views have a lot of value now. When I was the Western Division Lands Commissioner I was extremely heavily involved in the review of the Western Lands Act undertaken by John Kerin. Throughout the entire period of that review he was hammering me saying, "Why don't we just freehold the lot?" That was in about 2000. The determination about whether Western Lands leases were exempt from native title had not been made. So there was still uncertainty about whether native title existed over Western Lands leases. I just kept telling him he could not do it. Since then it has been determined that native title is extinguished on Western Lands leases, so that obstacle has been removed.

I have spoken directly to previous Ministers to whom I was answerable and told them that one option they could always consider would be to freehold Western Lands leases. Probably about eight or 10 years ago the State Government made a decision to freehold a lot of other types of Crown land at a premium of about 2 per cent, from memory. But, for whatever reason, Western Lands leases were not part of that proposal. Over the past 15 years—virtually coinciding with when I took on the job and when the Labor Government came into power with Bob Carr as Premier—a huge amount of natural resource legislation has been introduced. I have always argued that the Western Lands Act was probably the first natural resource legislation in Australia that used land administration levers to deliver natural resource outcomes. Until 1995 or thereabouts, things like clearing and cultivation control were in the Western Lands Act before they were applicable anywhere else. Since those sorts of controls have become statewide, a lot of the reasons for the Western Lands Act probably—

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: It is redundant now.

Mr WISE: It is somewhat redundant. There are different ways you can look at it. Banks have said there is just as much security with a Western Lands lease as there is with freehold. So there is no financial imperative for that to occur. It certainly creates some frustrations in intensive areas, such as along the Murray where there are requests for more intensive building developments and Western Lands leases are an obstacle to that. However, given that every Western Lands leaseholder has paid a freehold price for their lease there would be pretty major objections if they had to re-buy their property. The Committee would have to address that. An easy way to do that would be to set it at a nominal 1 per cent or 2 per cent of the value of the lease and then let their annual Western Lands rent pay that off over the next five years or whatever.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: I refer to the general concept of commercial operations in national parks. If, for example, Toorale were to be opened up to commercial operations, how extensive do you think that would or should be? Surely you are not suggesting that the entire park should become a sheep run once again, or are you? Or are there specific areas in which you believe it would be appropriate to have grazing?

Mr WISE: I do not know enough about the intricacies of that property to form any opinion. My approach is to look at establishing processes such as the Innamincka process. That station, park, or whatever it is called, has some areas excluded from grazing while other areas have been leased back to Kidman, which once owned the country. I am not the judge of which parts should or should not have certain operations. But they are not the sort of areas that could be negotiated. Members had an opportunity to inspect the property briefly yesterday. You cannot see it all in five minutes by any means. However, you would have seen how the country has recuperated as a result of the change in seasons—that is, it is unrelated to grazing. Regardless of whether country is or is not grazed, what drives the back country is the seasonal circumstances and the recuperative ability of Western Lands based on good rain. That is the overriding influence.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: However, we heard evidence yesterday from an expert who indicated that grazing in fact had a detrimental effect, particularly on native flora, and that the understorey had been unable to regenerate back to its natural state because of grazing operations. It is not something that you will solve over here. You presented information this morning indicating a contrary view.

Mr LEWIS: In relation to the claim made yesterday, you only have to look at my property. I have a 50,000-hectare property and you could flog a flea around there at the end of the drought. However, once it started raining we had stock back on there. The groundcover is just unbelievable. We have doubled our numbers in the past five years. If you get the right rain at the right time this country does recover.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Thank you for appearing before the Committee. Mr Wise, I take you back to this issue about the Western Lands lease situation. You made the comment in your submission that you suspect that the National Parks and Wildlife Service may still be liable to pay rates because of the tenure until it was changed from Western Lands lease to national park title. Are you aware of any other State Government-held land that is subject to a Western Lands lease and whether the Government pays rates on it?

Mr WISE: I am not aware of any. Every bit of public land that the Government now owns in the Western Division at some stage probably was a Western Lands lease. Even Sturt National Park—one of the first national parks—was all Western Lands leases as I understand it. Once it is acquired by the Government, it goes through a process of changing the title.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: What is the title of that land now? Is it freehold?

Mr WISE: I would have to take that on notice. I am sure it is not freehold. I am sure it is some classification of Crown land.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Still on the Western Lands Act and in your previous administrative role as Western Lands Commissioner, all the Western Lands leases had restrictions on them, as you were saying, on cultivation and vegetation beds and so on, but they also had a restriction on the carrying capacity, the number of stock units those properties could hold, did they not?

Mr WISE: That is correct. And the commissioner had the authority to influence that, even to the extent of ordering destocking of the whole lease. That authority was exercised—not necessarily destocking of the entire lease—not infrequently.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: In those days were there inspectors who used to move through an area checking on the way leases were managed and making sure the lessees were abiding by the conditions of the lease?

Mr WISE: There were and there still are. I think they are now called rain plant officers—I am not certain of their title. I would estimate there are probably about eight or nine across the western division, employees within the relevant department, who still do that. The practice that has been established is that they attempt to get out every time a lease is transferring ownership, not only to establish how the previous person has operated but as a baseline for the new owner, and it is a great communication opportunity to have words to a new owner, especially if they have not owned in Western Lands country before—what some of the rules are in

this area. That operates. While it is a large area—42 per cent of the State—it is not a big population across that area and people know each other fairly easily.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: What are the relationships like between the Western Lands staff or the agency staff that make the recommendations on behalf of Western Lands and the landowners or lessees? Is there a mutual respect that exists on both sides?

Mr WISE: I am five years out of date. Certainly during the 11 or 12 years I was Western Lands Commissioner I went out of my way to engender a close relationship, and there certainly was mutual respect. I think in the 100-plus history of Western Lands administration there has always been a respect, especially by the leaseholder to the landlord, if you like—not necessarily always positive—but there is an acknowledgement that the Western Lands Commissioner had responsibilities and was held accordingly. I think it is fair to say that over 110 or 112 years of history it has been fairly mutual, there has been a two-way liaison.

CHAIR: Councillor Lewis, what would you describe is the attitude of the Bourke residents to the creation of Toorale and other national parks? Do you think they see it as a positive or negative thing?

Mr LEWIS: You only have to look at the protest we had down here when it was first sold to the Government. There was a big street parade protest.

CHAIR: Protesting against the sale?

Mr LEWIS: Yes, under the former mayor. A large crowd was very upset about it. A lot of families have gone out of the district. A lot of people lose a lot of money. Shearing, truck driving—I know myself probably, I have to make \$50,000, \$60,000 a year doing a trucks run. In 2008 Clyde paid me \$200,000, not just in Toorale, but over its four properties, to cart grain away. In 2004 I delivered 1,000 tonne of gypsum. It is worth \$60,000. So just for me, with Toorale gone, that is money I do not make. There are the shopkeepers, fuel depots, it is a big loss to town, not just to rates. The income has just gone. National Park staff live in town but they certainly do not produce the economy like the shearers and contractors did.

CHAIR: What would you say the attitude is now, four years later? Have people just got on with it?

Mr LEWIS: There is still heat out there about it. They still like to see a return. I think most people realise it is not going to return. If they can get some financial commercial income from there it would be very good.

CHAIR: When you spread the loss of rates across the other ratepayers, were those ratepayers informed why their rates had to be increased?

Mr LEWIS: I do not know. I cannot remember. Mr Wise might remember that.

Mr WISE: No, they were not. I purposely did not because to my mind that would have been putting fuel on the fire. So, we purposely did not do that. It is somewhat ironic because the perception within the shire is that the decision of the Government to buy a property for a national park is not just a national park for the people in that shire, it is a national park for the wider community, yet it is the locals who have to pay the rates. So if the wider community want national parks, the shire view would surely be the wider community should be paying the rates, not that that rate be carried by a few locals.

CHAIR: Forgetting about national parks for a moment, what percentage of the council's or local government areas' income is created by tourism? Is this a big tourist area here or not, compared to other shires?

Mr LEWIS: Certainly a lot of tourists go through here. But council itself receives no income from tourism. It costs us money.

CHAIR: No, I did not mean the council. I meant the area—the economy.

Mr LEWIS: The general manager might have more information on that, but certainly the motels, fuel, some of the small shops make money.

CHAIR: Do you have a chamber of commerce in Bourke? You do not?

Mr LEWIS: Did have.

Mr WISE: No, we do not have a chamber of commerce at the moment and I have absolutely no idea what the tourist income to the community is, but it would pale into insignificance compared to the income from irrigation in the years when there is water in the river. This year there are probably \$50 million or more of cotton, and there is no way the tourist industry comes anywhere near that. The biggest tourist industry in Bourke is probably people like public servants coming in and out of Bourke every week. They keep a lot of the hotels and motels fairly occupied. The grey nomads going through is a big increasing trade, but they have fairly tight budgets. Certainly reiterating the mayor's point, tourism always comes at a cost to council. They are the ones who want public toilets, they are the ones who want the roads improved, whatever. We do not get a dollar out of them other than enticing them to go through the exhibition centre and the Jandra paddle vessel, which is a tourist attraction.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: What was the population doing in, say, the preceding few decades, say, since about 1980 or so? Has it been increasing or declining in general?

Mr LEWIS: In 1980, early 1990s, it would have been increasing or a steady increase. We had the wool reserve price scheme withdrawn in 1990. The woolgrowers certainly lost a lot of income. Irrigation is still picking up, burning along, and in 2003 or 2004 the river stopped flowing for a while and that is when the town lost 25 per cent over 10 years.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: You lost 25 per cent?

Mr WISE: We have had a 30 per cent population decrease since 2000. During the census period from 2001 to 2006 Bourke shire had the third-greatest population decrease of any shire in Australia. Two shires in Western Australia had a bigger percentage decrease. In that five-year period it was about a 22 per cent decrease.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: We heard yesterday as we were heading back from Toorale that this used to be an area for citrus and grapes, so there was a collapse of a lot of those crops around that time. Is that the time we are talking about, 2005?

Mr WISE: That is correct. There was one very large, expanding intensive property with citrus and grapes. That property on the edge of town just started towards the end of last century and came out here and expanded at a great rate. It ended up going into receivership through not being able to have a constant water supply, which coincided with the severe drought, and that would be the main one that would have been referenced because that was such a big one. They employed a lot of casual labour, much of which came in from out of town.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: In your submission you note that there was a school in the shire which previously provided education to children from Toorale and which is now closed. Can you say that that closure was directly related only to the sale of Toorale and not to the other situations that Bourke was finding itself in, for example, the closure of the citrus crops, the 25 per cent decline since 2000? Was this directly related to Toorale and nothing else?

Mr WISE: That particular school had a decrease in the child population as the town population decreased but the school was still going actively in 2007. A new principal came to the school shortly after that—I am not sure exactly when. It was still a functional school when I came to Bourke in 2007. That citrus property had folded three years earlier than that, I imagine. The drought had broken here before that school closed. I should add there was one family on Toorale, the irrigation manager at the time had a large number of children who attended that school, and probably created the critical mass to keep the school going. So, when he lost his job and left town that virtually tripped it over the edge, as it has been explained to me, anyway.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Since the drought has broken, what has happened to Bourke's population?

Mr WISE: As we understand it, it is reasonably stable at the moment. It may have decreased 100 or so over the last census period, but it has reasonably plateaued out at the moment.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Is it fair to say that there are other factors associated with things like schools closing down, other factors as well as Toorale's closure? It does seem that your submission suggests that Toorale's closure is to blame for the closure of the school and the decline in, maybe, business profitability over the last few years. But, digging a little deeper, there was a bit more going on in Bourke, was there not?

Mr WISE: Certainly there are always changes, always things going on. I think it gets back to the broader issue that at the time of the Toorale purchase we attempted to get an indication from all the business houses—and that includes schools and whatever—of how much the employment at Toorale, the commercial business of Toorale, contributed to the individual businesses. We were not able to see anyone's books, and no-one really had books available specifically on that, but the pretty widely held consensus view by the business houses was that Toorale was contributing about 10 per cent. I have no idea of the mayor's circumstance—he has quoted to you the income he got—whether that was five per cent, 10 per cent or 50 per cent of his business; they are the sort of opinions that the business houses formed of what Toorale contributed. The point they made was that because of some of those other circumstances that you are referring to, if they were getting down towards the critical threshold then taking out 10 per cent might be enough to tip them over. I would suggest you that the school was exactly that situation.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I am very interested in your latest submission headed "Biodiversity and conservation benefits of grazing of Western Division land compared to destocking". In my private discussions yesterday with the expert who was with us, he indicated that there were a number of peer review papers available to the contrary to this. Will you take on notice, given there is no research—we have of a couple of paragraphs here making exertions, which we will follow up—but are you aware of any other peer review papers that may back up the statement that there is no significant difference in the number of species of fauna between grazed versus ungrazed areas? You can take that question on notice.

Mr WISE: I could attempt to do that. My preference is—and the reason I referred you to go back to the person who has done the work—to get that sort of information directly from them. I take the attitude that they are the experts; I am not. I would be interested to know who the expert was that you spoke to yesterday. I would imagine it is a working colleague of the person that I have given you his name. It is appropriate for those people to challenge each other on these relative aspects.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: You have presented a submission here that contains a series of statements and you have said there is an individual, whom we will follow up on. You have made a series of assertions. I presume you must have some other basis for making them. You have had an interest sufficient to be involved in this since 2003. There must be some other paper somewhere in the world that backs up the evidence you have given.

Mr WISE: As I have indicated, I am prepared to see what I can find for you. It is not my area of expertise. Maybe if I can expand a little bit further. I was actually seconded out of the Department of Agriculture, out of the role of Regional Director of Agricultural, to work jointly with the Agriculture Rural Assistance Authority and the Department of Land and Water Conservation to get the program called WEST 2000 established back in 1995. I then became the Western Lands Commissioner and the Regional Director of Natural Resources and as an additional extra role I ended up being the chair of the WEST 2000 management board. So my role was at the management level, the organisational level. I was heavily involved in getting that enterprise-based conservation concept trialled. Again, I do not claim to be the expert; my role was facilitating a process. I will see if I can find other papers.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Your conclusion on page 2 is based upon one as yet unpublished position, not on the basis of other research?

Mr WISE: That is certainly the case.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: I go back to the input cost you estimated in your submission of \$4.7 million from Toorale. How much of that would have been spent in businesses in Bourke?

Mr WISE: I really cannot answer that. It is also important to note that they were not actual costs—and that is very clearly written in the paper. That paper was put together in the month or so after the sale of Toorale. The way that data came about was using material in the advertising brochure for the property sale, where they specify how many hectares of X, Y and Z and how many sheep and cattle and whatever, and then using the gross margins data of the Department of Primary Industries to calculate this information. It was purposely done

that way rather than me going to the management of Toorale and saying, "Can you disclose some of your personal information?" To my mind at the time everything was so sensitive that it was inappropriate to talk to them personally. It was far better to use some sort of objective government data plus the published data.

But what I would like to say is that the management of Clyde Agriculture had a strong philosophy of shopping locally, spending locally. If they could purchase something locally they would irrespective of whether it was at a premium price. I would suspect that a very high proportion of that was spent locally. I do know that its shearing teams came from elsewhere because we did not have a shearing team capable of doing the work. But shearers still spend locally. When they are here for one or two months of the year they are spending money. So a very high proportion of the money would have been spent locally. Before we close I would like to acknowledge that in the audience and listening are representatives from Brewarrina Shire who weekly have issues with National Parks not paying rates or whatever in the Brewarrina Shire as well. What we are talking about is not unique to Bourke.

CHAIR: Thank you Councillor Lewis and Mr Wise for appearing before the Committee today. A couple of questions were taken on notice. Are you happy to supply answers to those questions, if you can, within 21 days?

Mr WISE: I certainly will if I possibly can. I have a few things on in the next 21 days.

CHAIR: I understand that. Congratulations on an exemplary career. Are you retiring?

Mr WISE: I have never been ambitious and I have never been looking for the next job so I do not know what the future holds.

Mr LEWIS: He received the Premier's award on Monday night.

CHAIR: Congratulations.

(The witnesses withdrew)

NANCY JOAN ROBINSON, Landholder, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: Mrs Robinson, welcome to this inquiry.

Mrs ROBINSON: It is a long trip in here.

CHAIR: How far for you?

Mrs ROBINSON: 160 kilometres.

CHAIR: Whereabouts are you located, roughly?

Mrs ROBINSON: On the Queensland border, directly between Weilmoringle and Enngonia—in God's own country. It was very interesting coming in actually, with national parks in focus, to see the best wildflowers on the Ledknapper Crossing or on private land. I also have a book here that I have written about the area. Unfortunately, I cannot give you a copy because I only have three left—they have sold out. Just pass it around.

CHAIR: Before we proceed to questions from the Committee do you wish to make an opening statement?

Mrs ROBINSON: Yes, I do. I also have a letter that my husband received from National Parks in 2009, which is why I am here.

CHAIR: Would you like to table that letter?

Mrs ROBINSON: Yes, I would. I have a copy for each Committee member.

Letter tabled.

CHAIR: You have the floor.

Mrs ROBINSON: The letter being circulated was received by my husband. It is dated and signed by Nerida Green. It was seen by us as an inaccurate, offensive and threatening letter. It destroyed the so-called "good neighbour policy" they had been boasting about and nothing constructive can be gained by such rudeness. The issue of replacing the boundary fence remains in limbo and is unresolved. The boundary fence is old but in the same condition as it was when National Parks bought Gerara. If you buy a place with an old fence on it and do nothing to repair it and then bung on a wobbly like a spoilt child because some small number of stock get over it, there is something sadly missing here. We have found the National Parks local staff to be polite and when they have contacted us to remove some of our cattle—

CHAIR: Mrs Robinson when you are referring to someone's name it is probably best to say a national park representative or a councillor or something like that.

Mrs ROBINSON: No troubles. When our son Callum went to retrieve them we had recorded 28 inches of rain, which is about 700 millimetres. He at one stage had himself and the five cows bogged—this is how ridiculous the situation had become. Expecting anyone to muster stock in these conditions highlights how little they know about the country. When we received this letter my husband was sick in hospital under chemotherapy. It was well known in the area that he was a very sick man. We get neighbours' stock and we always enjoy a good relationship with our neighbours. We get neighbours' stock through old and new fences and sometimes they get ours. They are always returned without a problem. We have never experienced such rudeness before. We have lived at Ellerslie for 44 years and we have had a total of 28 different neighbours. Malcolm was too sick to reply to the letter, so I contacted our local member, Kevin Humphries. He kindly informed us not to worry. I guess it is too much to ask for an apology.

This inquiry is overdue and I hope you will address the local issues. I ask the Committee to consider the following recommendations. First, neighbours should be treated with respect and letters like this should never be sent. Second, neighbours' paddocks are not buffer zones. Third, equal responsibility must be shared for repairs and maintenance of fences and ramps. Fourth, national parks must be sustainable and earn their management costs with tourism, agistment, grazing selected areas and harvesting goats. Shooting goats is just

lazy dollars on the ground that attracts pigs and foxes. Neighbours should be able to muster adjoining areas and get rid of the red tape and paperwork that is currently holding this process back. Fifth, National Parks must pay shire rates. It is ridiculous that National Parks do not contribute to the local community—they use all the facilities and roads. They must not be allowed to bludge off the community.

Sixth, a commissioner or a local representative should be appointed who can resolve issues in a reasonable manner without placing landholders in an impossible position like the position in which we found ourselves. Seventh, I question whether we need as much land in the Bourke and Brewarrina shires for National Parks. I do not believe so. Eighth, National Parks need to be more selective in key areas of significance and have enough staff to manage them. Economically the costs involved in the purchase and management of local parks far outweighs the benefits. It is estimated that Brewarrina shire has lost more than \$5 million each year. As the Committee has heard, that amount is much greater in the Bourke shire. The effect of that is enormous in relatively small communities like Bourke and Brewarrina. Bourke has an average of 3,000 people. Ninth, National Parks properties are vacant, leaving huge areas of land unattended. Tenth, biodiversity is well maintained in Western Lands leases.

Please look at that book; that was done before we had national parks in our area. Water is the key to a healthy environment and it is often removed from national parks. When you ask them where the animals will get water, they say, "They will go somewhere else." Do you know where that is? It is their neighbours' places. Matthew Robinson bought Toorale from Sir Samuel McCaughey. The homestead was built for Matthew and Louisa. My husband's grandfather managed Toorale and our family was horrified to hear that it was proposed that the dams on the property be demolished at a huge cost. That is total madness. They would be demolishing a habitat that has existed for over 100 years and leave thousands of acres of productive land producing nothing. Most of this land should be sold off or grazed, not only on Toorale but also in other national parks.

It is better for wildlife to have their habitat grazed with plenty of water to drink. As I have found, there is only one animal that does not need a drink of water, and that is a dead one. Toorale water not extracted from the Darling River should be the achievement. But leave and maintain the dams on the Warrego because it is an established wildlife habitat and should remain as a wildlife sanctuary. I thank the Committee for giving me this opportunity.

CHAIR: Are you prepared to table that document?

Mrs ROBINSON: Yes.

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: It is good to hear from you. Do you have a bushfire plan for Ledknapper Nature Reserve developed in consultation with the National Parks and Wildlife Service if a fire starts in your place and goes into the parks or from the parks into your place?

Mrs ROBINSON: No, they do not communicate with us in any way.

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: So there is no bushfire plan?

Mrs ROBINSON: No, nothing.

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: They obviously have an issue with domestic stock going on to Ledknapper. Can you give me a picture of what might be moving out of the park on to your place?

Mrs ROBINSON: If a cow can get over a fence it is obvious that their wildlife can get over it. We have a problem with one bore drain and pigs, goats, kangaroos and emus. At the moment the emus are getting stuck in our bore drains. We have to go along there every day to remove them.

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: These are native and feral animals coming out of the park?

Mrs ROBINSON: Yes. Where the kangaroos are coming in they have created a deep pad.

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: Because there is so much traffic?

Mrs ROBINSON: Yes.

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: What sort of damage are the pigs and the other animals doing to your enterprise?

Mrs ROBINSON: It is not just the pigs, although they are a huge problem; it is also the cats.

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: Do you mean wild cats?

Mrs ROBINSON: Yes, and foxes. The increase in the number of wild cats on our place is massive. We have had shooters continually since last Christmas.

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: You have shooters. Are their shooters in Ledknapper?

Mrs ROBINSON: We do not know because they do not tell us anything. I think the catchment management authority funded a pig shooting exercise some time ago. They extended it to neighbours, but this thrill-seeker would not go up in a helicopter with some mad man with a gun.

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: I do not think it is an unusual problem with parks or any neighbour. However, can you explain why you have not been able to resolve the fencing issue? The normal rule is what is in the fencing legislation. What is behind that?

Mrs ROBINSON: There is a reason it has not been resolved. They wanted the area where we are having this enormous problem with their animals coming on to our bore drain to be ring-locked to stop most of that traffic.

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: That is a better class of fence?

Mrs ROBINSON: Yes, it is a higher class of fence rather than just wire fencing. They have refused to do it. We have been harassed. While my husband was sick he was continually harassed by them. I eventually spat the dummy and told them precisely what I thought of National Parks, which was not very complimentary then and it is still not.

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: So a ring-locked fence would be pretty close to double wire fence, would it not?

Mrs ROBINSON: It is much better. If it is put in properly, it can exclude small kangaroos—not large kangaroos—and most other animals.

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: It would keep out most pigs?

Mrs ROBINSON: Pigs are a bit like goats—there is hardly any fence they cannot get through.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Thank you for appearing. I have heard that private landowners have a different strategy from that used by the National Parks and Wildlife Service for the control of goats. Is that true? Do you harvest goats during drought for commercial gain?

Mrs ROBINSON: We have been living off goats for probably the last five or six years. We have a very good plan and method of mustering goats. We have a fellow with a gyrocopter—there are two blokes in the area who have gyrocopters. With a gyrocopter and two or three people on the ground and a decent yard to put them in, you can harvest goats very successfully. We harvested some the other day. They are a very efficient animal for grazing.

One of the questions you asked Geoff Wise that I was interested in is whether wildlife can survive in grazing areas. Absolutely, yes. When I was in America on my Churchill Fellowship, I visited areas that had not been grazed for 30 years. It was very interesting. They asked me, "What do you think we should do with that?" All the soil around was just bare with an occasional tuft of grass. They talked about the fence-line effect. You could not see the soil on the other side because the grass was so thick. That was in the grazed area. I saw another area where an old boy had longhorn bullocks on rehabilitated mining areas. He used to feed the bullocks grain and put them out in these areas and the effect was staggering. That way wildlife can survive because they have food and water. The grass may not be long, but it is most certainly a better habitat for all of the animals concerned.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Obviously goats are a good source of income when you are not grazing other stock. How do you ensure that there are enough goats next time around when you corral them and put them on the truck? Do you leave the younger goats?

Mrs ROBINSON: When we muster our goats we have an area fenced in or ring-locked where we draft off the young goats. We make sure we are not over stocked. When they are old enough to sell, we sell them. Most landholders now have a very efficient way of handling goats. They are no longer a feral animal; they are a precious commodity. We are most upset when the National Parks and Wildlife Service gets in the air and shoots them. It is just a dollar on the ground. Saying that they cannot pay rates and pull their weight in the community is not acceptable.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: I refer to the letter you tabled. I note that it suggests that you applied for boundary fencing assistance. Did you do that?

Mrs ROBINSON: We argued about it, and we are still arguing about it. The last straw for me with regard to the fencing was that my husband died of cancer. He was very sick with cancer and this was all happening when he was very ill. The last straw was when they rang me and asked me to give them information about the meaning of "Ledknapper". I was supposed to tell them. It is in my book and I told them to buy it. Landholders often give them free information and they publish it and claim it as their work. That is plagiarising.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Is it correct that you did not apply for boundary fencing assistance?

Mrs ROBINSON: Not officially, but we discussed it. We did not apply for it because they would not agree to do that particular area. It was a matter of only two miles, but they would not provide ring-lock fencing. We said that we would not put in an application until they agreed.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: The first paragraph of the letter states:

You have been given regular verbal directions to remove the cattle.

How many times did you have a conversation with the National Parks and Wildlife Service before they wrote the letter—either you or your son?

Mrs ROBINSON: There was no demand for us to remove the stock. There was only ever a small number involved. When my son got bogged there were five cows. That letter is about five cows.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: The National Parks and Wildlife Service area manager states:

I understand that you and your son, Callum Robinson, have been given regular verbal directions to remove the cattle and ensure that they don't return to the Nature Reserve.

Are you suggesting that that is incorrect?

Mrs ROBINSON: That is why I said when I spoke to you originally that it was incorrect.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Thank you for speaking to the Committee. What is the closest national park after the Ledknapper? Where do they come from?

Mrs ROBINSON: That is the million-dollar question. There is no-one living at Garera now. They do not have a phone, so it is very hard. Sometimes they call us on the two-way radio, but they have never given us their two-way radio number. If we need to contact them, we have to ring Bourke. The whole situation is highly undesirable.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: So, how far from Bourke is Ledknapper Reserve?

Mrs ROBINSON: Gerera is 10 miles down the road from us, so, say 100 kilometres out of town, and it comes right through to Beulah, which is about 30, 35 miles down the road from us. I am sorry, I think in miles, I cannot think in kilometres

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: That is all right. We are all over 25 and we understand what miles mean. So nobody is there on a regular basis?

Mrs ROBINSON: No-one at all at Gerara now.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Before it was converted to a reserve, the previous owners used to live there, did they?

Mrs ROBINSON: Yes, we had two lots of neighbours other than National Parks there. Mrs Wilcox lived there. She worked in Brewarrina at times and in Bourke at times but she was always there on the weekends and you could always contact her and we had no problems with her.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: What area is in that property in total?

Mrs ROBINSON: There are 35,000 acres in Gerara.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: When was it converted into a nature reserve?

Mrs ROBINSON: It would have been just before 2009—about 2008. I could not be exact, do not quote me on that, but about that time.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: From 2009 to now, there has been a string of good seasons?

Mrs ROBINSON: Yes, there has, and that is why we have not had stock in our adjoining paddocks with Gerara. However, very soon we will have to go along the fence, stand the posts up, any that are down, and take fallen trees. Quite often the trees that were over the fence that enabled our cattle to get over were on the national parks side. The ramp, the grid, joining us is on spinifex country and the sand is continually going into it. There is a problem because of the sand and the instability, especially with road trains, the dog will hit the ramps, so we have enormous problems with the sides of the ramps because of the sand. That country is our drought reserve. We use it as a haystack. We do not use it in good seasons, we only use it when the seasons are bad. It is mulga and spinifex country.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Is the mulga and spinifex country susceptible to wildfire after a series of good seasons?

Mrs ROBINSON: Enormously. We had a wildfire at the back of our place on spinifex country about three weeks ago. I had gone to Cunnamulla and I thought our neighbour was having a very good burn—it was our place. There were no problems. He was burning his country, it got into our country. He said he would fix the posts and it was not an issue. My son and I went out the next day—me with a shovel and he with the tractor—and we managed to control that fire.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: If that fire had started in the middle of a nature reserve what would have been the end result? Would somebody from National Parks be out there to put it out?

Mrs ROBINSON: I do not know, to be honest.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Would you be able to let them know?

Mrs ROBINSON: My husband was a fire captain in the area. He was informed that under no circumstances if there was a fire in Gerara was he ever permitted to enter.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Do they have control burns at Gerara, hazard reduction burns, that you are aware of?

Mrs ROBINSON: A bit of a joke. They burned two little areas on Gerara, one the year before last.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: What sort of area?

Mrs ROBINSON: Just a little strip along the side of the road—on one side of the road. This year they burned another strip and no-one can understand why because it would achieve absolutely nothing. The major

problem we have in that country is dry storms. If you have dry storms—and virtually the whole of Gerara at the moment, one spark and it is a bomb. We have country like that too, so we cannot throw too many stones I suppose, but we are deliberately doing it for grazing. I have always been interested in wildlife. I am a person who brings birds home that have been damaged on the side of the road and fix them up. I have always been very interested, and that is why I wrote that book. I have always been interested in the history. I am currently writing the Robinson family story. The Robinsons, Sir Samuel McCaughey, the Wilsons and the Killens were all part of the same area of Ireland and almost had a one talk system, and when they came to Australia were very close.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: Whereabouts in Ireland did they come from?

Mrs ROBINSON: They came from Broughshane near Ballymere.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Gerara was proclaimed in about 2006, 2007?

Mrs ROBINSON: Something like that, yes.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: How long before that had it been operating as a commercial property?

Mrs ROBINSON: It was one of the very well-known stations. Gerara was split up at one stage. Old Gerara, which is south of the place I own called Glenmore, was the original settlement. It has high Aboriginal significance. There is a permanent spring there. That is another problem. They seem to think that one spring has dried up because we have a bore and they have been harassing us about piping and capping a bore. I have great problems with that because of the effect it will have on the wildlife. I told you that only one animal does not need a drink of water. Even echidnas, I have seen an echidna swim in a bore drain and enjoy every bit of it. I have always loved wildlife and I will always stand up for them.

CHAIR: Thank you for coming such a long way and presenting evidence to us. If the Committee has any further questions it would like to ask you, could you take those questions on notice? We will write to you?

Mrs ROBINSON: Yes, no problem at all.

CHAIR: Generally speaking, any answers to questions we would like within about 21 days of your receiving them.

Mrs ROBINSON: I am a pretty busy little beaver.

(The witness withdrew.)

CAROLE JOY MEDCALF, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Brewarrina Business Centre, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: Prior to proceeding with questions from the Committee, would you like to make an opening statement?

Ms MEDCALF: I would, thank you.

CHAIR: Please proceed.

Ms MEDCALF: I have some documents I would like to tender. Unfortunately not enough for one copy each but certainly one between two. Before I start, I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and pay my respects to their elders both past and present. Brewarrina Business Cooperative is an Aboriginal organisation. The board consists of representatives from a range of Aboriginal organisations in Brewarrina. One of its responsibilities is it holds the licence for Crown reserve land in Brewarrina, which is heritage listed and is known far and wide as the fish traps area. The fish traps are depicted in the front photo of the presentation I have given you. I will work through that presentation.

On the second page is an area located within the region. It is located in the township of Brewarrina. The area that is known as the fish traps area covers a little larger area apart from the river and it is known by the Aboriginal people as Baiame's Ngunnhu. The area covered occupies a 400-metre long stretch of the bed of the Barwon River. A short distance downstream of the Ngunnhu the river becomes known as the Darling River. Its tributaries meander through a sparsely settled, semi-arid region of extensive alluvial plains. The landscape is almost exclusively occupied by leasehold properties that are primarily used for livestock grazing and wool production.

The management of the Aboriginal sites is covered by a conservation management plan which applies to an area of approximately 50 hectares centred on the Ngunnhu. The plan area incorporates those parts of the river bed and banks included in the National Heritage list and the New South Wales State Heritage Register and adjacent to culturally significant sites. They consist of ochre beds, Black Rock and Rocky Ridge, all of which are situated downstream of the Ngunnhu, and a large number of camp sites, middens, scarred trees and other cultural sites are located on the northern side of the river.

The boundary of the plan area is delineated by the upstream border of the Crown land at Brewarrina Weir, the eastern edge of Weir Park, the riverside verges of Doyle and Darling streets in Brewarrina and the Kamilaroi Highway. To the west, the boundary follows a creek channel and various vehicular tracks to the downstream edge of Rocky Ridge. The area covered is shown in the next document. The Committee will see that the area is licensed to the Brewarrina Business Centre. It is split into four major types of land: town common, travelling stock reserve, Barwon 4 Aboriginal land and Crown reserves.

The land tenure on the northern side in the travelling stock reserve is actually disused but it was proclaimed under the Crown Lands Act, and the Barwon 4 Aboriginal land has been gazetted under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983. The bed of the Barwon River itself is submerged Crown land and because of its impact on the fish traps it is considered to be part of the licensed area. The Crown reserve area marked in the map is also occupied by the Brewarrina Aboriginal Cultural Museum and the Brewarrina Business Centre manages it on a daily basis as well.

Reserve trusts are established, as the Committee would be aware, in a particular fashion. I guess the impact of that is something I would like to talk to the Committee about. When people are managing reserve trusts and Crown land there is a commitment from them to manage it as best they can within the resourcing they have available. Obviously an Aboriginal business in western New South Wales has sometimes little resources to draw upon. The current and future management of Baiame's ngunnhu is inextricably linked to the Brewarrina community, not just the Aboriginal community. The township of Brewarrina is the service and administrative centre for the Brewarrina Shire, which covers in excess of 19,000 kilometres, and it adjoins Bourke Shire to the west and the Walgett Shire to the east.

The economic structure of each of those local government areas is relatively simple—as the Committee would have heard in the submission of the General Manager of the Bourke Shire—with most employment generated by agriculture or by a range of supporting service activities, such as retail, trade, government

administration, education and health and community services. The capacity for any of the organisations in these towns to manage substantial and significantly important areas of land is impacted by the location and the resources that are around it. Aboriginal people account for 55 per cent of Brewarrina Shire's population and 60 per cent of the population of the township. The town has a growing Indigenous population and a falling non-Indigenous population. For Aboriginal people the country is crisscrossed—by the way, I come with their blessing—with the tracks of ancestral beings and the stories of their exploits and creations. Certain natural features delineate the boundaries of tribal areas.

The ngunnhu is located in the country of the Ngemba people. For them and for people from neighbouring groups, such as the Morowari, Baranbinja, Ualarai, Weilwan, Kamilaroi and Kula, the ngunnhu is a central place of cultural significance, and it has been so for many years. It has been a place in their dreaming stories of meeting and sharing in all of that time. According to one member of the Brewarrina Aboriginal community the fish traps are "our heritage, our past and our future"—it is the future that is quite important here. For Aboriginal people across the region the ngunnhu represents a direct and tangible link with Baiame, their ancestors, their traditional society and the mood of other cultural places and stories that crisscross the landscape. It is a place where their forebears caught fish, maintained the stone walls of the traps, met in great intertribal gatherings, undertook rituals, camped and were buried. They still do that. A large part of those traditions still continue today.

Baiame's ngunnhu is also a place of great potential for Aboriginal people. The future management of the fish traps holds the possibility of reversing some of the damage to the cultural and natural values of the place, of employment and training opportunities, and of financial benefits associated with cultural tourism and education. Through these changes it has the potential to play a major role in cultural renewal and cohesion in the Aboriginal community. Within the general community of Brewarrina there is a general acknowledgement that the ngunnhu is the one feature that sets the town apart from other centres in the region, such as Walgett and Bourke. To this end the tourism drawing power of the town and the long-term viability of a number of local businesses are directly linked to the future management of the fish traps. The next page shows an area marked as natural heritage, which is part of the Barwon River. Next page, on 27 November 1976 the National Parks and Wildlife Service added the Brewarrina fish traps to the Aboriginal Sites Register. Since then it has been registered on the service's New South Wales Aboriginal Information System, and on 11 August 2000 it was added to the New South Wales State Heritage Register.

The colour photos that follow were taken in 2009. They give you an indication of how the area was when the Brewarrina Business Centre took over the management of the area. In the front of that photograph is the bank of the river and the fish traps are above it. That picture is of what have become known as silt islands. Those islands build up over periods of time—they are now known as reeds or weeds—and they need to be eradicated on a regular basis. In 2009 that is how the area was on the side of the riverbank, and that was true right across the site. That was how we took it over from the State. Those islands have been fired and weeded on a number of occasions since then. Since then we have also had two major floods in that area. If you are looking at this photo here, the river came right over to here, up to here and all of that was under very high water. Now as it is going back you will see those areas of silt and weeds have again come back and they will need to be cleared. Part of the clearing process is to fire the weeds to ensure that it is safe for people to go in and clear—there is a photo demonstrating some of our local staff doing that—or to poison some of the weeds as well. They mark areas and clear areas at a time.

All of those skills have needed to be taught to local people and they still continue to be needed to be taught to local people. The training and education around the management of a significant conservation area, as you can imagine, is quite extensive. It is also quite important that you have the technical knowledge and expertise available to do that. We have been able to do that partly in partnership with Lion Nathan who formed a private partnership with us for the past five years. They have contributed to the training and brought in experts and done some of those training exercises for us. That partnership is about to conclude in the next 18 months and we will be looking at renewing it. I do not know whether they will be but certainly we will be looking for other private partnerships to enable that training and education to go ahead.

Again, if you look at the last photo, you can see the height of those weeds. Obviously that does not happen automatically; it does not happen overnight. But when you have flood areas that you cannot reach for periods of time, it does not take long before you are back in a situation where those things need work. Obviously a small community is limited.

The impact of no contributions, or low contributions, by the State Government to the management of those things is significant, not only for the community but also for the actual area itself. Everyone has agreed that it is a significant area, and everyone has agreed because a licence was given to the Aboriginal community via the business centre acknowledging that local Aboriginal people need to be involved in the management of that area. They look to be involved in the management of that area, but obviously they need some support in doing that. I realise that it is a little off the topic of this inquiry, but it is important to recognise. It is not the same as local government claims, but it is similar in the sense that there needs to be a recognition of the impact on local communities as a result of the management of these areas. That is not in any way trying to say that the local community does not want to manage it, quite the contrary. However, support and expertise are essential.

CHAIR: Who issued the licence to the organisation?

Ms MEDCALF: It came through the then Department of Lands.

CHAIR: While we were at Toorale we spoke to the area manager about the efforts to retain Indigenous trainees and to get them through the education requirements, which are more formal in a national park environment. Because it is a government entity it has to have certain levels of training. Have you developed any techniques that you call proprietary information with regard to how you go about retaining those skills, or is that not the intent? Is the intent to give them the skills and encourage them to go somewhere else?

Ms MEDCALF: The Brewarrina Business Centre has previously organised its training in the sense that if the people went then it lost the skills and knowledge. That is certainly not how we operate currently. We have worked closely with New South Wales museums on the Aboriginal Cultural Museum and with a range of national bodies, which bring in expertise. The idea is that we now develop our training and it stays in house and in the organisation.

CHAIR: Including what I call Indigenous intellectual property; in other words, the input from the local people about how it should be managed?

Ms MEDCALF: Absolutely. We are currently working with a group of local Aboriginal people on creating story boards that will then go into the town. They will go around the museum grounds. They are quite happy to share the knowledge provided it is presented in a particular fashion, which we are very mindful of and very respectful of.

CHAIR: The Committee was presented with two methods of cooperative management—the statutory method and the memorandum of understanding—in relation to the co-management of national parks. There is only one statutory example, but there are five or six memoranda of understanding. In your case, even though the area is relatively small, yours is a statutory arrangement whereby you are given a licence and you are responsible.

Ms MEDCALF: That is right.

CHAIR: You do not have landlords with the Department of Lands overseeing what you do. How do you set your goals? Do you have a written set of goals, objectives or outcomes?

Ms MEDCALF: We have had a conservation management plan in place since the beginning. That is a commercial document that we set out to implement from the beginning of the process.

CHAIR: And that is your own document?

Ms MEDCALF: Yes, it is. However, it was done in consultation with the community, a number of State Government departments and with local government at the time. The end result is the document that guides the management of the area itself. That has four or five main areas. It must involve training and education and environmental management of land and water. It must also involve passing on significant Aboriginal culture and it must have a cultural context.

CHAIR: For how long has this project been going?

Ms MEDCALF: We started with the licence in 2009 and it expires in November this year.

CHAIR: It seems a short period, only three years. That is stupid.

Ms MEDCALF: We have applied to extend.

CHAIR: Do you have an option or anything like that?

Ms MEDCALF: Not at the moment, but we have applied to extend.

CHAIR: To the Department of Lands?

Ms MEDCALF: Yes.

CHAIR: Do you believe that the model you have used has been successful, even though it has only been in operation for three years?

Ms MEDCALF: I might be incorrect. It might have been a five-year licence.

CHAIR: It is still a very short period.

Ms MEDCALF: Yes.

CHAIR: Do you believe that you now have evidence to demonstrate that the methodology has worked?

Ms MEDCALF: I believe that the Brewarrina Business Centre probably learned a few lessons along the way and that at the moment it is well placed to implement this plan and to provide that evidence.

CHAIR: It may not be tomorrow, but in another five years or in the future do you think that the business centre and/or similar ventures would be able to take that type of 100 per cent Indigenous management structure into managing national parks, provided they were of interest to the local people?

Ms MEDCALF: I believe that Aboriginal people already do that in other places. I think that in another 12 months there will be ample evidence in Brewarrina.

CHAIR: They do that in the Northern Territory.

Ms MEDCALF: That is right.

CHAIR: As I said, in the west it appears that only one of the seven arrangements is statutory. From a very brief reading of this it seems to be a really exciting model.

Ms MEDCALF: It is a very exciting model to work with. However, in another 12 months you will see significant results.

CHAIR: What sort of relationship do you have with local government in Brewarrina? Is it supportive or otherwise?

Ms MEDCALF: It is testing. That is probably the best way to describe it. I am a former State public servant and a former local government employee, so I understand—

CHAIR: The way it works.

Ms MEDCALF: Their shortcomings and the way they work. I also understand the calls on the public purse and resources, particularly in these areas. However, we are trying to develop a healthy relationship.

CHAIR: Is it intended that these fish traps will become a tourism attraction?

Ms MEDCALF: They are already.

CHAIR: That does not interfere with the cultural issues?

Ms MEDCALF: We have three Aboriginal staff who act as tour guides, not only in the museum but also at the fish traps, and that will continue.

CHAIR: Because it is a riverine environment and although it does not flood very often, would that be a major physical and potentially destructive issue? This environment must be continually maintained and worked, does it not?

Ms MEDCALF: Absolutely.

CHAIR: You cannot just leave it.

Ms MEDCALF: Absolutely not.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: That was the essential problem you faced; that is, over the past 35 years when the State Government had responsibility for the land it went to rack and ruin, not to put too fine a point on it.

Ms MEDCALF: Not to put too fine a point on it.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Thank you for appearing before the Committee today. I want a sense of the resources provided to the Brewarrina Business Centre. What did it mean in terms of resources when the centre became the trustee for the area? Are resources provided by the State Government? For example, what resources underpin your conservation management plan? You have mentioned Lion Nathan, and that is obviously a private partnership. What does the Government do?

Ms MEDCALF: Government supplies grants if we apply for them.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Through?

Ms MEDCALF: Through any of the programs that are available to anyone who is looking to maintain these sorts of areas.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: So it is through the environmental trusts or Caring for Country?

Ms MEDCALF: Any of them. We have had both Commonwealth and State government funding over the past five years in a range of areas.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: I assume that there is nothing formal once you actively bid to become a trustee for the land. After that, all responsibility other than through one-off grants for the upkeep, including resourcing, falls to the Brewarrina Business Centre?

Ms MEDCALF: That is why I am here.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: The previous question was about tourism. Does the State Government or the local council assist with any promotion in relation to the area?

Ms MEDCALF: The State Government has just included us on its top 10 sites to visit in the western region of New South Wales.

CHAIR: That is Tourism NSW?

Ms MEDCALF: Yes.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: That is a good. What specific recommendations does the Brewarrina Business Centre want? Do you have a dollar figure or a recommendation in terms of legislative change?

Ms MEDCALF: We do not have a dollar figure. However, I would suggest that the State Government, in particular, look at longer term grants. If we are looking at a long-term plan, it is important for us to have some certainty about the—

CHAIR: Funding?

Ms MEDCALF: Yes. Bearing in mind that we are a small organisation, we do not want to use resources every year applying for funding, chasing public servants and doing all the things you do to get grants. That takes up some of the resources that should be directed elsewhere. Triennial funding would be of benefit, not only for us but also for anyone who takes over the management of public land. Local government in Brewarrina gave the management of Weir Park, which is part of the Crown reserve area, to the Brewarrina Business Centre because it could not afford to do it any longer. The centre also manages the senior citizens' hall because local government could no longer afford to do it. There is a range of community facilities that are falling into local community organisation management because local government out here is struggling.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: That was a very interesting discussion. I have been through Brewarrina a number of times and have never known where to go to see the fish traps. Thank you for your explanation of it. You mentioned you have three Aboriginal tourist officers who work with the Brewarrina Business Centre. When you get tourists coming through, do they charge to show people where those fish traps are?

Ms MEDCALF: That is part of our venture. The aim of this process is to make the museum self-sustaining and to train local community people in how to do that. At the moment we have, as I said, three staff who act as tour guides. A proportion of that currently goes through the council because its visitor information centre does the bookings. That will not continue for very much longer because at the moment they are taking the lion's share of the costs and we are doing all the work. That is not my idea of how we want to run a business. So, we are in the process of shifting that at the moment. We are also in the process, as I said, of developing up stories. For anybody who has not been to Brewarrina, the museum, which is located on the reserve, consists of two domes which replicate traditional Aboriginal structures. The first dome has been closed for the last eight or nine years.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: That is on the corner of Darling Street and the highway?

Ms MEDCALF: That is correct. The second dome is the museum itself and it has been closed until recently when we were able to reopen it. The first dome is set up as a tourist shop. There are a number of local artefacts that we are currently gathering from local artists and the like, and they will be part of the whole process of trying to turn the museum into a self-sustaining business.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: What is your annual budget? I know you encompass a lot more than just the management of the fish traps. What sort of budget are you looking for for the management of the fish traps?

Ms MEDCALF: In the last year we probably had about \$135,000, which is not a great deal when you consider there are three staff. In other words, the rest of the organisation is subsidising that part of it.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Has the weir had any impact on the historic value of the site?

Ms MEDCALF: It has not had any impact on the historic value but it has had an impact on the site itself over the period of time. Currently, the Department of Primary Industries is putting in a fish ladder, which is an enormous structure, and it will have an impact most probably on the tourism that comes in.

CHAIR: Visually?

Ms MEDCALF: Yes, and people coming to look at the ladder, as they do in other parts of the country. When that is coupled with the fish traps and the museum it makes Brewarrina quite uniquely placed to attract some of those visitors.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: Is your long-term plan to return it to a pre-European or early colonisation look as it was or to maintain a historic ruin? What is your longer-term strategy?

Ms MEDCALF: The longer term strategy is to recreate—some of the rocks have been used previously by European settlers and some by Aboriginal people, but the integrity of the fish traps is still there. So, it is to

replace as much of the stonework as we can. The stones are local, still So it is a matter of identifying areas where we can replace some of that stonework. It is a unique structure in the country.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Is it the only one you are aware of?

Ms MEDCALF: It is the only one still in that particular condition that I am aware of, yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: I gather those two photos on those pages are pretty much the same spot?

Ms MEDCALF: Pretty much.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: In that old photo it almost looks as though there is an old rock weir where the site of the current concrete weir is. Was there construction of an old rock weir as part of the fish traps originally?

Ms MEDCALF: Not as far as I am aware. But because the structure had been in place across earlier, I think that was one of the reasons why the site for the weir was chosen. It is also on the bend of the river so it is quite a convenient place for it.

The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS: I would have to say it was a more effective structure before the government got involved in the management of it.

Ms MEDCALF: You might say that.

CHAIR: I am sure the Committee will have questions to send to you to get some more detail and to flesh out some of your recommendations. Are you prepared to accept questions?

Ms MEDCALF: I am happy to accept questions.

CHAIR: The normal practice is that we would like the answers back within 21 days of you receiving the questions.

Ms MEDCALF: Yes, that is fine.

(The witness withdrew)

(The Committee adjourned at 11.20 a.m.)