

GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE NO. 5

Wednesday 15 September 2004

Examination of proposed expenditure for the portfolio area

PRIMARY INDUSTRIES

The Committee met at 5.30 p.m.

MEMBERS

Mr I. Cohen (Chair)

The Hon. A. Catanzariti
The Hon. R. H. Colless
The Hon. D. J. Gay

The Hon. K. F. Griffin
Ms S. P. Hale
The Hon. H. S. Tsang

PRESENT

The Hon. I. M. Macdonald, *Minister for Primary Industries*

Department of Primary Industries

Mr B. Buffier, *Director-General*

Mr A. Coutts, *Deputy Director-General, Mineral Resources*

Mr A. Gleeson, *Executive Director, Corporate Services*

NSW Fisheries

Mr J. Gibson, *Departmental Liaison Officer*

Ms W. Stamp, *Executive Director, Policy, Co-ordination Unit*

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**

CHAIR: I declare this meeting open and I welcome everyone to this public hearing of General Purpose Standing Committee No. 5. I thank the Minister and departmental officers for attending today. At this meeting the Committee will examine the proposed expenditure for the portfolio areas of Primary Industries. We have discussed the matter and we will examine Agriculture and Forestry for the first hour and 20 minutes and then we will examine Fisheries for 40 minutes. Any Department of Primary Industries structural changes will be considered with Agriculture and Forestry. I appreciate that staffing issues are involved.

I point out that in accordance with the Legislative Council's guidelines for the broadcast of proceedings, which are available from the attendants and Committee clerk, only members of the Committee and witnesses may be filmed or recorded. People in the public gallery should not be the primary focus of any filming or photographs. In reporting the proceedings of this Committee the media must take responsibility for what it publishes or what interpretation it places on anything that is said before the Committee.

There is no provision for members to refer directly to their own staff while at the table. Members and their staff are advised that any messages should be delivered through the attendant on duty or the Committee clerk. For the benefit of members and Hansard, I ask departmental officials to identify themselves by name, position and department or agency before answering a question referred to them.

I declare this examination of proposed expenditure open. Minister, do you wish to make a brief opening statement?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: No.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, according to the mini-budget and the budget papers, \$37 million is to be cut from the Department of Primary Industries [DPI]. Will you give the Committee a breakdown of exactly where that money will be cut from?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: The financial restrictions forced upon us by the Commonwealth Government and the Commonwealth Grants Commission, which took \$350 million off the New South Wales budget—an outrageous impost on New South Wales—have forced all agencies to consider issues of savings. As part of the budget process the Department of Primary Industries has to find savings in the order of \$37 million. We will be happy to provide—I will take the question on notice—a break-up of that figure. Suffice it to say, \$20 million of that amount is to come from the Forestry side—Primary Industries trading—and \$17 million from Agriculture and Fisheries. We have a rigorous program in place to identify savings and we will roll that out progressively.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: The mini-budget and the budget indicated that a further \$37 million is to be cut next year. Will you give us a breakdown of where that money will come from? Do you expect a further bonus of \$20 million from Forestry next year as well?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will not be providing the Committee with any details of the budget next year. That will be the subject of discussions with the appropriate budget committees of Cabinet. I indicate that we will be releasing that in the next financial year.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Does that indicate that you have done no work in that area?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Because you say "A" it does not mean "B". I am saying to you that we will be looking at that issue in the course of budget discussions for next year.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: The mini-budget and the budget indicated cuts of \$37 million this year, \$37 million next year and \$58 million the year after. Have you cast your eye to the horizon and the \$58 million cut looming in two years, which comes on top of two consecutive cuts of \$37 million?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I think your figures are very inaccurate. But we will provide the Committee with details of estimates figures at this time next year—and, accordingly, the third year's figures will be provided the year after that.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, on what do you base your statement that my figures are inaccurate?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: For a start, you said that next year there is to be a cut of \$37 million; it is actually \$54 million.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: And the year after?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: It is \$58 million. So your figures are wrong.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: So they are less.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Your figures are wrong.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: The figures are less.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I said your figures are wrong.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: So you will have to cut more. Substituting your figures, have you done forward planning?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Sorry, what was that?

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Point of order: I believe the Minister for Primary Industries has answered that question at least twice already. If we are to continue in this fashion we will be here for a week.

CHAIR: I appreciate that Mr Catanzariti but the questions and answers have been quite short so far so we will allow the Minister to answer—as he was going to—and continue with the next question.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Could you repeat the question, Duncan?

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: As you said, Minister, the budget indicates that savings will be achieved of \$37 million this year. You corrected that to \$54 million next year and \$58 million the year after. They are your figures. Given that you must achieve those savings, have you put in place any forward planning as to how you will do that?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I always believe in forward planning but those figures will be the subject of Cabinet subcommittee budget analysis.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Believing in forward planning and actually doing something are two different things. Have you done any forward planning for the figures that are actually in the budget?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes, for figures that are actually in the budget. But, as I understand it, I am not required to reveal budget discussions for the next financial year to this Committee—and I do not intend to do so.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: How do you plan to make the extra saving of \$54 million next year and \$58 million the year after without cutting further staff?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will give you a little bit of a lesson on how the budget works. The \$37 million this year goes towards the \$54 million next year. So, taking the figure of \$54 million next year, one would only have to find additional savings in the order of \$17 million.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: No.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: No.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Absolutely.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: No, it is not. I will give you a lesson on budgets. That is not the situation.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: If you cut the current expenditure by \$37 million this year—whatever way you go about it—the following year the \$37 million is already saved. You only have to find an additional \$17 million.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: No.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: That is correct.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Do you envisage being able to help your budget figures by the sale of an extra \$20 million worth of timber in the following year?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: No. Again, the issue of how I will manage the second year's savings programs will be the subject of a subcommittee of Cabinet.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: I refer you to the \$20 million worth of extra timber that you are selling this year. How was that figure arrived at?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: It was arrived at through discussion by a subcommittee of Cabinet.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Where did you find sales of an extra \$20 million worth of timber this year that was not around last year? Where did you find the extra timber to be sold?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: That is easy. It is not all about selling timber. There are opportunities for increasing revenue from new forest products, revision of pricing and charges for some services, reduction of some services, voluntary staff reductions and realignment of operational business locations.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: So how much of that sum is coming from the sale of timber?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I have never said that that is coming from so-called "sales".

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: But you did, Minister.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: No, I said—

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Yes, you did, in *The Land*.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: No, I said it is dividends.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: In *The Land* on 5 August 2004 you said that you would only have to cut \$17 million from the DPI because of the sale of an extra \$20 million worth of timber. They are your words, not mine.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take that question on notice.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: How much is coming from the sale of timber?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I said I will take the question on notice.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: So you will give us a detailed answer about the figures that you used to arrive at this \$20 million figure?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: We will provide an appropriate answer to your question.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: No. You said that you would give me an answer on the details. Are you reneging on that?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I said that I will provide you with an appropriate answer.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Minister, has the department received the money from the proceeds of the sale of the Shannon Vale research station at Glen Innes?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Can you tell the Committee where that money is? What is it being used for? How is it split up? What is happening to it?

Mr GLEESON: The department has permission from Treasury to apply that to payments involved in the amalgamation. So that has gone into our recurrent budget.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: So it has gone into recurrent funding and it is not being used to upgrade other research facilities.

Mr GLEESON: No, not the Shannon Vale one.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: So it has gone into redundancies.

Mr GLEESON: Part of it could be used for redundancies, part of it could be used for operating and part of it could be used for salaries.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Minister, did you not give an undertaking that money from the sale of these facilities would be re-channelled into improving research facilities at other research stations?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will have to take on notice that question in relation to Shannon Vale. I add that Shannon Vale was done well before the amalgamation and the release of the 20:20 vision program that I announced at New South Wales Farmers. Shannon Vale was an earlier sale.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: During examination of Treasury estimates earlier in the week I asked the Treasurer what happens with the proceeds of the sale of assets and he said that they come back to Treasury.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I do not know what he was talking about there. However, we have an understanding that the sale of assets will be directed towards our research program.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Do you have that in writing?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Can you provide us with a detailed copy of that?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: For \$25 million of asset sales, yes, we have that in writing.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: That indicates that you are selling \$25 million worth of assets?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: We hope so—our plans are to do that—of surplus and assets that are not being fully utilised and it will be directed into upgrading our research facilities.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Recently you appointed a new director-general. Was the position advertised?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: No.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Why not?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I felt that we had an appropriate person who could do the job and, as I am able to under the Act, I appointed that person.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: So there were no other applicants?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: As I say, it was not advertised. He was appointed in accordance with public sector guidelines on 1 July 2004. He was appointed that way, yes.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Mr Buffier, what was your position at Westpac?

Mr BUFFIER: I was not at Westpac at that point in time. I had previously been with Westpac.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Did you approach the Minister or did the Minister approach you?

Mr BUFFIER: No, I did not approach the Minister.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I approached Mr Buffier.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: You knew Mr Buffier was sitting around?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: No.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: What circumstances led you to approach Mr Buffier?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Mr Buffier has an impressive record, having been Deputy Director-General of the Department of Agriculture. He was National Business Manager of Westpac Agribusiness for a number of years and was a member of a number of important Commonwealth and State committees. I was impressed by his work. I did not know he was available. It came to my attention that he might be available and I approached him, and I am very glad that I did.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: So Premier's told you that you had to appoint him?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Certainly not. It never came from Premier's.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: When was Mr Buffier first appointed to the role?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: On 1 July 2004.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Does Mr Buffier have a performance agreement?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: He would. It is being developed at the moment.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Is this unusual?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I am not aware that it is or is not unusual. The aim was to have someone in place by 1 July 2004 who could competently conduct him or herself as director-general of the amalgamated departments. I proceeded, upon the announcement, some time after the mini-budget, to find someone who would be able to do the job.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: So you bypassed your existing directors-general who you did not think were up to the standard of the new task?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: That is absolutely outrageous. It does not imply—

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Why did you not appoint one of them?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I am not obliged to appoint any particular person.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: If you do not think they are up to the task, you have kept them on?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: That is outrageous.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Is it wrong?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: That is outrageous. Every one of the directors-general is competent and could do the job of director-general, there is no question of that.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: When did Mr Buffier first begin his duties as director-general?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: On 1 July 2004.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: On what salary level is Mr Buffier?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Mr Buffier is a level 8, senior executive officer, with a remuneration package of \$370,000 per annum. It is subject to adjustment in accordance with relevant Statutory and Other Offices Remuneration Tribunal determinations.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: What date was the briefing of the proposed work force management plan of the Department of Primary Industries?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: It is around 26 or 27 June.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: And Mr Buffier started when?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: On 1 July.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Why did he brief staff at that meeting?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: He was present at the meeting on my instruction and, as he was commencing in the near future, he would be conducting the whole process, and I thought it was prudent and wise that he attend.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Who is responsible for making decisions to co-locate or relocate offices of the Department of Primary Industries [DPI] under the proposed work force management plan?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: As I understand it, it would be the director-general.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Why and how were Grafton, Gosford, Temora and Deniliquin agricultural research facilities originally selected for closure under this plan?

Mr GLEESON: There were a number of reasons. The reasons for each were different but essentially they have been outlined in the work force management plan. Essentially, the basic underlying reason for each was that we could do the job of the DPI in front of us without those assets. We had enough capacity throughout our other assets and what we wanted to do was to increase the utility of the assets that we had and reduce the maintenance burden overall while still maintaining services.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Could you give me the reasons for each of them?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take that on notice. By the way, the work force plan was developed and adopted by the interim board of management that was in place at the time.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Can you indicate when you will be making a decision on the future of those stations?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: No.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Will you be fulfilling your obligation of a moratorium until November, as detailed at the New South Wales Farmers conference?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will be making the decision in good and proper order and good and proper time.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: I ask the question again: Will you be adhering and honouring the undertaking you gave at the New South Wales Farmers conference when you spoke at that conference that there will be a moratorium until November this year?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I always honour my commitments.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: That is a yes.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Thank you, Minister. I take it that that is a yes?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: No, I honour my commitments.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Well, that is a yes.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Can you tell me if honouring your commitments is anything but a yes?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will be honouring my commitments.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Do I take that as a fact that you will not be honouring your commitments and that is a no?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I think, as usual, you will take it whatever way you like, which is the way you have acted on just about every issue that comes up. So you go and say whatever you like in a press release. I do not mind.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: You have a portfolio that represents regional New South Wales, an area of the State that is doing it tough at the moment, an area that has a tradition of giving their word and sticking to it, an area that has a tradition of Ministers for Agriculture who stick up for their department. At the New South Wales Farmers conference you gave your word that there would be a moratorium on the closure of these agricultural stations until November. Yes or no, will you stick to your word?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Take it whatever way you like. I will be sticking to my word. [*Time expired.*]

CHAIR: Minister, are you aware that the number of threatened fauna and flora species that Forests NSW are finding prior to logging is declining each year? Could that be due to poor survey effort or is reduction in threatened species due to ongoing loss of habitat in Forests NSW?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take that on notice, but I have not heard of that information at all.

CHAIR: How much money or indirect benefits such as travel expenses has Forests NSW provided to groups who are signatories of the Ourimbah protocol since its inception? Was there any sort of open tendering process for this money?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take that on notice.

CHAIR: Are you aware whether Forests NSW has been purchasing logs from private property and on-selling them?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes, we are contracting, that is true.

CHAIR: Forests NSW estimates the area of camphor laurel in the Northern Rivers is about 70,000 hectares. How was that figure derived?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will have to take that on notice as well.

CHAIR: Has Forests New South Wales undertaken a cost-benefit analysis of the logging of camphor laurel forests in the Byron Bay region?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: A trial is under way.

CHAIR: Is a cost benefit analysis a part of that trial?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes, it would have to be.

CHAIR: Can you provide that information to the Committee?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes, certainly. I will take that on notice.

CHAIR: Does the analysis indicate that the cost of poisoning, logging and chipping camphor laurels for so-called green energy far exceed the financial return?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I am not aware of that. I will take that on notice as well.

CHAIR: Has Forests NSW undertaken an energy audit to determine whether the energy inputs into logging, chipping and transporting camphor laurels chips to Broadwater and Condong exceed the energy outputs?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take that on notice.

CHAIR: Is there any net gain in saving greenhouse causing pollution?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Of the camphor laurel? I will have to get that information for you.

CHAIR: Are you aware that the actual resolution agreed at the last Gene Technology Grains Committee meeting was not an acceptance of protocols but an acknowledgment that outstanding issues have been passed to the canola reference group, which has not yet met to resolve the outstanding issues?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: No, I am not aware of that last resolution. I will take that on notice.

CHAIR: Is it wise to test co-existence principles that have not yet addressed the outstanding issues?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I would have to look at the specifics of that to answer.

CHAIR: Would you agree with the principle that non-GM growers are expected to keep GM out of their crops rather than the GM grower keeping GM crops contained?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I would have thought that the protocols that were being discussed at that time would have been putting a lot of the onus upon the actual grower to ensure the integrity of their crops.

CHAIR: What protection is there for those neighbouring farmers who choose to be non-GE in the regime that your Government is looking at?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I guess there are a number of protections. It could vary from liability insurance, and common law could be sought to seek redress. There were a number of provisions in place which the Commonwealth has approved in releases made by Mr Truss and others over the last few years in which they indicated that those mechanisms are available to growers to seek redress.

CHAIR: Were you aware that the Australian Competition and Consumer Council has confirmed that in order to market as GM-free or non-GM, no contamination is accepted, as it would be a breach of the Trade Practices Act to label a contaminated product non-GM?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: If that is the case then that survey taken of organic corn chips and other products where they found that in virtually every example of organic product, the GM-free factor broke the protocols with GM product in their organic product. Yes, it is an issue of concern and it should be addressed.

CHAIR: Have you been advised by the committee that the coexistence plans that they intend to test use definitions that do not comply with law as contamination of up to 0.9 per cent is expected to be tolerated in non-GM crops, when it would not be legal?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: The 0.9 per cent is the European protocol, as I understand it. I will take advice on the rest of your question.

CHAIR: Do you consider coexistence GM crops and non-GM crops is possible to a zero tolerance level?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I doubt whether, in this world, you can get zero tolerance with anything, but I believe it is possible to ensure the integrity of crops. We do that currently with a range of crops where very specific markets demand that certain varieties and certain levels of protein and contamination are very important aspects of the contracts we sign, and we appear to be able to do it with up to 27 varieties of wheat and a number of other grains. So, I think in theory, it is possible to segregate various products, not only GM and non-GM.

CHAIR: Do you consider a large-scale coexistence trial will allow New South Wales to maintain a guaranteed GM-free status?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I think trial and research are acceptable. I have not seen where a trial would ever impact upon so-called GM-free status.

CHAIR: Who would guarantee the maintenance of a GM-free status?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will ask the question the other way. Who is making the decision whether you are GM-free or not GM-free?

CHAIR: You are the Minister, and I am asking the question, rather than the other way round.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: No, I am not playing around with words.

CHAIR: No, rather than the other way round.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: You are asking: Would we lose GM-free status? I am not aware that we have GM-free status.

CHAIR: Do we not have GM-free status at the present time?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Is it the World Trade Organisation that says we have GM-free status? Who is saying this?

CHAIR: Logically perhaps, if we have not produced genetically modified crops in open areas in these types of industries, that means that currently we have GM-free status.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I do not know really what you are talking about. Who gives us GM-free status? Is it some international organisation, or is it Greenpeace?

CHAIR: I would have thought this was something you were well across before we embark on that direction. I believe there is a reasonable way to assess status.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I would have thought you could not claim that New South Wales is GM-free, given the fact that we produce a considerable quantity of cottonseed oil from GM-derived product that is used for human consumption in every fish and chip shop in New South Wales and around the country. So I do not know what you mean when you say New South Wales has GM-free status. We certainly are not GM-free.

CHAIR: On that issue of cottonseed oil, we have a certain level of quality control over food products. Do we have a similar quality control with cottonseed oil in the fact that we have a crop on which pesticide is used, and in certain circumstances has Ingard cotton, which is a GE product grown for material production? Does that guarantee that cottonseed oil for human consumption is assured of having the same level of control as other food products?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I have not ever heard of any complaints about the quality of oil derived from GM cottonseed oil. I have never heard of one complaint—other than some ideologically based complaints.

CHAIR: In terms of complaints, are people aware that that is what they are consuming? Is the end product something that the consumer is well aware of?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: You could address that question to the national labelling authority that looks at those issues.

CHAIR: If I could go on to water saving in irrigated crops. What progress is being made in the introduction of water-saving technologies in irrigated crops such as rice and cotton?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: As you would be aware, there has been a lot of progress over recent years in terms of improving the water usage as compared with output. You referred to the rice industry. Which was the other? I believe you said rice. There have been considerable improvements made. I am trying to recall the figures. If my memory serves me well, there has been a 50 per cent improvement over the past 10 years in the output consumption of water. That has been brought about by absolutely excellent research that is being done into getting better varieties, as well as laser levelling and better usage of water on farm and the return of water into the cycle. I think the rice industry is in fact a triumph of good research and good farming practice, such that there has been a dramatic reduction in the demand on water over the past 10 years.

CHAIR: What action have you or your department taken to rehabilitate the hundreds of old cattle dip sites in northern New South Wales that are threatening the water quality of countless streams and rivers?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: We will take that question on notice because it is a fairly specific question. We are doing work in that area, and I will give you the details.

CHAIR: Similarly, could you tell the Committee what program the Department of Primary Industries has in place to reduce the runoff of sulphuric acid from acid sulfate soils?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take the question on notice and give you the details of our program in that area.

CHAIR: Could you indicate as well the effectiveness of the program?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Some of it has been absolutely effective. I have looked at sites on the North Coast where we have worked with farmers to reduce sulfate soil. Our fisheries department in particular has done a lot of work in that area to improve fishing habitat in some of the rivers, and that has involved work on reducing acid sulfate soils.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Minister, do you have confidence in your GM advisory council?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Absolutely.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: How often have you met with them?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I do not think I have had a meeting with them. I have met the Chair a couple of times.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Do you receive reports from the committee?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Why are the deliberations of the committee confidential?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: This is usual practice when there are considerable commercial issues involved. Proponents obviously have considerable IP that they believe should be protected. The advice to me is not made public. I believe the committee should operate on a confidential basis—rather than being turned into a circus, as it occasionally has been by one or two members who walk straight out of the committee room, do interviews with the press, and go back in and out. I believe many of our committees—not just this committee—operate on a confidential basis, to encourage a proper flow of information between the members, particularly when one is dealing with areas that are potentially so important on a commercial basis.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Will any parts of those reports ever be released?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take that question on notice. I have not considered that issue.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Last November you told Parliament, "This trial was designed to test the stewardship program and protocols developed over the past year or so to ensure that genetically modified canola can be segregated from non-GM canola in the on-farm and post-farm handling and transport chain." Are you aware that the Gene Technology Grains Committee is not calling for coexistence plan protocols, only principles?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I am not going to get into a debate about whether principles and protocols in the end have all that much difference. Suffice to say that I believe any trial, if it occurred, would have to be conducted under terms and conditions that ensure the integrity of that trial.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Surely there is a difference between principles and protocols. Protocols provide for a specific set of criteria that have to be observed, whereas principles are just generalised statements.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Protocols or principles, what I have seen is a very detailed document that covers just about everything one is meant to do to protect the integrity of the trial. It goes for many pages.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: What evidence do you have that the details of the coexistence principles have been relayed to farmers and approved by the farming community?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I believe they a lot of information has been made public over the past year or two on how the trials should be conducted, and how they occur. The information would be quite public. As you know, the Federal Office of the Gene Technology Regulator trials are always on the GPS. The co-ordinates are public. You could drive your four-wheel-drive right onto the property and onto the site of those trials. They are not secret trials. Nor would they be in New South

Wales. I believe if we did have trials, it would be very much incumbent upon the companies and the growers to inform their neighbours of what they are doing.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Are you aware of the percentage of market production that the organic sector has in Europe and the United States of America?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I am sorry, in Australia?

Ms SYLVIA HALE: The production of organic crops in Europe and the United States of America. Do you know the percentage of production?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I do not know the specific percentage, but there are reasonable markets in all countries for organic produce.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: It is my understanding that in both Europe and the United States of America it is about 10 per cent. Would you know what percentage of production in New South Wales is organic?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I can only go on the surveys that have been conducted through retail outlets, and I thought it was in the order of 7 per cent of product is classified as organic for one reason or another, if my memory serves me correctly.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Presumably, it is in its relatively early stages here. Minister, what are you doing to ensure that farmers are aware of the increasing market opportunities in organic produce? And what are you doing to assist farmers to fulfil market expectations?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: We are supporting the CRC on organics, as a partner. We conduct research at Bathurst. We have an organic farming section there. If I recall correctly, I think we have a number of publications in relation to organic farming. So, yes, where possible, the department is assisting organic farming.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Could I ask you some questions on the Game Council?

CHAIR: One question, and then you are out of time. We may come back if there is time.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: It might be best to deal with them as a block.

CHAIR: Do Government members have any questions? No. Mr Gay or Mr Colless, would you like to ask some questions?

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Minister, are you aware of a program at the Glen Innes research station called the Glen Innes long-term rotation trial?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Are you aware how long that trial has been operating?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Some time, as I understand it. I read about it just the other day.

Mr BUFFIER: I think it is 30 or 40 years.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: It is 30 or 40 years.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: In fact, I think it is a lot longer than that, Mr Buffier. I think it is about 70 years that it has been in operation. As I understand, it was first put in place to monitor land degradation as a result of long-term crop rotation-crop management practices, and that that is what has been happening for the last 70 years. The other day I heard on the grapevine that the department was going to close down that trial. Is that a fact?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I have not heard that.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Will you give an undertaking that that trial will not be closed down?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I do not know if I can give any specific undertaking, but I will certainly take that question on notice and give you the appropriate answer.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: I would be very pleased if you would have a careful look at that because it has some extremely important historical data associated with the land degradation processes, as I am sure you are well aware I know a little bit about.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: And it would be a great shame if that trial were closed down in the interests of saving a few thousand dollars a year, given the long history there and the potential in the future for it to look at ways of rehabilitating land that has been degraded by the effects of long-term farming practices.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I am happy to take your representation on board and come back to you with an appropriate answer, but you are making a very strong case.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Thank you for that. Are you aware that if the Grafton Agricultural Research and Advisory Station were to close, that would see the end basically of beef cattle research in the North Coast area of New South Wales.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I do not necessarily believe that is the case. One thing you have to try to get in focus these days is the enormous amount of research we do in co-operating partnerships with farmers across the State. In fact, on the cropping side we have 43,000 plots on 795 farms. There are opportunities to conduct research in a way that utilises the services of farms. I will just say a couple of things in relation to it. The Grafton Agricultural Research and Advisory Station [ARAS] is one of two locations for North Coast farming systems research and extension. In 2003-04 Grafton ARAS cost \$2.14 million to run, with only 6 per cent of those funds coming from industry research and development corporations. In other words, the vast bulk of the money came from the department and only 6 per cent of it came from industry.

The proposal to rationalise activities at Grafton that was put forward through the work force plan by the interim board of management in May was based around the completion of research on beef cattle genetics, the major user of the Grafton land resource. If the new Armidale beef co-operative research centre is successful, land to run beef herds would be available at Glen Innes and Total. Both these locations are more appropriate centres for the beef industry, which is the rationale put forward by the interim board of management in the work force plan as its reasons in relation to that program in Grafton.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Earlier you indicated that previous money from the sale of Shannon Vale had been used to pay voluntary redundancies from the great departmental staff. Will any of the future money generated from the potential sale of land also be used to pay voluntary redundancies?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: No. Could you just read the first part of that question for Mr Gleeson, who also wants to say something about it. No, the voluntary redundancy [VR] money is not coming from any sales.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Not from any sales?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Not from any sales.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: That is the basis of this question. Mr Gleeson answered the previous question at an earlier time. How many Department of Primary Industries [DPI] staff have accepted voluntary redundancy so far?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: The process is still under way. I think that staff are to respond by 8 October. I do not have a figure on me on acceptances at this point.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Can you detail the particular positions that will be lost in the DPI, given that the budget papers indicate that 325 positions are expected to be cut from the department this year?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I have made it clear on a many occasions that in terms of front-line staff there would be a minimal impact, and in fact that has been the guiding hand that has worked through the department's consideration of the number of expressions of interest that we have received from staff. We are determined to make sure that we keep a strong front-line service, particularly in the extension side, in the field right across the State. That has played a very important part in evaluating whether to proceed with certain expressions of interest or not.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: What is the total cost of the voluntary redundancies expected to be?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I do not have a figure on that, but Treasury has agreed to fund the voluntary redundancies.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: You must have.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: We do not have a figure, no.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: You must have an idea. You cannot have Treasury tell you that you are going to take 325 people out and not have a figure.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: No. I do not particularly have a figure. You have to remember that the VRs related to staff on a wide variation of salaries, and we will evaluate that once we get the returns in on 8 October. At this point in time, on the basis of salaries—that is, of those who are going to accept—you cannot work out that figure.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Treasury is paying for the redundancies?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Correct.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Out of your budget?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: No.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Out of a separate budget?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Out of Treasury funds, yes.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Could you draw our attention, not at this stage but at some other stage, to where that sum of money appears in Treasury figures?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will provide the details, yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Is it a fact that a number of DPI agronomist positions are currently vacant throughout the State?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes, there are two or three. I have a specific answer on this so I will be able to give you some information in relation to it. From time to time, as I say, like all organisations there is some turnover of staff. For instance, the agronomist we had at Walgett, if my memory serves me correctly, has gone to work for private industry, necessitating change there. People have been moving in and out of positions. As some staff have vacated positions it is vital that appropriate processes are followed so that we can be sure to get the best people for any particular job at any particular time. The department is currently considering responses from staff and stakeholders

to proposals in late June for changes to its structure and staff to help achieve cost savings. There are a number of particular positions. Front-line positions are what you are talking about, the agronomists?

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Yes.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: The department has a longstanding policy of offering existing skilled staff the opportunity to relocate to vacant positions. When this approach creates vacancies then further recruitment action commences. I can assure the member that we are in the process of filling vacant positions, and where those vacant positions have arisen we have put temporary, alternative arrangements in place whilst we fill those positions.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: You mentioned Walgett. That will be refilled?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes. They have been advertised.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Moree?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Walgett and Moree West, both of those positions have been advertised, with interviews held during August.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Okay. I accept that.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I am pleased to announce that the successful applicants have accepted an offer from the department and will take up these positions shortly.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Singleton?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I do not have specific information about Singleton, but you can rest assured—

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: It will be refilled?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: It will be filled under the same formula.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Scone?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I am not sure about Scone, either. You are talking agronomists?

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Agronomists, yes.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes, we would fill front-line positions.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Wellington?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Mr Greg Brooke, who is highly regarded and who has had considerable experience as district agronomist in Nyngan, has accepted the position at Wellington, and will commence work in Wellington shortly.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Are you also expecting retirements or resignations from agronomists in Tamworth and Inverell later this year?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I would have to take that on notice.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: And if they do will those positions also be refilled?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: They are front-line positions.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: They will be refilled?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Could I just turn briefly to the Brigalow Belt South Bioregion, which I am sure you are aware of?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: What is the current status of the comprehensive regional assessment of the Brigalow Belt South Bioregion?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: The Government has agreed to maintain a moratorium on the harvesting of timber from certain compartments in State forests in the western region pending its decision arising from the Brigalow Belt South and Nandewar assessments. At the same time the Government has given an assurance that timber supplies to local mills will be maintained. If Forests New South Wales considers access to moratorium compartments is essential to maintain timber supplies to local mills and there are no alternatives, Forests New South Wales may put its case for obtaining access to the independent resource and conservation division of the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources for a ruling.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: The Rt Hon. Ian Sinclair has prepared a report on behalf of the Government for that. Can you make that report public?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I would have to take advice on that.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Can you advise the Committee of recommendations and the likely economic implications to the communities that rely on the resource that are in the report?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I have not actually read the report. The Government's position is being co-ordinated by the Minister for Natural Resources.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: The Minister for Natural Resources said that it was your role.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: No. As I understand it, he said forestry is now under my responsibility.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: That is why we are asking you.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: But he is still, as I understand it, co-ordinating the process of the development of a park in that area.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: When do you expect to make a decision on it? It has been outstanding for some three years now and the people up in that region are getting extremely frustrated with no decision.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: These are very difficult issues, as you can appreciate. They combine a whole lot of different social, economic and environmental factors. The Government is not going to rush into making a decision in this area.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: It certainly has not done that.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: And is carefully assessing the various approaches and will make a decision in good time.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: In relation to the privatisation of the softwood plantation, what is the current status of the scoping study being carried out by ABN Amro?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: My colleague the Minister for Transport Services, Minister for the Hunter, and Minister Assisting the Minister for State Development is co-ordinating the privatisation and scoping study issues.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Who is that?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Mr Costa is co-ordinating the approach. Discussions are being conducted with stakeholders, and in good time the Government will make some decision in relation to it.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: You have DPI, but he has the privatisation part of it?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: He has carriage of it. I, of course, have a raft of opinions on the issue, but I guess you could probably address such questions to him.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: You would not want to burden us with your opinions on it?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: No, I do not want to take up your question time.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: How many jobs have been cut or left unfilled within the Trangie Agricultural Research Station over the past nine years?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Sorry, how many?

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Jobs have been cut or left unfilled within the Trangie Agricultural Research Station over the past nine years?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I think I will have to take that on notice.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: That is fine.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Suffice to say that at last brush I think there was something over 50 staff at Trangie, and just to reiterate there has never been any suggestion within the work force plan that was given to the unions and staff that there would be any closure of the actual research station.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: The figures we would be interested in are those for the research offices because that is exactly what happened at Shannon Vale research station.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take it on notice.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: The number of research offices there were bled dry until no research was being done there, and we are concerned that that might happen at some of the other research stations.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: It might be a good thing for The Nationals at some point to approach industry leaders and convince them to put some more dollars into research at some of our research centres, such as Trangie and others.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: It would be nice to see a Government commitment, too.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: It would be good because the Government has committed several million dollars.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, you could start with 37, 54 and 58 over the next three years. That would be a good start.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Well, I do not think it would affect much in relation to these issues, my friend.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: How many positions in the Dubbo Department of Primary Industries office have been cut or left unfilled over the past two years?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take that on notice.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: How many jobs have been cut or positions left unfilled within the Deniliquin Agricultural Research and Advisory Station?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take that on notice. Is that over the past nine years too?

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Yes.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: They are all nine-year studies?

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Yes.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Okay.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, how many jobs have been cut or left unfilled within the Gosford Agricultural Research and Advisory Station over the past nine years?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take that on notice.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, what has been the extra cost in establishing the new so-called strong executive management team within the Department of Primary Industries?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I am not aware that there is any extra cost. I might add that we have done a very good job of reducing our senior executive service [SES] by 20 per cent, so you would be very pleased with this endeavour.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: What is the average salary range of the seven members of the executive management team?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take that on notice.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Was the \$657,350 New South Wales ovine Johne's disease [OJD] abattoir surveillance program cut back to the generic animal disease management program budget of \$30,000 after the New South Wales OJD management program began on 1 July?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: It was how much money, did you say?

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: It was \$657,350 cut back to \$30,000.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take that specific on notice. The answer I have here is somewhat more general.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: I want to go back to the issue of the softwood plantations and the ABN AMRO report. Do you have any idea what the cost of that study was?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I have not seen any paperwork in that direction, I am afraid, but I will take the question on notice.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Can you tell us if ABN AMRO structured its report to the Government in such a way that it could expect to collect massive returns by overseeing the preparation for sale and sale of the plantation assets?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I think that the scoping study that you are referring to was actually conducted under the auspices of Treasury. I think your questions would probably be better placed to the Treasurer.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: What is the estimated return to the Government if the sale proceeds? Can you give us some idea of that?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: How long is a piece of string? I will have to take that on notice.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, I draw your attention to budget estimates in Budget Paper No. 2, Volume 2, under 51.1 Agriculture. Under "Operating Statement" for the year 2003-04, there is \$1.047 million for rural financial counsellors with a revised figure, quite appropriately, of \$1.497 million.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I am sorry, can you give the reference again so that we can get it?

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: On page 15-15, under 51.1 Agriculture, "Operating Statement", there is a figure for rural financial counsellors.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes. I follow now. You are going to ask me why there is a decrease, or something of that nature?

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Yes.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Well, I am pleased that you have asked me that question because in my draft press release earlier this week, I announced another \$825,000.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: That is why I am asking you the question.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: In fact, it takes our contribution higher than the Commonwealth's contribution.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: But, Minister, your new contribution on top of that still has you below last year's.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: How? Last year was revised.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Yes.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Actual.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Yes.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: And was \$1.497 million. For the budget 2004-05, it is \$1.068 million. If you add \$825,000 to that, that is in fact nearly \$1.9 million, which is an increase of \$500,000 over the actual expenditure last year.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: That is fair. I have been misled. You are allowed to get one.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I feel relieved.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Yes, Minister. As one of the functions of the Game Council is to make recommendations to the Government on the gazettal of public lands for hunting, can you inform the Committee if any land has been gazetted?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: No. I did not think there was, but—that is right; there is none.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: You say that no land has been gazetted. Can you explain to the Committee what is the hold-up, and what land is being considered for gazettal?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take that on notice.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Has State Forests not yet agreed to its land being used by shooters?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: No.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: It has not?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: No.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Is your department involved in any ongoing talks with State Forests in this regard?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes, there are talks.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: When do you anticipate a decision being made?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I do not have that answer. I do not see it in the immediate future.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Do you want to take that on notice?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes, I will take it on notice, but I add to that that any decision by Primary Industries Trading or Forests New South Wales to proceed with anything would be on the basis of some trials to work out all the various issues that have to be addressed.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: When shooters are given access to State forests, who will cover the insurance for members of the public who could be injured by shooters?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Clearly there would have to be an insurance policy taken out.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: By whom?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Lots of groups take it out. I presume the Sporting Shooters Association could get involved in it or the Game Council could try to get a policy. There could be a number of things. I will take that on notice, but there would have to be a policy in place.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Could you provide the names of the 16 members of the Game Council?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: You will take that on notice, I presume?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: How many people are being employed by the Game Council? What are their positions?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take that on notice.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: How many people have applied for game licences?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I do not think we are at that stage, as yet. I do not have how many. It is fairly recent.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: You will take that on notice?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: How many people have applied to become licence distributors?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I do not know. I will take that on notice.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Has the Government received any revenue, as yet, from game licences?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Not to my knowledge.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: If not, do you have any expectation as to how much you are likely to receive?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: No, I do not.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: So there is no indication?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: As I understood it, any funds raised would go to sustain the organisation itself. It is not a tax.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Would you be able to provide the Committee with the projected revenue stream from game licences for the next five years?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: And also indicate what the revenue will be used for?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will endeavour to obtain such, yes.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Do you anticipate that the Game Council and its staff will be funded from the sale of licences?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I think that was the intention of the construction of the Game Council—that it would be self-funding.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Finally, what wildfowl can be hunted by shooters who have game licences?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Well, I think this is subject to various negotiations, but the major potential was ducks down in the rice regions.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: But you can be a bit more specific than that, presumably, can you?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes, I can. I will give you the details.

CHAIR: Minister, how does that accord with the legislation that was passed by this Parliament that effectively banned duck shooting in New South Wales?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: My understanding was that it banned the duck season. However, there have been licences issued by the National Parks and Wildlife Service in the past for duck mitigation in irrigation areas in the Riverina, and that has been operating for a number of years. Your friend and fellow Byron Bay resident has raised this issue on numerous occasions.

CHAIR: I am sure his presence is still felt, at least on behalf of ducks.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Indeed.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Half the ducks he brought in were not shot. They had died of natural causes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Old age?

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: No—the shock of being confronted by Richard Jones.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: There is a very ordered system in place for duck mitigation work around the irrigation areas and there is a quota worked out after considerable research to estimate population and what the quota could be.

CHAIR: In terms of that culling or mitigation, as you call it, on private lands in the rice growing areas, what sort of checking is undertaken in terms of threatened and endangered species and assessment of the type of animal that is actually mitigated?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: There are very, very solid protocols in place, including identification programs. It is run by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, or the National Parks Service, as it is called now.

CHAIR: Is there direct policing of that?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I think you would have to refer the question to my colleague the Minister for the Environment for the precise details.

CHAIR: Minister, I will just briefly go back to genetically engineered crops. What investigations has New South Wales Agriculture undertaken on the relationship between the commonly used herbicide glyphosate and the increasing incidence of fusarium wilt, especially in genetically engineered Roundup Ready crops, such as cotton and canola, and also wheat in North America?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take that on notice.

CHAIR: Has overseas scientific research showed that glyphosate encourages progress of fusarium because its application can lead to a selection of some soil microflora over others, leading to a change in the balance of microflora in treated soils?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take that on notice.

CHAIR: Are you aware of this as a problem, or is this something that your department is not aware of?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I am not across the detail of that particular issue.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Someone in your department should be, surely.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: We will get the material for you, if it exists.

CHAIR: Perhaps you could also tell me what economic and environmental impacts the spread of fusarium will have on crops, such as cotton, canola and wheat? Would the impacts be more severe if New South Wales allows more GE Roundup Ready crops, such as canola, to be planted, with the subsequent increased use of glyphosate? If not, why not?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I would have thought that the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator [OGTR], in providing a licence for any GM product, would take into account all those issues. In fact, I have seen them discussed in great detail in the reports. As you are quite aware, the national protocol is that the Commonwealth address the health and environmental issues and the States' role in the question of GE crops is in fact one of assessing the marketing and impact on agriculture in a particular State. That was determined some time back and legislated for by the Commonwealth. As a consequence, the emphasis on the environmental research is conducted under the auspices of the OGTR, but I will see what is available in relation to this matter. I am sure that if it was an issue, you could probably dial up the OGTR web site and probably find thousands of pages on any particular topic—something that I encourage members who have views in relation to these issues to do on all occasions, so that they may be well and truly informed.

CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Those with concerns on the advisory committee are a minority. Will you accept a majority vote to approve trials, if the minority can prove that the

coexistence plans will not allow coexistence and some sectors of industry will be faced with unmanageable problems? Do you not approve additional costs and liabilities?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I would tend to suggest that majority votes are an important factor in any consideration of advice I receive. In the end I will make my own decision.

CHAIR: Who should compensate those concerns?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Compensate the committee?

CHAIR: Compensate those who are affected?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: According to the Commonwealth documentation that has been presented to me, common law avenues. And, of course, as I understand it, there would be considerable liability insurance in place in relation to any malfunction of some trial.

CHAIR: In the New South Wales Exemption Order, section 41 reads:

The exempt person must hold and maintain, and must ensure that all subcontractors are beneficiaries under or otherwise hold and maintain, for the period of the trial and the post-harvest monitoring period, a public liability insurance policy that provides coverage as a minimum.

Do you think that public liability is sufficient to cover loss of the GM-free status and subsequent losses incurred, post-trial?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Again, I am not too sure what you mean by GE-free status. We are not a GE-free State. In fact, most of the Commonwealth is not. A lot of trials are going on around the country. For instance, Tasmania grows poppies that are GE-developed for the painkilling industry. New South Wales grows many tens of thousands of hectares of GE cotton. You keep saying that we will lose our GE-free status. I am struggling with the concept of how we are GE-free, when clearly we are not.

CHAIR: Do you see any value at all in GE-free status in specific agricultural industries? Or do you think that is something of no worth on the overseas market?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: In certain markets it is worth something, but again even the Japanese, who have very stringent requirements in relation to GE canola, import about two million tonnes per annum, from Canada mainly. I am struggling with your concept of GE-free when clearly we are not. I draw your attention to the study by the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics some time back that said that there is no premium for non-GE canola. In fact, in the European market, which you cite so often, we have only ever been an opportunity player. With the expansion of the European market to include a number of other countries, some of which are significant producers of canola, it is doubtful whether Europe will be a significant canola destination for New South Wales, whether it is GE or non-GE.

CHAIR: Minister, will you ensure that any company that wishes to plant GE crops in New South Wales will provide strict liability insurance against loss to neighbouring and other farmers as a result of any GE pollution?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Liability insurance is required now.

CHAIR: Do you have confidence in the advice given to you by your advisory council on gene technology in relation to conditions to be applied to exemption orders for canola trials under the moratorium legislation?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I have full confidence in my committee.

CHAIR: We will now deal with the Fisheries portfolio.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, can you guarantee that the management plan you have put in place for the class one noxious species, caulerpa taxifolia, will prevent caulerpa from spreading?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: The invasive seaweed, caulerpa, has been found in nine coastal estuaries. They are Lake Macquarie, Pittwater, Sydney Harbour, Botany Bay, Port Hacking, Lake Conjola, Burrill Lake, Narrawallee Inlet, and most recently in St Georges Basin. Over the past four years the Department of Primary Industries and its predecessors have trialled a number of techniques to control caulerpa, with the best results coming from applying pool salt to caulerpa beds. I am advised that treatment with salt has greatly reduced the amount of caulerpa in some areas, such as Lake Macquarie. However, it has not completely eradicated caulerpa from any area and other infestations are too large to allow comprehensive treatment. Therefore, the New South Wales Government is focusing its efforts on limiting the further spread of caulerpa and continuing research into alternative treatment options.

The highest priority for control work is to treat any outbreak in new estuaries. For example, the Department of Primary Industries responded immediately to the discovery of caulerpa in St Georges Basin by applying salt, establishing non-anchoring and no-boating areas, holding community information sessions and installing a silt curtain to quarantine the largest infestation. The community also plays a vital part in taking care not to fragment or spread the weed and reporting any new sightings. Yes, we are working on this issue. We have spent a considerable amount on salt and we are conducting research to try to find alternative methods of controlling this marine pest.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, you mentioned that caulerpa has spread in the past six months, is that correct?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes, into St Georges Basin.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Do you expect it to spread from St Georges Basin into Jervis Bay?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take that on notice. Clearly there is a possibility of that.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, you mentioned sea salt. What other techniques have you tried and are currently using to deal with caulerpa? Which technique do you believe offers the most promise?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Salt is the only one we have at the moment, and that is why the research is going into alternative methodologies. Salt is the most effective so far.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: What is your prognosis? Do you have expectations of being able to eradicate this mutant seaweed? If not, what is likely to happen to our fisheries?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: A lot of the pests that we get in this country, animal and plant, have always been incredibly difficult to eradicate. I think we have not actually eradicated many. We tend to adopt a policy of management, in the end. As I said, we are working on the research to try to find alternative methodologies to control this. We will endeavour to come up with some better control measures, or more enhanced control measures. But this is a difficult issue, because it is so invasive. Yes, it has the potential to create problems over time.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: I turn now to Mick Palmer's report on illegal fishing for commercial gain or profit. The report was due to be handed down in January this year. Why was the final report not available until July of this year?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I understand that in the course of reporting by former commissioner Mick Palmer, he sought further consultations on various occasions. As a consequence he requested and received extensions on the reporting date.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Given your answer, that a proper fellow whom you appointed—Mick Palmer—sought and was given leave to have extra consultation, and given that a key finding of the report was that illegal harvesting and blackmarketing in fish is serious, and having now been given the report, why have you sought community feedback on this report instead of immediately acting on its key recommendations?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: There were a large number of recommendations. For a start, we did act in that general area on illegal fishing. In conjunction with the New South Wales Food Authority we have taken actions that have received considerable publicity. For instance, the blitz on abalone mid-year caught a large number of people and a massive amount of abalone. The details were that a number of people, eight or nine, were caught and a large amount of equipment was confiscated.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: On what date?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: In June I think, but I will have to take that question on notice.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, that was before the report.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: No. We knew the problem from the consultation period.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: That is not answering my question. You are talking about something you did before the report was out. My question was why did you go back to community consultation, given that you had allowed extra time for the report to be put in place?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I am suggesting that from the open public hearings that were conducted by the Palmer inquiry along the coast, a number of issues, particularly in relation to abalone, were raised, but not exclusively so. We were proactive; we did not wait for the report. We were acting to try to curtail some of that activity. We believe we were very successful. A number of the recommendations require new policy, significant legislative reform and decisions on resource allocation. That is why the community has been asked to comment on the report. The report was released for public consultation on 13 July this year and the closing date for submissions was 27 August. The Government will finalise its response to the report after considering the submissions.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Is it a fact that you have put it back to the community because you are stalling on the implementation of the key recommendations, because your department is in financial difficulties?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Certainly not; and the department is not in financial difficulties.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, is there any funding provision in the 2004-05 budget for additional fisheries inspectors to be appointed to help crack down on illegal fishing?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: We believe that we have the resources to conduct the crackdown and we have already been doing it.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: But the report recommended extra fisheries inspectors, did it not?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Along with other major recommendations, and they will have to be considered by us in the very near future.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: But Minister, it was the key part of the report?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: That is not correct. There are a large number of recommendations. For instance, there was the indigenous fishing strategy, which will have important consequences, particularly on the South Coast. Mr Palmer made a number of significant recommendations in that regard and we are proceeding to look at some legislative changes to implement his recommendations. You have just chosen one element—more staff—as a way of going

about it. I am saying that there are a lot of issues and we will make appropriate responses to them. We also have been reorganising resources to cope with some of the areas that have been put forward by Mr Palmer in his report.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Community consultation, but no extra fishing inspectors?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Not at this point. As I said, we have the report out for community consultation and we will evaluate it. We will look at the resource issues appropriate to implementing key elements of the report.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: I have a series of questions, some of which you may wish to take on notice. Regarding New South Wales Fisheries offices at Albury, Batemans Bay, Bathurst, Yass, Coffs Harbour, Wellington, Grafton, Cooma, Eden, Broken Hill, Deniliquin, Narrandera, Taree, Inverell and Tamworth—and I am happy to give you a copy of this question—how many staff were employed in each office on 31 March 2004?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take that question on notice.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Following the completion of the restructure, how many staff will be employed in each of these offices?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: You are referring to something that will occur in the future. I will have to take that question on notice.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Will there be cuts to the number of staff from each of these offices following the restructure? If so, how many? Will technical positions be cut from any of these offices? If so, how many? Will advisory positions be cut from any of these offices? If so, how many? Will research positions be cut from any of these offices? If so, how many? How many casual employees are currently employed in each of the offices? How many casual employees from each of the offices will not have their contracts renewed following the restructure? Under the new structure will any of these offices have media relations and/or public relations officers? If so, how many and what will be the salary of each of those officers?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take those questions on notice. Suffice it to say that I do not see a great deal of change in those areas.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Can you take the same questions on notice regarding NSW Agriculture departmental offices in Bathurst, Tumut, Yass, Coffs Harbour, Dubbo, Wellington, Grafton, Casino, Forbes, Cooma, Broken Hill, Cobar, Deniliquin, Taree, Armidale, Glen Innes, Inverell, Orange, Kempsey, Tamworth, Gunnedah, Wagga Wagga; the NSW Agriculture Beef Industry Centre in Armidale; the NSW Agriculture head office in Orange; the NSW Agriculture institute in Orange; the NSW Agriculture Centre for Excellence for pastures and weeds, deciduous fruits, wool and sheep meat products and vertebrate pests in Orange; and the NSW Agriculture Centre for Excellence for northern farming systems in Tamworth?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Certainly. I will take all those questions on notice but you will have to give us a month to reply.

CHAIR: You have 35 days within which to reply.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: That is good.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: That is before November.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: I have a few questions relating to the native fish restocking program. How much is collected each year from freshwater licences?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: It is in the annual report. If we have one here, we will be able to tell you that. Do you require figures for both licences or just for freshwater licences?

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Freshwater licences.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Revenue from freshwater licences?

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Revenue from freshwater licences.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: As at 30 June 2004 the Recreational Freshwater Fishing Trust was \$2,589,000.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Where does that money go?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: As I understand it, on fishing projects approved by the Recreational Freshwater Fishing Trust, which comprises recreational fishers. Its entire program is allocated through that process.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: So how much of that money is allocated for restocking native fish in New South Wales?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will have to take that question on notice.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Is the funding for native fish restocking based on a dollar-for-dollar allocation?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: There is a program that is based on dollar-for-dollar funding.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Is all native fish restocking carried out on the basis of a dollar-for-dollar allocation?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: No, not necessarily. Different programs attract different situations.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Could you give us a brief outline of what are those different programs? Perhaps one of the staff members might like to answer that question if they have that information to hand.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Local councils apply for one of the programs. I will take that question on notice and give you the details.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: So if local councils apply, they get the money on a dollar-for-dollar basis?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: If fishing clubs apply for the money, do they get it on a dollar-for-dollar basis?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Is the money for fish restocking programs for non-native fish, such as trout and salmon species, allocated on a similar basis?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: It can be in certain areas but, as I understand it, we release them directly into a major series of dams.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Why is there a difference?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: That was the policy that was implemented before my time. I will take that question on notice. Are you suggesting that we should provide dollar-for-dollar allocations for everyone?

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: No. I am saying that the information we have is that there is a huge discrepancy between native fish restocking programs and non-native fish restocking programs. Native fish are restocked on a dollar-for-dollar basis and salmon and trout species are not restocked on that basis. They are restocked, and that is paid for by the department. It seems to me to be a bit incongruous that you have different guidelines for native species and non-native species.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take that question on notice.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Does the Government have any plans to increase the fishing licence fee?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: The Government does not have any plans as such.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: But you are not ruling it out?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: No, I am not ruling it out. Over time and in consultation with relevant stakeholders there is a possibility that inflation will erode the current amount. That consideration would be put before the Recreational Fishing Trusts.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: When I went to renew my fishing licence this year at my favourite fishing spot on the South Coast, the proprietor of the bait and tackle shop said that he did not have any fishing licences. He had applied to the department some time ago and he had not received any licences. He suggested that I go into the major town, which is located some 20 kilometres away. I went there and the proprietor of the shop there gave me his second-last licence. He said that he had applied for licences but that he was having trouble getting them. That was in the middle the fishing season—it was in the middle of summer. Is that a problem that has been experienced elsewhere?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: We have a massive number of outlets. There are some areas where the owners of a number of premises will not take on fishing licences, for various reasons. As you would know there is an arrangement between the trust—

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: This person did not have that problem. He had had licences and he was looking for more. He wanted licences but could not provide them because they had not been supplied to him.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: If you could supply me with the details, I will look into that matter and give you a specific reply.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Does NSW Fisheries use fry rather than fingerlings for native fish restocking?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Fingerlings.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Do they have a better survival rate than fry?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Absolutely.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Do you purchase fingerlings from Queensland and Victoria as well?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take that question on notice. Basically, a lot of our breeding is carried out at major hatcheries.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: What are those major hatcheries?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Gaden and Dutton, and Narrandera breeds native fish.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Do you have any plans to restock eel-tail catfish in rivers where they used to be common but they are now quite rare?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take that specific question on notice.

CHAIR: What progress has been made in the removal of redundant dams and weeds to facilitate the migration and breeding of native freshwater fish?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I am advised that we do not have prime carriage of that matter. We are working with Heath, State Water, the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources, and others on that issue. I will seek some advice in relation to that matter and provide you with an answer.

CHAIR: How much does the shark-netting program in New South Wales cost annually? What do you do with the by-catch from that operation?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I do not have a specific answer as to how much it costs.

CHAIR: Is the project paid for by your department?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes, we run the contract. You have to remember, of course, that when considering these issues the evidence is clear-cut. These nets have saved a considerable number of lives. In the years prior to the implementation of this project there was virtually a death every year from shark attack. Since the nets have been in operation—a total of 60-odd years—there has been only one shark death on netted beaches in the Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong areas.

CHAIR: Have you determined whether or not there have been declining shark populations over those years?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I do not necessarily believe that that is the case. There is strong evidence to show that there were deaths each year, even if there was some decline after that. It would take some time to come into effect and to be reflected in the figures. Because there was only one death over that period I think the evidence is pretty uncontroversial. That was due to the role of nets in preventing shark attacks. We have been given plenty of anecdotal evidence to the effect that large numbers of sharks have been seen off Sydney's beaches each summer. Without the nets I guess it would be safe to assume that there would be a higher death rate amongst swimmers.

CHAIR: Could you provide the Committee with the figures?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I have figures that show what that project costs. It costs \$730,000 each year.

CHAIR: Do you have figures on the positions of those sharks? In other words, how many sharks are caught on the inside of the net going out as compared to sharks on the outside of the net coming in, that is in areas where there are bathers?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take that question on notice and supply you with the information.

CHAIR: Given what you have said, I guess you are not considering removing those nets. However, would you consider removing them during the whale migration season—a non-peak swimming season?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I understand that the nets are in place only from September through to March or April. The main whale migration period is May to August, so the nets are down at that stage.

CHAIR: Given that whales are migrating now, that there has been quite a bit of media interest in whales trapped in nets, particularly on the North Coast and off south-east Queensland, and that this is not a peak swimming season in Sydney, would you consider extending the non-net season?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take that question on notice. I have already asked that very same question, so I think it is worth looking at that issue. I remind members that the Government has implemented a number of measures to try to cut back on what has been called the by-catch. The pingers that were placed on the nets have been very effective in reducing the by-catch of certain species. That will be part of our threat abatement plan.

CHAIR: Is it correct that, as a result of the restructuring of the Department of Primary Industries, a number of former NSW Fisheries positions, known as conservation managers or conservation officers, will be lost?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: That is a very good question. I have been discussing these issues with the Nature Conservation Council. The plan is to have the conservation officers who are based at Ballina moved to Wollongbar and to be incorporated into the enhanced science section. I had a meeting about this very issue yesterday. I am advised that the department is currently considering responses from staff and stakeholders to proposals released in late June 2004 for changes to its structure and staffing to help achieve cost savings. The proposals include a reduction in the number of fisheries conservation managers.

At this stage no final decision has been made on the future of these positions. No decision will be made until the full range of ideas submitted by the community, staff and other stakeholders have been considered. I assure you that the department remains committed to environmental management and conservation and will continue to enforce the aquatic habitat protection and threatened species management provisions of the Fisheries Management Act 1994. I have been discussing with the Nature Conservation Council and Ocean Watch our options in regard to these manager positions.

CHAIR: Given the lack of staff, particularly Fisheries policing staff—I think there are only two for the entire North Coast region—are you able to indicate that there will be no loss of staff, particularly as new marine protection areas and marine parks are likely to be established in the near future? Can you indicate whether conservation staff are among those likely to be targeted when reducing staff numbers?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes. My understanding is that we have 100 Fisheries officers devoted towards compliance across the State.

CHAIR: How many are on the North Coast?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: My understanding—I am advised of this—is that we tend to move them about; I guess you could call it going where the need is.

CHAIR: Could we get a figure for that? Are there two or 20 in the northern region at any one time? I think you will agree that the need is constant.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes, we will give you that figure. I am also advised that there is at least one large recruitment each year when up to 10 new officers are recruited and trained per year on a needs basis.

CHAIR: To clarify, if staff are allocated on a needs basis, can you confirm that we will not see a reduction in the numbers of staff involved with threatened species and conservation in the Fisheries area?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Yes. I will reply to you in writing.

CHAIR: Could you tell the Committee—perhaps you should take this question on notice—how many such staff will be offered voluntary redundancies?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: We do not know. That detail has not come through to us as yet.

CHAIR: What measures will be put in place to ensure legislative conservation obligations, such as the protection of threatened species and the assessment of development applications, are still met?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: We will continue to perform that role properly.

CHAIR: At last year's estimates committee hearing we discussed the urgent need to protect the grey nurse shark but almost a year later there has been no increase in protection. When will action be taken on this issue?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: There is a major research program under way, as you are probably aware.

CHAIR: But that is not actual protection, Minister.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: It is a very complex issue and has to be treated carefully and based on the best research available. The electronic tag program has been providing new research to us on the habits of the shark and other very vital information. As I understand it, that information is currently being downloaded and will assist us in working out a future role for enhancing the survival of the shark.

CHAIR: How much of the DPI budget is allocated to supporting measures to increase protection?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Of the grey nurse shark?

CHAIR: Yes.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will have to get that specific answer for you. I do not know whether we have an actual figure for any particular species, as such, but we will see what we can do.

CHAIR: Some regions of the State that host grey nurse shark critical habitat areas are concerned that increasing protection measures will have a negative economic impact on their communities. Are you committed to regional adjustment packages for communities that may face this issue and has the DPI allocated a budget to deal with this issue?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: It is an issue that we are assessing. We certainly have looked at compensation—for want of a better word—in relation to fishing efforts by commercial fishers when they have been excluded from certain areas when plying their trade. We will have to consider that issue in any proposed enhancement of grey nurse shark protection.

CHAIR: An original NSW Fisheries budget of \$5.7 million in 2003-04 was slashed to predicted spending of \$1.7 million, which was nearly halved again to a DPI budget of \$900,000 for 2004-05. How is this justified in light of the fact that every fishery management strategy and environmental impact statement to date has identified excess active and latent effort as a threat to the viability of the New South Wales fishing industry?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: Where are those figures from? What program are you talking about?

CHAIR: I understand that they are from the budget.

Mr BUFFIER: You would be talking about a specific program.

CHAIR: No, I cannot give you that information.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take the question on notice and you can supply us with some additional information.

CHAIR: Thank you. What budget does the DPI have for implementing a system of freshwater aquatic reserves in New South Wales?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take the question on notice. Are you talking about freshwater aquatic reserves?

CHAIR: Yes.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: This issue was raised with me by Dailan Pugh recently when we announced the draft zoning plan. We do not actually have a provision for freshwater aquatic reserves in place in this State. That is an area we will have to look at. It is a big issue, of course: how they can be created and the sorts of protections that you can put in place. It has implications not just for coastal areas but right across the State in terms of how they would work in any particular area and what landholders would make decisions to close off areas to fishing. All those sorts of issues are big issues and I believe we probably should be looking at a more co-ordinated statewide policy before we jump in.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: What was the budget for the Marine Parks Authority [MPA] in 2003-04 and what is its budget for 2004-05?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take the question on notice.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Could you explain how the Government will meet its commitment to establishing one marine park in each bioregion by 2007 without increasing significantly the budget for the MPA?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: All of these issues are under consideration at the moment. I am sure that the Government's policies will be matched by the appropriate resources. I did not know there was any particular problem with the budget of the Marine Parks Authority.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Could you give us some indication of the likely costs involved?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will have to take that question on notice.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: During last year's estimates committee hearing you said that assessment for the Manning Shelf, the Hawkesbury Shelf and the Batemans Shelf were "more than substantially complete and they are now undergoing peer review." Could you explain why the assessments for the Hawkesbury and the Batemans shelves have not been released?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: These are very complex issues. In relation to the Manning region, a bioregional assessment is a systematic evaluation of the available biological and physical data on marine species and habitats in the region. We are currently considering the Manning Shelf bioregional assessment report. However, at this time no decisions have been made on marine-protected areas in the Manning bioregion. I do not have specific information with me about the other areas that you have mentioned but I will take the question on notice.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: But 12 months ago you said that the assessments were more than substantially complete and were undergoing peer review. How long do you usually expect peer reviews to take?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I have no idea in any particular circumstance; they are different. Some, like the Manning Shelf, are huge proposals, involving many habitats and having many different subregions within them. Others are just as complex. As they become available, they will be considered and released on the web.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Can you give any estimate of the time when those assessments might be released?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will deal with that when I answer the question on notice.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Is it true that in the past year only one recovery plan, the eastern cod recovery plan, has been gazetted?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I think you are probably right but I will take that question on notice and give you the specifics.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Is it true that the grey nurse shark recovery plan, which at the last estimates committee meeting was described by you as being substantially finalised, has not yet been gazetted?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: That is correct. It is part of the whole research program that we are conducting at the moment and the Stevens report.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Would you be able to give the Committee the time line for gazettal of the grey nurse shark recovery plan?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: If one is available, I will. But I will take that question on notice.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Thank you. Is it true that, of the 11 recovery plans under development at the last estimates committee hearing, only one—the Oxleyan pygmy perch—has been released for public consultation?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will take that question on notice, but I think you are probably right.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: How much was spent on recovery planning and threatened species conservation assessment in 2003-04?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: We do not break down our budget like that but we will have a look at it on notice for you.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: If you could detail the balance of the spending that would be useful. How much is budgeted for in 2004-05?

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: For threatened species?

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Yes.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: We do not evaluate our budget according to that sort of criteria.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: So at this stage you could only do it retrospectively rather than prospectively.

The Hon. IAN MACDONALD: I will try our best to put an answer together for you in relation to that.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Thank you.

CHAIR: That concludes our questioning tonight. I thank the Minister and his departmental officers for their attendance this evening.

The Committee proceeded to deliberate.

=====